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Gjergj Fishta in the history of Albanian literature

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Abstract

Gjergj Fishta is one of the most extensively analyzed writers of Albanian literature. Although he was disowned during the communist period in Albania, his undeniable literary values brought about a restored interest into his work by many scholars. For a long time, during the communist censorship up until 2014, many discussions and writings occurred regarding the ban of some writers during the period 1912 to 1939, including Fishta. Such a conclusion emerges due to the fact that various critical and literary works into the history of literature, as well as post-war anthologies, whether individual or group writings, failed to afford Fishta with his due place. Furthermore, following the democratization of Albania, the prohibition of Fishta's writings over the course of half a century has been the subject of many writings. Therefore, this paper will analyze Fishta in communist times, his inclusion in histories of Albanian literature after 1968, which coincided with the year when the manuscript "The History of Albanian Literature 1912 - 1939" was prohibited. In particular, the proceeds with an evaluation and analysis of Fishta's writings in these histories, including the manuscript itself.

Keywords: *Gjergj Fishta, the manuscript, the history of institutional Albanian literature, histories of individual literature, the issue of censorship against Fishta*

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After the collapse of communism in Albania, prohibited authors, along with sentenced and ostracized authors became the subject of extensive writings and discussions. This was done in the light of the institutional censorship of art in general, including literary writings.

Socialist realism remains a literary period of everything but works nurtured by imagination and artistic talent. Theoretical and thematic preconditions and restrictions have inevitably rendered any genuine art impossible, with few exceptions. Albania is not the only state of censorship, and the communist system is not the only system that used censorship to convert literature (and arts in general) into a tool for propagating certain ideas. Censorship has existed since the Roman times, in particular under Nero, which according to Vasily Rudich (2013) "[...] greatly facilitated Nero's *artistic tyranny* with a program of *cultural re-education* of the Roman people that, according to a recent view, he seriously endeavored to implement" (p. 2).

This brutality, which did not extend to his personal life, but rather only to his work, was equally prevalent in democratic countries. The best example of the above is discussed in George Orwell's essays (2000). As far as Albanian literature is concerned, however, the perception of censorship arose much earlier than its actual introduction in reality (2015). This occurred as, with the introduction of a strict state censorship, the elements and work, which may have led to creation of a rather liberal space, albeit under a dictatorship spirit, could have brought to the fore values of various writers.

However, in the manuscript "The History of Albanian Literature 1912 - 1939", found by the author in the Archive of Albanian Language and Literature in Tirana, one of the writers designated as "forbidden" was already introduced as such since 1944, as soon as the Socialists came to power. Gjergj Fishta was thoroughly analyzed in the manuscript, both in terms of his

patriotic and religious activities, but also his work as a whole. Given that this manuscript is part of an institutional project, with two published titles (Shtuteriqi et al, 1959 and Shuteriqi et al 1960), the last part of which was available in 1965, but was only prohibited upon publication in 1968, brings to light the fact that Fishta was part of the interest and research work of the authors of this manuscript.

On the other hand, there are early various histories of literature. The first attempt at a historiographic look of Albanian literature was made in the nineteenth century. A. Stratigoit wrote "Albanian Literature Handbook" (*Manuale di letteratura albanese*), published in Milan in 1896, while Marchiano's study mainly deals with Arbëresh literature. These works, in turn, were followed by: Gaetano Petrotta (2008) and Schirò (1959), Konica (2013) and Shuteriqi (1955), Justin Rrota (2006) and Eqrem Çabej (1936). There are also the works on the history of Albanian literature by English author Stuart Mann (1955), along with "Albanian writers, Part II: from the League of Prizren to date" by Ernest Koliqi and Namik Ressuli (1941). With the exception of the first two historical treatises, Fishta was analyzed in all other above-mentioned works with varying degrees of detail. However, he is not part of "The History of Albanian Literature - for secondary schools" by Dhimitër Shuteriqi (1955), although he was the editor-in-chief of the said manuscript (Hoxha Beqiri, B. 2016). In addition to reflecting on the manner of Fishta's treatment in the manuscript of 1968, we have touched upon the institutional and individual historiographic descriptions that came after the writing of this manuscript.

Manuscript "History of Albanian Literature 1912 - 1939" and Fishta

Among the many manuscripts preserved in the Archives of the Institute of Linguistics and Literature, there is also a "History of Albanian Literature 1912 - 1939", a manuscript not mentioned anywhere until 2014. Moreover, the way in which this manuscript was recorded creates an impression of active measures employed to silence the work that has been done around this literary period. This is because the manuscript in question is the continuation of the "History of Albanian Literature", the institutional publication of which the first two parts were published in the years 1959 and 1960. This manuscript was part of this project.

Thorough commitment had been invested into preparing the unpublished "History of Albanian Literature 1912 - 1939", which was prohibited during the process of publication (in bottles) and is a rather comprehensive manuscript (prepared for print in two volumes, although initial plans involved a single volume). In addition to other authors (who were declared "prohibited" by state censorship) Gjergj Fishta was also treated. The space afforded to this writer in a chapter dedicated for him is the same as that of Naim Frashëri. This element highlights the importance given to Fishta by the working group / editors on the discussion of the period 1912 - 1939 of the Albanian Literature History, n.d.). The manuscript was produced in the sixties and seventies, but the exact time has not been documented. Bearing in mind that the prohibition of the publication was effected in 1968, we can inevitably conclude that Fishta was not banned immediately upon the communists assuming power, which dismisses all criticisms of the post-communist years speaking of a Fishta prohibition that encompassed a 46-year timespan.

The manuscript engages in a comprehensive treatment of the writer - as has been done with other writers in these volumes as well as those published - by analyzing both his life and activity and his work in all dimensions, pointing out at first that a prominent but rather "a complex writer emerges in the Albanian literature, a writer with an extensive and contradictory creativity" (History of Albanian Literature 1912-1939, n.d. 122). The complexity of this writer is an element highlighted by other critics. The manuscript lists, among others, two key elements of Fishta's works (based on the subject matter), which are patriotic and religious. The chapter about Fishta makes a distinction of these elements by presenting a writer who is both patriotic and committed to national affairs, but also veiled in a religious mantle with the effort to occasionally put this element at the front to the detriment of the former. As stated "he submits the requirement that literature be auxiliary to religion, so that the writer is guided in his literary work by religious morality " (p. 126). Although the writer himself claimed his ideal was *Atme (Fatherland) and Fé (Religion)*, the manuscript attempts to relegate the former to the detriment of the latter. This is also visible when analyzing the writer's publications. Much of Fishta's publications are of contradictory character. In large part, he assumes the position of the clergy, for which the interests of the church and of the Catholic religion stand above that of the people (p. 127).

In his writings, including religious writings, the writer was influenced by the spirit he was fed all his life, because he was devoted to his calling. However, *religious morality*, so prevalent in Fishta's writings, was not at all at odds with patriotic issues (as attempted to be portrayed in the manuscript) or his continued efforts to raise the awareness of the people and European countries on the state of Albania because he "[...] denounced the great powers of Europe, which toyed with the

fate of the little people and passionately protected the right of Albanian people to self-determination and an independent state" (p. 127).

In spite of the high regard for the author's works and his efforts for the national cause, interchangeable attempts to undermine either one or the other can be perceived in the chapter.

In addition to the introductory paragraph, the manuscript's chapter (40 out of 275 pages in total, written in typewriter), writes about Fishta's life including the personal circumstances that influenced him, his preferred writers and the impact of oral literature on his work without neglecting o the "traditional friendship with Italy". "Anzat e Parnazit" (Parnaz's Ancients) and "Gomari i Babatasi" (Babatasi's Donkey) are the first works analyzed in the script, under a separate sub-chapter. "Since his early beginning of his work, Fishta emerges as a writer of a powerful drive and originality" (p. 129), while, the compilation involved is *a collection of his best poems* (p. 129). The compilation is then analyzed by motifs, starting with the motif of patriotism, and including motifs that involved the life of international politics. However, "Palok Cuca" affords a multi-dimensional analysis, including its characters and the power of the satire. Whereas, for drafting the "Babatasi's Donkey" it is noted that:

Guided by a decision of the then Ministry of Education to introduce in all the schools of Albania, both state schools and those ran by the Catholic clergy and other private institutions, a new and unified program is introduced, on the basis of which education would be offered in accordance with data of positive sciences. (p. 134-135).

After an analysis of the contents of the work, the structure of the poem is also analyzed, where "[...] its idea emerges through

only one part of the subject" (p. 135). The subject and characters are believed to be at the service of stripping the "anti-patriotism of some officials who held high positions in the state, to deplore the country's bad leadership by country's officials of the time, and to sharply criticize the major issues of the administrative system" (p. 136). Through the character of Babatas and the verses dedicated to him, Fishta's satire is illustrated, which was deemed appropriate. Also, an analysis of the poem's structure, as well as a theoretical analysis, and an analysis of the stylistic figures employed as a means of reinforcing the satire is used. Meanwhile, the value of the work is also appreciated for its comic situations rather than for ridiculing leaders only. The "Babatas' Donkey" is as such evaluated as *a profoundly publicist work*.

The sub-chapter "Mrrizi i Zanave" (Fairy's Hideout), Fishta is considered as an inspired lyrical writer. Here, selected poems are analyzed as they delve into various themes. The motives of poems are discussed, ranging from the love for the mother tongue, the evocation of the past, the nature of Albanians, exalting the virtues of the covenant (Besa) and manhood to cursing persons who do nothing to save the country from Serbian and Montenegrin chauvinism. "Evocation of Skanderbeg's face is done with a rare portrayal art" (p. 139). Also, we have a description of Fishta's curse for Europe, as illustrated by his verses. The fact that hostilities with neighboring countries, including Greece, as well as the European countries, and Turkey are discussed points to the freedom of the editorial staff, especially Vehbi Balas, who is the author of this chapter.

This chapter, in one of its sub-sections, also dedicates few paragraphs to the compilation of religious poems, "Vallja e Parrizit" (Parriz's Dance). Many of the poems are regarded as hymns to biblical characters, although part of the translations

and adaptations are said to have limited the readership. Notwithstanding, at the end of the section it is nonetheless acknowledged that “among other religious poems, beautiful artistic accomplishments are found, written with a special spirit and Fishta's religious lyricism are important to understanding the prosaic and studying the process of evolution of language and of his mastery” (p. 143). It should be noted that, philosophical lyrical works of this volume are particularly appreciated as the poet addresses issues of life and death, from *the position of mystical idealism*. The writer's *eloquence* is also discussed, but also the inclusion of cosmic elements in these verses.

The chapter continues with "Highland Lute". Right at the outset, it is rated as Fishta's masterpiece and simultaneously described as “one of the largest and most complex creations of Albanian poetry” (p. 143). A brief background to the work is provided including the the first editions and artistic changes during the extensive period of its writing. The theme and poem structures are analyzed based on the characteristics of the poem. Also, the conflict portrayed in the work itself is followed more closely in the critique.

Similarly, when elaborating the "new era" period and associated change of circumstances, a connection is made with the age of the author and his place of living. The writer's harsh criticism towards Turks comes to the fore. The poem is analyzed using verses as illustrations, including verses collected by the people. Fishta's ultimate accomplishments are complemented with portraits of characters: Oso Kuka, Ali Pashe Gusia, as well as Tringa, although the latter is not imparted with a thorough analysis.

Of course, there is also some criticism involved with this work. "Highland Lute," as noted "[...] is a very complex and contradictory work" (History of Albanian Literature 1912-1939,

n.d., p. 153). While the Albanian struggle to protect their lands, its popular spirit and the idea of the work regarding the fight and efforts required to prevail are positively assessed, positive colors attributed to patriarchal life, conservative customs as well as mercenarism are believed to be distorted concepts. Furthermore, the poet is claimed to have been unable "to make a full distinction between the people and the ruling classes" (153). Additionally, some artistic weaknesses were also highlighted, such as "prolongation, depiction of events like mere dry chronicles, cold listing of country names, repeated verses and rhymes, etc." (ibid), which are deemed minor. More profound in this respect is the contention that "the poet was not always able to retain the warm and conscientious inspiration as seen in some of the early songs" (ibid). In the end, however, the work is considered as a rare gem in Albanian literature, and praised for its major historical subject, expressed through a multi-faceted substance. Finally, the metric analysis of the poem as well as the romantic elements of the poem are discussed.

The next chapter is the section "Dramas". After listing dramas along with brief description of their themes, focus shifts to "Judas Makabe". The subject and the characters are introduced, along with *staple tragedy acts*. The rhetoric of a part as well as a generalized and rapid presentation of events is criticized. "Ifigjenia n'Aulli" and "Jerina as the Queen of Flowers" are two other dramas similarly criticized, while translations are discussed at the end.

The Chapter ends with "The art and significance of Fishta's work", showing the time of the poet's work, his inspiration, and his position in the national movement. This part also points out that although he criticized the European countries, he did not object to Austrian imperialism. The romantic part of his work is brought to the fore, along with the realistic parts. His linguistic contribution is highlighted as the dialect used in addition to

Fishta's contribution to "enriching Albanian verses" (p.161). Fishta's influence on other writers is also not overlooked. However, as far as the Fishta's work is concerned it is large in volume and equally rich in types and genres. Being a multifaceted talent, he presented almost equal artistic strengths, both in satire and dramaturgy, in lyrical and epic poetry. But he was not confined to these alone. He delved in prose, engaged in journalism, wrote literary reviews and essayist studies (p. 125).

Thus, in this manuscript, Fishta is portrayed through multidimensional aspects of his engagements and writings.

Gjergj Fishta - part of histories of literature after the manuscript

Gjergj Fishta was the subject of a number of individual writings about the literary works and histories of Albanian literature. However, some authors also adamantly ignored him. In this paper, we will focus only on the histories of institutional and individual literature of the period after the writing of the manuscript.

The "History of Albanian Literature" of 1983 in Tirana, an institutional edition of the Academy of Sciences of the People's Republic of Albania, the Institute of Linguistics and Literature, completely overlooks Fishta and his writings. Indeed, he is referred to as the head of the magazine "Hylli i drites" (The Star of Light) "that represented the Catholic reaction as well as political interests of Austro - Hungary and subsequently of Italy, as would the newspaper "Posta e Shqypnise" (Post of Albania) (1716-17), which was published by Austro - Hungarian invasion troops and run by Fishta" (Bala, et al, 1989, p. 462). In the chapters discussing Albanian literature over the period 1912-1939, a general discussion of the literature

dedicated just one paragraph to Fishta as the chief clergy representative. He was credited as a poet, publicist, pedagogue and politician, and for directing Franciscan press. The analysis continues by pointing out that the “interests of the church and the religion were placed above the interests of the homeland and the people, which he proclaimed and defended with all the demagogy and cynicism, and laid at the center of his literary work” (p. 471-472). The paragraph continues with "The Highland Lute" (as given in the book), as the main work of Fishta, an epic poem which “by attacking chauvinism, relegated the fight against the Ottoman invaders” into the background, and further criticized the glorification of “patriarchalism of bajraktarism, religious obscurantism of clericalism” (p. 472) as well as speculation concerning patriotic feelings. With regards to “Babatas' Donkey”, this satirical poem allegedly attacked ideas of secularism in schools. Close associations to folklore elements are also pointed out. In addition, Fishta's art is criticized for “often [being] accompanied by proxies, desired effects, rhetoric, the brutality of expression and style sometimes bordering banality, false arguments, which strive to be impiously imposed, as well as a distinct conservative stance towards language” (p. 472). The paragraph ends with the sentence hinting that Fishta *ended his days* as an academic of fascist Italy.

Bearing in mind the submitted manuscript elements, which, based on analyzed archival documentation, should have been completed in 1965 as well as the institutional work of 1983, the impact of censorship is clearly visible in the latter. This evaluation of Fishta portrays him as a purveyor of the national cause, who used his works in an attempt to obliterate values and strengthen religion and foreign states. Fishta, in the history of 1983, was mentioned and discussed very briefly, in a rather notorious portrayal, but also as a poet who used his creativity

only to glorify the old and religious ideas, which were expressed through his *conservative language*. This negative stance towards the poet, for those unaware of his writings, renders the impression that his works were, to an extent, worthless.

"History of Albanian Literature - Romanticism" by Rexhep Qosja (1990), presented only Fishta's romanticism, which was deemed "to encompass in very broad terms, almost exhaustive, using combination of some scientific criteria" (Dado, 2011, p. 126). Although there is no special chapter on Fishta, the realist Fishta prevails over the romantic Fishta. Although his masterpiece was of a romantic period, we again find the representation of some important elements of the writer, intertwined with that of other romantic poets. As Qosja himself says "Fishta belongs to the ensuing period of Albanian literature" (Qosja, 1990, p. 38). The poet, who began writing in the Romanticism period, but whose works extend beyond this period, often listens to the popular rhapsody "in which fictional heroisms of Muja and Halil are praised, seven Shalas, Marash Uci, Oso Kuka" (p.119), which serve as a source of inspiration for many of his elements and characters, but also the "motive of female sacrifice to uphold the honor in "The Highland Lute"" (p. 119). Fishta is mentioned in the disintegration of romantic myths, religious poetry, epic songs, episms (where Fishta's "Lute" is briefly elaborated by drawing parallels with Naim Frasheri's "Scripture's Story"), epism and his extraterrestrial connections, the pace of structures and the system of motivation and fatalism. In Qosja's major work, Fishta remains illustrated only with occasional sentences about the poetics of his romantic work without any apparent devotion to deeper analysis of his writings.

On the other hand, Robert Elsie, a dedicated and eminent scholar of Albanian literature published his version of "History

of Albanian Literature” (2001) after the publication of two institutional histories.

Elsie (2001) begins the rather comprehensive chapter on Fishta with the following paragraph:

The greatest and most powerful figure of Albanian literature in the first half of the twentieth century is the Franciscan father Gjergj Fishta (1871 - 1940), who more than any other writer, gave artistic expression to the wandering soul of the new sovereign Albanian state. Listened to and hailed as the "national poet of Albania" until the World War II as well as the "Albanian Homer", Fishta would immediately fall into oblivion when the Communists took over power in November 1944. The mere mention of the name was a taboo for Albanians, which persisted for forty-six years in a row (p. 193).

Right at the start, Elsie informed the reader that Fishta could be considered as one of the greatest figures of Albanian literature of his time, whose work was banned when the communists assumed power in the territory. Given the censorship in other communist states, the censorship exhibited here is not entirely astonishing to foreign readers. Of course, Elsie (2001) came to this conclusion following the omissions of this writer in the historical overviews where he should have held a central place in the literature from 1912 to 1939

In this work, we find an analysis for the songs of "The Highland Lute" because, although Gjergj Fishta "is the author of a total of thirty-one literary publications, his name is inextricably linked with a single work, in fact, with one of the most amazing creations throughout the history of Albanian literature, with *"The Highland Lute"* (pp. 194-195).

Other parts deal with a shorter and superficial analysis of the works of Fishta, including his early writings / publications. "Parriz Dance" is considered to be the culmination of Catholic literature in Albania. However, Fishta's mastery is best shown in his satirical poetry, where he used wisdom and shrewdness, along with sharp quill to reproach the cravings of behavior and intellectual apathy of his fellow compatriots. According to Elsie (207), he did not possess the sympathetic and advising irony of Cajupi, but rather the harsh, burning, often ruthless satire, an equivalent to the poetry of Faik bey Konica's satirical prose.

In the chapter on Fishta, a number of Albanian critics weigh in, but also foreign critics, which serve to reinforce the true literary value of Fishta's work. Also, reasons behind attempts to prohibit the work of Fishta are discussed, as well as failed attempts to erasing from the verses of Fishta's works from the people's memory. Also, Fishta's return to the spotlight of critique is elaborated.

Elsie succeeds in portraying Fishta in many respects, including inspiration, influence, and the values contained in his work, along with the dominant figures at the service of artistic value. However, "after the war, Fishta was attacked and slandered perhaps more than any other pre-war writer and was immediately doomed to oblivion. The national poet turned into a curse" (p. 208). The conclusion of this chapter represents the opinion formed amidst the silence of the critics.

Also, the work "Gjegji Fishta" (1998) by author Vehbi Bala is published, but since it is similar to the manuscript chapter analyzed above, we will not delve into its characteristics. "Portrayal of Fishta by Bala at different time periods"(Hoxha Beqiri 2016) is a more detailed elaboration of the matter

Conclusion

Without wishing to comment and analyze the possible changes since the manuscript was published, we will merely convey Rexhep Qosja's view, who believes that "The History of Albanian Literature", "published in Tirana in 1959 - 1960, is undoubtedly the best text of the Albanian literature, in which its most systematic and convincing separation has been made to that day" (Qosja, 2006, p. 13). Such a high praise for this comprehensive, institutional work relates to a manuscript, as the same level persisted there as well.

Moreover, having in mind conclusions of the chapter on Fishta, which state that his work is awaiting a scholarly separation between the positive part and the portion damaged by clerical ideology that played a negative role in the life of the country (History of Albanian Literature 1912-1939, p. 161) makes the fact that the handwriting was not published is even more painful.

However, in view of the above, it is easy to draw some conclusions:

- Gjergj Fishta's work was not prohibited in 1944, but in 1968.
- The "History of Albanian Literature" published in 1959 (first part) and 1960 (second part) also had a part covering the literature of 1912-1939, a manuscript that was banned during the publication process. While before the manuscript, i.e. up to 1941, Fishta's work was analyzed and written about (including the memorial volume "Father Gjergj Fishta 1871 - 1940" of 1943, although not of any prominent value), there is not much writing about Fishta's work during the period 1944 - 1968 (neither in the "History of Albanian Literature for High School" by Dhimitër Shuteriqi).

- The compilation of the chapter on Fishta in the manuscript, as well as the manuscript as such, remained silent for a period of 46 years.
- The histories of Albanian literature, after this period, mention Fishta only in derogatory terms; they cover only poems of his romantic work, but not a separate analysis of Fishta's romantic writings; or they analyze it from the perspective of a foreigner who, although based on writings of others, is able to properly portray Fishta's personality and his works (especially the "The Highland Lute").

Therefore, we may conclude that the chapter in the manuscript of "The History of Albanian Literature 1912 - 1939" is written with dedication and remains a testimony to later censure. There are also many elements that can be studied and analyzed in the future.

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