

## THREE POETS OF THE GOLDEN AGE OF SCUTARINE CATHOLIC LITERATURE IN ALBANIA

Robert Elsie

The educational foundations laid by the Catholic Church in Shkodra in the second half of the nineteenth century had visibly borne fruit in the independence period. Northern Albania, and in particular the isolated regions of the northern Albanian Alps with their unique tribal culture, had always lagged behind the more advanced south from an educational point of view, and indeed still do today, but in the first third of the twentieth century, Shkodra itself overshadowed the country's new capital city Tirana by far, both educationally and culturally. It was primarily due to these educational facilities in Shkodra that Scutarine Catholic literature of the period was able to eclipse all contemporary writing in the Muslim and Bektashi traditions and, with the exception of the works of Fan Noli (1882-1965), any remnants of literature in the Albanian Orthodox tradition.

A fundamental role in the cultural advancement of the north was played by the Catholic clergy which, with the support of church circles from Catholic Austria and Italy, provided the half-Catholic, half-Muslim city and surrounding region with access not only to formal education, to publishing and cultural facilities but also to a wide range of new Western ideas. Albanian literature continued to benefit from the attention it received from the Franciscan and Jesuit fathers as it had in the nineteenth century, when nationalist-minded members of the Catholic clergy, such as Pjetër Zarishi (1806-1866), Leonardo De Martino (1830-1923), Ndue Bytyçi (1847-1917) and Preng Doçi (1846-1917), were among the first of the period to write and publish poetry of note in Albanian, not all of which had been restricted to religious themes.

The two predominant figures of Scutarine culture, and of Albanian literature in general between the two world wars, were the Franciscan pater Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940), voice of the nation, and the Jesuit-educated prose writer Ernest Koliqi (1903-1975), a treatment of whose works is beyond the scope of this article. But there were many others who contributed to the awakening of an independent Albanian culture in the north, in particular three Catholic poets of note: Vinçenc Prennushi (1885-1949), Lazër Shantoja (1892-1945) and Bernardin Palaj (1894-1947). These three men personified the zenith - and at the same time the downfall - of Scutarine Catholic literature.

The first of these writers from Shkodra would now seem to symbolize, more than any other, the final decades of Scutarine Catholic culture and its demise after the communist takeover. Poet, folklorist and translator Vinçenc Prennushi (1885-1949) (also written *Prendushi*) was born on 4 September 1885 in Shkodra and studied at a Catholic college in Austria. On 25 March 1908 he was ordained as a Franciscan priest. Prennushi, fascinated by the oral culture of northern Albania, began collecting folksongs from the mountain tribes. This compilation of folklore material was published by Austrian archeologist and historian Carl Patsch (1865-1945) in the volume *Kângë popullore gegnishte*, Sarajevo 1911 (Gheg Folksongs), and made a major contribution to the study of Albanian oral literature. Prennushi also wrote articles on various subjects for the Catholic press of the period, for Scutarine periodicals such as *Lajmtari i Zemers t'Jezu Krishtit* (The Messenger of the Sacred Heart), *Hylli i Dritës* (The Day-Star), *Posta e Shqypniës* (The Albanian Post) and *Zâni i Shna Ndout* (The Voice of St Anthony).

In his ecclesiastical career, Vinçenc Prennushi served as a provincial from 1929 to 1936. In 1936, he was made Bishop of Sapa and in 1940 was appointed Archbishop of Durrës, thus becoming one of the two highest dignitaries of the Catholic Church in Albania.

In 1924 Prennushi published a volume of elegant lyric verse in Gheg dialect entitled

*Gjeth e lule*, Shkodra 1924 (Leaves and Flowers), which was reprinted in 1931. This collection of sixty-five poems contains verse of both nationalist and religious inspiration. His patriotic poems are reminiscent of the standard motifs of Rilindja verse: Scanderbeg, the flag, and self-sacrifice to the homeland in bondage, and often have a martial, indeed rather un-Franciscan ring to them. Such poems were popular at the time and many were recited by the public, such as *Grueja shqiptare* 1918 (The Albanian Eoman), in which a maiden spends her days embroidering a red and black Albanian flag, but in her concern for the nation she dies of grief and is buried in it herself. His spiritual poems, of mood rather than of ideas, are pensive. Many take up typically Catholic themes: the saviour on the cross, the Virgin Mary, St Francis of Assisi and Duns Scotus. The general tone of these poems, some of which offer poignant reflections on the futility of our earthly existence, is sombre and melancholic rather than serene and confident.

Of Prennushi's translations, mention may be made of the five-act children's drama *E Trathtuemja*, Shkodra 1919 (The Betrayed One), from the Italian *Tradita*, 1903, by one T. A. Rolando, as well as his Albanian versions of the novel *Quo vadis*, 1919, by Polish Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916); of the novel *Fabiola*, 1924-1925, by Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman (1802-1865); of *Dreizehnlinden* by minor German poet Friedrich Wilhelm Weber (1813-1894), an epic on the introduction of Christianity to the Saxons; and of *Le mie prigioni*, the memoirs of the Italian patriot and dramatist Silvio Pellico (1789-1845).

Vinçenc Prennushi was, according to his contemporaries, a man of virtue and humility and enjoyed great respect among the Catholic population. Apparently not politically active despite his lofty position in the church hierarchy, Prennushi was arrested by the communist authorities after the war, tortured and sentenced by a military court in Durrës to twenty years of prison and hard labour as an enemy of the people. Weakened by prison conditions and suffering from asthma and heart disease, the sixty-three-year-old archbishop died in the prison hospital in February 1949.

The second of this literary triad, Lazër Shantoja (1892-1945) was a poet, essayist and translator from Shkodra. Though talented, he published little. Born on 2 September 1892, he studied at the Jesuit-run *Kolegja Papnore Shqiptare* (Albanian Pontifical Seminary) in Shkodra, where he was taught by poets Ndre Mjeda (1866-1937) and Anton Xanoni (1862-1915) who instilled in him a love for his native Albanian and for foreign languages. Shantoja studied theology at Innsbruck and, following ordination as a priest in 1920, worked in several village parishes in northern Albanian, notably in Sheldia, east of Shkodra. The temperamental priest loved music and was known in the region as the 'pastor with the piano' after arranging for his piano to be transported to him there by mule. When Lazër Mjeda, brother of poet Ndre Mjeda, was nominated Archbishop of Shkodra in 1924, Shantoja was appointed his personal secretary. Among his duties in Shkodra was to participate actively in the Catholic democratic weekly *Ora e maleve* (The Mountain Fairy), founded in April 1923 by Ernest Koliqi (1903-1975) and Anton Harapi (1888-1946). This he did with articles of forceful style and corrosive Scutarine irony. When Ahmet Zogu (1895-1961) took power in the coup d'état of December 1924, Lazër Shantoja, like many other intellectuals of the period, went into exile, initially to Yugoslavia and Austria. In January 1928 in Vienna he began publishing a short-lived fortnightly periodical 'of an independent political group of Albanian refugees' entitled *Ora e Shqipnisë* (The Muse of Albania). Shantoja later continued on to Switzerland where, accompanied by his aging Scutarine mother, he worked as a chaplain in Berne.

Lazër Shantoja is remembered as a brilliant stylist, much like Ernest Koliqi, though the paucity of his publications and his long years away from Albania have placed him somewhat on the sidelines of Albanian literature. He is the author of prose texts of stylistic finesse, such as his essay *Grueja* (The Woman), and of refined lyric verse scattered in Scutarine periodicals such as *Hylli i Dritës* (The Day-Star), *Zâni i Shna Ndout* (The Voice of

St Anthony) and *Leka* (Leka). Under a pseudonym, he published a series of love sonnets dedicated to a young lady of Shkodra. His 180-page *Për natë kazanesh*, Shkodra 1919 (For Kettle Night), is a humorous collection of anecdotes, proverbs and sayings. Much-admired are his translations, primarily from the German. Among these are *Wilhelm Tell* and *Das Lied von der Glocke* by Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), and *Hermann und Dorothea* (1936) and sections of *Faust* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). The indefatigable Fan Noli (1882-1965), himself a translator of note, had begun and abandoned a translation of *Faust* while in exile in Berlin after the collapse of his 1924 government. On reading Shantoja's translation, he wrote to the latter in Switzerland to express his admiration:

“I can think of no congratulation for your Albanian version of the poetry other than to assure you that, had the giant of Weimar known Albanian, he would have thanked you, an Albanian Nerval, for this translation.”

After long years abroad, Shantoja made the unwise decision to return to Albania in 1940. He settled with his mother in Tirana. Four years later, he was arrested by the communist authorities, mercilessly tortured and shot in the spring of 1945.

Bernardin Palaj (1894-1947) was a Franciscan poet with a passionate interest in folklore. He was born on 2 October 1894 in the mountains of the Shllaku region and began his elementary schooling at the school of the Franciscan fathers in Shkodra, known later as the *Collegium Illyricum* (Illyrian college), directed by Gjergj Fishta. The Franciscans sent him for secondary education to Salzburg in Austria and for theological training to Innsbruck. He became a member of the Franciscan order on 15 September 1911 and was ordained a priest in August 1918. On his return to Albania, Palaj worked as a parish priest in the mountains and later taught Albanian and Latin at the *Collegium Illyricum*.

Like Vinçenc Prennushi and Shtjefën Gjeçovi (1874-1929), Bernardin Palaj collected folksongs on his travels on foot through the mountains and wrote articles on Gheg oral literature and tribal customs. He was particularly taken by the *Këngë kreshnikësh*, the heroic verse cycle of ‘frontier warriors’ of Mujo and Halili, which he published, together with Donat Kurti (1903-1969), in *Këngë kreshnikësh e legënda*, Tirana 1938 (Frontier Songs and Legends).

Palaj was also the author of classical lyric and elegaic verse, much of which was published in the thirties in the Franciscan periodical *Hylli i Dritës* (The Day-Star). This poetry of harmonious musicality and technical perfection, like that of Italian poet Giosuè Carducci (1835-1907), evinces a patriotic vision of the historic past and of the rich native culture of his people. His first poem *Prej burgut të jetës* (From Life's Prison), published in 1933 under the pseudonym Kukel Lapaj, is a 248-line religious hymn on the fall of man and his redemption. It concludes with the exhortation:

“O njeri i shkretë! Mbate, si të duesh ket jetë:  
Ká rruga kjo qi të qesin në Hind - te Leka,  
Te Çezari në Romë, a larg atje m'nji detë,  
Nji Napoljon kû e xûni në ngûjim deka.  
Kot u rrek njeri gjithnduersh per të diktuem  
Se kû i ká shtonet e veta lumnija!  
Në daç shoq me kënë me Zotin e mishnuem,  
'Kalo tuj bâ mirë!' - kshtu urdhnon Perendija!”

(Oh wretched man! Consider, if you will, this life:  
It has roads that will take you to India - to Alexander,  
To Caesar in Rome, or far off into the ocean

Where death overtook Napoleon in prison.  
In vain man strives in sundry ways to discover  
Where bliss has its channels!  
If you wish to be a companion of the Lord Incarnate,  
'Go your way doing good deeds!' as God commands.)

The 1,533-line *Valët e nji shpirtit* (The Waves of a Spirit) of 1934 is devoted to the Roman emperors of Illyrian origin, in particular to Constantine the Great (r. 307-337) who introduced Christianity to Europe. 1937 was a particularly productive year for Palaj. It was then that he published: the 893-line *Moskë-Alkazar* (Moscow-Alcázar) on the siege of the Alcázar military academy in Toledo at the outbreak of the Spanish civil war, an event in July of 1936 which profoundly shook sections of the pro-fascist Catholic clergy of southern Europe; *Vorreve të flamurit* (At the Graves of the Flag) and *Kuq e zí* (Red and Black), nationalist hymns composed on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Albanian independence in which the poet calls upon the *zâna*, his muse, to honour the graves of the heroes of the nation. The 1,184-line *Ndërmjet të Shën Gjergjvet* (Between the two Saint Georges' Days) of 1938 contains fresh pastoral scenes of colour and light at the arrival of St George's Day in spring. In deference to his master Gjergj Fishta, Palaj did not compose much epic verse, although his affinity for the magical rhapsodic world of frontier warriors, Mujo and Halili, gave him both a talent and an inclination for it. Fishta died on 30 December 1940 and Palaj was moved by the occasion to compose the 1,180-line elegy *Kah nata e vetme* (Towards the Solitary Night) in his honour. Again, it is the *zâna*, the awesome muse of Fishta and that of the Albanian nation, who laments cruel fate and the solitude of the tomb in the tradition of the *gjâmë*, the dirge of Gheg oral literature. Palaj's verse has been edited by Angela Cirrincione in the bilingual Albanian-Italian volume *Opere*, Rome 1969 (Works).

In the war years, Palaj also published a number of ethnographic studies on tribal law, myths and legends. In the autumn of 1944, having lost all hope that anti-communist forces might win the day and realizing that the end was nigh, he confided to Karl Gurakuqi (1895-1971), with tears in his eyes:

"I will withdraw to a parish up in my beloved mountains and there, where the Albanian spirit is kept alive, in contact with the common people, I shall continue the work I began many years ago, by carrying on research in history, in folklore and especially on the *Kanun*. I shall complete and systematize the rhapsodies which I meticulously collected so long ago."

Bernardin Palaj was arrested in Shkodra, severely mishandled and then sentenced to death for treason. He died in December 1947 in a Shkodra prison.

These three Catholic poets, Vinçenc Prennushi, Lazër Shantoja and Bernardin Palaj, stand for a host of scholars and secondary writers from among the Catholic clergy who were active in the field of culture and education up until 1944 and who made a significant contribution to Albanian letters. The death of these three men, concomitant with the death of the Gheg dialect as a literary language, is also symbolic of the demise of Scutarine Catholic writing as a current of Albanian literature and indeed of the golden age of Scutarine Catholic culture in Albania.

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