

## GJERGJ FISHTA, THE VOICE OF THE ALBANIAN NATION

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By far the greatest and most influential figure of Albanian literature in the first half of the twentieth century is the Franciscan pater Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940) who more than any other writer gave artistic expression to the searching soul of the now sovereign Albanian nation. Lauded and celebrated up until the Second World War as the 'national poet of Albania' and the 'Albanian Homer', Fishta was to fall into sudden oblivion when the communists took power in November 1944. The very mention of his name became taboo for forty-six years. Who was Gjergj Fishta and can he live up to his epithet as 'poet laureate' half a century later?

Fishta was born on 23 October 1871 in the Zadrime village of Fishta near Troshan in northern Albania where he was baptized by Franciscan missionary and poet Leonardo De Martino (1830-1923). He attended Franciscan schools in Troshan and Shkodra where as a child he was deeply influenced both by the talented De Martino and by a Bosnian missionary, pater Lovro Mihacevic, who instilled in the intelligent lad a love for literature and for his native language. In 1886, when he was fifteen, Fishta was sent by the Order of the Friars Minor to Bosnia, as were many young Albanians destined for the priesthood at the time. It was at Franciscan seminaries and institutions in Sutjeska, Livno and Kresevo that the young Fishta studied theology, philosophy and languages, in particular Latin, Italian and Serbo-Croatian, to prepare himself for his ecclesiastical and literary career. During his stay in Bosnia he came into contact with Bosnian writer Grga Martić (1822-1905) and Croatian poet Silvije Strahimir Kranjević (1865-1908) with whom he became friends and who aroused a literary calling in him. In 1894 Gjergj Fishta was ordained as a priest and admitted to the Franciscan order. On his return to Albania in February of that year, he was given a teaching position at the Franciscan college in Troshan and subsequently a posting as parish priest in the village of Gomsiqe. In 1899, he collaborated with Preng Doçi (1846-1917), the influential abbot of Mirdita, with prose writer and priest Dom Ndoc Nikaj (1864-1951) and with folklorist Pashko Bardhi (1870-1948) to found the *Bashkimi* (Unity) literary society of Shkodra which set out to tackle the thorny Albanian alphabet question. This society was subsequently instrumental in the publication of a number of Albanian-language school texts and of the *Bashkimi* Albanian-Italian dictionary of 1908, still the best dictionary of Gheg dialect. By this time, Fishta had become a leading figure of cultural and public life in northern Albania and in particular in Shkodra.

In 1902, Fishta was appointed director of Franciscan schools in the district of Shkodra where he is remembered in particular for having replaced Italian by Albanian for the first time as the language of instruction there. This effectively put an end to Italian cultural domination of northern Albanian Catholics and gave young Albanians studying at these schools a sense of national identity. On 14-22 November 1908 he participated in the Congress of Monastir as a representative of the *Bashkimi* literary society. This congress, attended by Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim delegates from Albania and abroad, was held to decide upon a definitive Albanian alphabet, a problem to which Fishta had given much thought. It was indeed Gjergj Fishta whom the congress elected to preside over a committee of eleven delegates who were to make the choice. After three days of deliberations, Fishta and the committee resolved to support two alphabets: a modified form of Sami Frashëri's Istanbul alphabet which, though impractical for printing, was most widely used at the time, and a new Latin alphabet almost identical to Fishta's *Bashkimi* alphabet, in order to facilitate printing abroad.

In October 1913, almost a year after the declaration of Albanian independence in

Vlora, Fishta founded and began editing the Franciscan monthly periodical *Hylli i Dritës* (The day-star) which was devoted to literature, politics, folklore and history. With the exception of the turbulent years of the First World War and its aftermath, 1915-1920, and the early years of the dictatorship of Ahmet Zogu, 1925-1929, this influential journal of high literary standing was published regularly until July 1944 and became as instrumental for the development of northern Albanian Gheg culture as Faik bey Konitza's Brussels journal *Albania* had been for the Tosk culture of the south. From December 1916 to 1918 Fishta edited the Shkodra newspaper *Posta e Shqypniës* (The Albanian post), a political and cultural newspaper which was subsidized by Austria-Hungary under the auspices of the *Kultusprotektorat*, despite the fact that the occupying forces did not entirely trust Fishta because of his nationalist aspirations. Also in 1916, together with Luigj Gurakuqi (1879-1925), Ndre Mjeda (1866-1937) and Mati Logoreci (1867-1941), Fishta played a leading role in the Albanian Literary Commission (*Komisija Letrare Shqype*) set up by the Austro-Hungarians on the suggestion of consul-general August Ritter von Kral (1859-1918) to decide on questions of orthography for official use and to encourage the publication of Albanian school texts. After some deliberation, the Commission rightly decided to use the central dialect of Elbasan as a neutral compromise for a standard literary language. This was much against the wishes of Gjergj Fishta who regarded the dialect of Shkodra, in view of its strong contribution to Albanian culture at the time, as best suited. Fishta hoped that his northern Albanian *koiné* would soon serve as a literary standard for the whole country much as Dante's language had served as a guide for literary Italian. Throughout these years, Fishta continued teaching and running the Franciscan school in Shkodra, known from 1921 on as the *Collegium Illyricum* (Illyrian College), which had become the leading educational institution of northern Albania. He was now also an imposing figure of Albanian literature.

In August 1919, Gjergj Fishta served as secretary-general of the Albanian delegation attending the Paris Peace Conference and, in this capacity, was asked by the president of the delegation, Msgr. Luigj Bumçi (1872-1945), to take part in a special commission to be sent to the United States to attend to the interests of the young Albanian state. There he visited Boston, New York and Washington. In 1921, Fishta represented Shkodra in the Albanian parliament and was chosen in August of that year as vice-president of this assembly. His talent as an orator served him well in his functions both as a political figure and as a man of the cloth. In later years, he attended Balkan conferences in Athens (1930), Sofia (1931) and Bucharest (1932) before withdrawing from public life to devote his remaining years to the Franciscan order and to his writing. From 1935 to 1938 he held the office of provincial of the Albanian Franciscans. These most fruitful years of his life were now spent in the quiet seclusion of the Franciscan monastery of Gjuhadoll in Shkodra with its cloister, church and rose garden where Fishta would sit in the shade and reflect on his verse. As the poet laureate of his generation, Gjergj Fishta was honoured with various diplomas, awards and distinctions both at home and abroad. He was awarded the Austro-Hungarian *Ritterkreuz* in 1911, decorated by Pope Pius XI with the *Al Merito* award in 1925, given the prestigious *Phoenix* medal of the Greek government, honoured with the title *Lector jubilatus honoris causae* by the Franciscan order, and made a regular member of the Italian Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1939. He died in Shkodra on 30 December 1940.

Although Gjergj Fishta is the author of a total of thirty-seven literary publications, his name is indelibly linked to one great work, indeed to one of the most astounding creations in all the history of Albanian literature, *Lahuta e malcís*, Shkodra 1937 (The Highland Lute). 'The Highland Lute' is a 15,613-line historical verse epic focussing on the Albanian struggle for autonomy and independence and, in particular, on events of northern Albanian history from 1858 to 1913. This literary masterpiece was composed primarily between 1902 and 1909, though it was refined and amended by its author over a thirty year period. It constitutes the first Albanian-language contribution to world literature.

In 1902 Fishta had been sent to a little village to replace the local parish priest for a time. There he met and befriended the aging peasant Marash Uci (1880-1914) of Hoti, whom he was later to immortalize in verse. In their evenings together, Marash Uci told the young priest of the heroic battles between the Albanian highlanders and the Montenegrins, in particular of the famed battle at the Rrzhanica Bridge in which Marash Uci had taken part himself. The first parts of 'The Highland Lute', subtitled 'At the Rrzhanica Bridge', were published in Zadar in 1905 and 1907, with subsequent and enlarged editions appearing in 1912, 1923, 1931 and 1933. The definitive edition of the work in thirty cantos was presented in Shkodra in 1937 to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the declaration of Albanian independence. Despite the success of 'The Highland Lute' and the preeminence of its author, this and all other works by Gjergj Fishta were banned after the Second World War when the communists came to power. The epic was, however, republished in Rome 1958, Ljubljana 1990, and Rome 1992, and exists in German and Italian translations.

In its historical dimensions, 'The Highland Lute' begins with border skirmishes between the Hoti and Gruda tribes and their equally fierce Montenegrin neighbours in 1858. The core of the work (cantos 6-25) is devoted to the events of 1878-1880, i.e. the Congress of Berlin which granted Albanian borderland to Montenegro, and the resultant creation of the League of Prizren to defend Albanian interests. Other cantos cover the Revolution of the Young Turks which initially gave Albanian nationalists some hope of autonomy, and the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913 which led to the declaration of Albanian independence.

'The Highland Lute' is certainly the most powerful and effective epic to have been written in Albanian. It towers over other attempts at this genre: Dalip Frashëri's Persian-influenced *Hadikaja*, ca. 1842 (The garden); Shahin bey Frashëri's Shi'ite epic *Myhtarnameja*, 1868 (The tale of Myhtar); Girolamo De Rada's rather meandering *Scanderbeccu i pa-faan*, 1872-1884 (Misfortunate Scanderbeg); Naim Frashëri's nationalistic but not altogether successful *Istori e Skenderbeut*, 1898 (History of Scanderbeg), and his Shi'ite epic *Qerbelaja*, 1898 (Kerbela); Giuseppe Schirò's epic of exile *Te dheu i huaj*, 1900 (In a foreign land); and Francesco Crispi Glaviano's *Mbi malin e Truntafilevet* (On the Mount of Roses).

The age of Bektashi and Shi'ite epics in the Turkish-Persian tradition was of course over and the classical theme for an Albanian epic, the tribulations of fifteenth-century national hero Scanderbeg, which had been approached with only limited success by the two most renowned Albanian writers of the nineteenth century, Girolamo De Rada and Naim Frashëri, was now too distant and nebulous to serve as the focal point for a twentieth-century epic. Gjergj Fishta chose as his subject matter what he knew best: the heroic culture of his native northern Albanian mountains. It was his intention with this epic, an unprecedented achievement in Albanian letters, to present the life of the northern Albanian tribes and of his people in general in its heroic dimensions. Indeed it was the author's fortune at the time to have been at the source of the only intact heroic society in Europe. The tribal structure of the inhabitants of the northern Albanian Alps differed radically from the more advanced and 'civilized' regions of the Tosk south. What so fascinated foreign ethnographers and visitors to northern Albania at the turn of the century was the staunchly patriarchal society of the highlands, a system based on customs handed down for centuries by tribal law, in particular by the Code of Lekë Dukagjini. All the distinguishing features of this society are present in 'The Highland Lute': birth, marriage and funerary customs, beliefs, the generous hospitality of the tribes, their endemic blood feuding, and the *besa*, absolute fidelity to one's word, come what may.

'The Highland Lute' is strongly inspired by northern Albanian oral verse, both by the cycles of heroic verse, i.e. the long octosyllabic *Këngë kreshnikësh* (Songs of the frontier warriors), similar to the Serbo-Croatian *junacke pjesme*, and by the equally popular cycles of historical verse of the eighteenth century, similar to Greek kleptic verse and to the *haidutska*

*pesen* of the Bulgarians. Fishta knew this oral verse sung by the Gheg mountain tribes on their one-stringed *lahuta* and relished in its language and rhythm. The narrative of the epic is therefore replete in the rich, archaic vocabulary and colourful figures of speech used by the warring highland tribes of the north and does not make for easy reading nowadays, even for the northern Albanians themselves. An intimate link to oral literature is of course nothing unusual for an epic poem, though some authors have criticized Fishta for ‘folklorism’, for imitating folklore instead of producing a truly literary epic. The standard meter of ‘The Highland Lute’ is a trochaic octometer or heptameter which is more in tune with Albanian oral verse than is the classical hexameter of Latin and Greek epics. The influence of the great epics of classical antiquity, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Vergil’s *Aeneid*, is nonetheless ubiquitous in ‘The Highland Lute’ as a number of scholars, in particular Maximilian Lambertz and Giuseppe Gradilone, have delighted in pointing out. Many parallels in style and content have thus transcended the millennia. Fishta himself later translated book five of the *Iliad* into Albanian.

Among the major stylistic features which characterize ‘The Highland Lute,’ and no doubt most other epics, are metaphor, alliteration and assonance, as well as archaic figures of speech and hyperbole. The predominantly heroic character of the narrative with its extensive battle scenes is fortunately counterbalanced with lyric and idyllic descriptions of the natural beauty of the northern Albanian Alps which give ‘The Highland Lute’ a lightness and poetic grace it might otherwise lack.

‘The Highland Lute’ relies heavily on Albanian mythology and legend. The work is replete with mythological figures of oral literature who, like the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece, observe and, where necessary, intervene in events. Among them are the *zanas*, dauntless mountain spirits who dwell near springs and torrents and who bestow their protection on Albanian warriors; the *oras*, female spirits whose very name is often taboo; the vampire-like *lugats*; the witch-like *shtrigas*; and the *drangues*, semi-human figures born with wings under their arms and with supernatural powers, whose prime objective in life is to combat and slay the seven-headed fire-spewing *kulshedras*.

The fusion of the heroic and the mythological is equally evident in a number of characters to whom Fishta attributes major roles in ‘The Highland Lute’: Oso Kuka, the fierce and valiant warrior who prefers death over surrender to his Slavic enemy; the old shepherd Marash Uci who admonishes the young fighters to preserve their freedom and not to forget the ancient ways and customs; and the valiant maiden Tringa, caring for her brother and resolved to defend her land.

The heroic aspect of life in the mountains is one of the many characteristics the northern Albanian tribes have in common with their southern Slavic, and in particular Montenegrin, neighbours. The two peoples, divided as they are by language and by the bitter course of history, have a largely common culture. Although the Montenegrins serve as ‘bad guys’ in the glorification of the author’s native land, Fishta was not uninfluenced or unmoved by the literary achievements of the southern Slavs in the second half of the nineteenth century, in particular by epic verse of Slavic resistance to the Turks. We have referred to the role played by Franciscan pater Grga Martić whose works served the young Fishta as a model while the latter was studying in Bosnia. Fishta was also inspired by the writings of an earlier Franciscan writer, Andrija Kacic-Miosic (1704-1760), Dalmatian poet and publicist of the Enlightenment who is remembered in particular for his *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga*, 1756 (Pleasant talk of Slavic folk), a collection of prose and poetry on Serbo-Croatian history, and by the works of Croatian poet Ivan Mazuranić (1814-1890), author of the noted romantic epic *Smrt Smail-age Cengica*, 1846 (The death of Smail Aga). A further source of literary inspiration for Fishta was the Montenegrin poet-prince Petar Petrović Njegoš (1813-1851). It is no coincidence that the title ‘The highland (or mountain) lute’ is very similar to *Gorski vijenac*, 1847 (The mountain wreath), Njegoš’ verse epic of Montenegro’s heroic

resistance to the Turkish occupants, which is now generally regarded as the national epic of the Montenegrins and Serbs. Fishta proved that the Albanian language, too, was capable of a refined literary epic of equally heroic proportions.

Although Gjergj Fishta is remembered primarily as an epic poet, his achievements are actually no less impressive in other genres, in particular as a lyric and satirical poet. Indeed, his lyric verse is regarded by many scholars as his best.

Fishta's first publication of lyric poetry, *Vierrsha i pershpirteshem t'kthyem shcyp*, Shkodra 1906 (Spiritual verse translated into Albanian), was of strong Catholic inspiration. Here we find translations of the great Italian poets such as the Arcadian Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782) of Rome, romantic novelist and poet Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873) of Milan whom Fishta greatly admired, the patriotic Silvio Pellico (1789-1845) of Turin, and lyricist and literary historian Giacomo Zanella (1820-1888) of Vicenza, etc.

Fishta's first collection of original lyric verse was published under the title *Pika voëset*, Zadar 1909 (Dewdrops), and dedicated to his contemporary Luigj Gurakuqi (1879-1925). It was followed in 1913, at the dawn of Albanian independence, by the first edition of *Mrizi i zânave*, Shkodra 1913 (Noonday rest of the Zanas), which includes some of the religious verse of *Pika voëset*. The general tone of *Mrizi i zânave* is, however, much more nationalist than spiritual, the patriotic character of the collection being substantially underlined in the subsequent expanded editions of 1924, 1925 and in the definitive posthumous edition of 1941. Poems such as *Shqypnija* (Albania), *Gjuha shqype* (The Albanian language), *Atdheut* (To the fatherland), *Shqypnija e lirë* (Free Albania) and *Hymni i flamurit kombtar* (Hymn to the national flag) express Fishta's satisfaction and pride in Albania's history and in its newly found independence. Also included in this volume are the allegorical melodrama *Shqyptari i gjyetnuem* (The civilized Albanian man) and its sequel *Shqyptarja e gjyetnueme* (The civilized Albanian woman).

With his nationalist verse concentrated in the above volume, Fishta collected his religious poetry in the 235-page edition *Vallja e Parrîzit*, Shkodra 1925 (The dance of paradise). The verse in this collection, including poems such as *Të kryqzuemt* (The crucifixion), *Të zânun e pafaj të Virgjërës Mri* (The immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary), *Nuntsiata* (The annunciation) and *Shë Françesku i Asizit* (St Francis of Assisi), constitutes a zenith of Catholic literature in Albania.

Gjergj Fishta was also a consummate master of satirical verse, using his wit and sharpened quill to criticize the educational shortcomings and intellectual sloth of his Scutarine compatriots. His was not the benevolent, exhortative irony of Çajupi, but rather biting, pungent satire, often to the point of ruthlessness, the poetic equivalent of the blunt satirical prose of Faik bey Konitza. Fishta had printed many such poems in the periodical *Albania* using the telling pseudonym 'Castigat ridendo'. In 1907, he published, anonymously, the 67-page satirical collection *Anxat e Parnasit*, Sarajevo 1907 (The wasps of Parnassus), which laid the foundations for satire as a poetic genre in Albanian literature and which is regarded by many critics as the best poetry he ever produced. In the first of the satires, *Nakdomonicpedija* (A lesson for Nakdo Monici), he turns to his friend, Jesuit writer and publisher Dom Ndoc Nikaj (1864-1951), whom he affectionately calls by his penname Nakdo Monici, to convey his sympathy that the latter's 416-page *Historia é Shcypniis* (History of Albania), published in Brussels in 1902, had not received due attention among their compatriots. The Albanians were quite indifferent to their own history and indeed to their present sorry state in general. The reason for this indifference, Fishta tells us, was a contest between St Nicholas and the devil. St Nicholas had sailed the seas at the command of the Almighty to sell reason and taste. The devil, for his part, competed with a ship full of old boots which he offered for sale. When the two merchants arrived at the port of Shëngjin, the Albanians took counsel and decided to go for the boots on credit. With such uneducated masses, Fishta recommends that Nikaj take solace in the aloof and cynical attitude of

Molière's *Tartuffe*. *Anxat e Parnasit*, later spelt *Anzat e Parnasit*, which contains many a delightfully spicy expression normally unbecoming of a mild Franciscan priest, was republished in 1927, 1928, 1942 and 1990, and made Fishta many friends and enemies. *Gomari i Babatasit*, Shkodra 1923 (Babatasi's ass), is another volume of amusing satire, published under the pseudonym Gegë Toska while Fishta was a member of the Albanian parliament. In this work, which enjoyed great popularity at the time, he rants at false patriots and idlers.

Aside from the above-mentioned melodramas *Shqyptari i gjytetnuem* (The civilized Albanian man) and *Shqyptarja e gjytetnueme* (The civilized Albanian woman), Fishta was the author of several other works of theatre, including adaptations of a number of foreign classics, e.g., the three-act *I ligu per mend*, Shkodra 1931 (Le malade imaginaire), of Molière, and *Ifigenija n'Aullí*, Shkodra 1931 (Iphigenia in Aulis), of Euripides. Among other dramatical works he composed and/or adapted at a time when Albanian theatre was in its infancy are short plays of primarily religious inspiration, among them the three-act Christmas play *Barit e Betlêmit* (The shepherds of Bethlehem); *Sh' Françesku i Asisit*, Shkodra 1912 (St Francis of Assisi); the tragedy *Juda Makabé*, Shkodra 1923 (Judas Maccabaeus); *Sh. Luigji Gonzaga*, Shkodra 1927 (St Aloysius of Gonzaga); and *Jerina, ase mbretnesha e luleve*, Shkodra 1941 (Jerina or the queen of the flowers), the last of his works to be published during his lifetime.

The national literature of Albania had been something of a Tosk prerogative until the arrival of Gjergj Fishta on the literary scene. He proved that northern Albania could be an equal partner with the more advanced south in the creation of a national culture. The acclaim of 'The Highland Lute' has not been universal, though, in particular among Tosk critics. Some authors have regarded his blending of oral and written literature as disastrous and others have simply regarded such a literary epic with a virtually contemporary theme as an anachronism in the twentieth century. Ismail Kadare (b. 1936) has decried 'The Highland Lute' as a "long monotonous poem, a sterile chronicle which, being moralizing and didactic to boot, resembles the epics of the north as much as distilled water resembles that of the cascades of the Alpine pastures." Only time will tell whether Fishta can regain his position as 'national poet' after half a century of politically motivated oblivion.

The Scutarine Catholic school of letters which Gjergj Fishta dominated entered a golden age in the first decades of the twentieth century and much credit for this blossoming of Gheg culture goes to him. Franciscan poets and scholars like Pashko Bardhi (1870-1948), Shtjefën Gjeçovi (1874-1929), Pal Dodaj (1880-1948), Vinçenc Prennushi (1885-1949), Marin Sirdani (1885-1962), Anton Harapi (1888-1946), Justin Rrota (1889-1964), Bernardin Palaj (1894-1947), Donat Kurti (1903-1983), Benedikt Dema (1904-1960) and Gjon Shllaku (1907-1946), and indeed virtually all other Albanian intellectuals who spent their productive years in Shkodra at some time during the first four decades of the century were influenced in one way or another by the imposing figure of Father Gjergj Fishta. Scholar Eqrem Çabej (1908-1980) in his 1941 obituary of the poet, wrote:

"Rooted profoundly in the soil of his native land, which he rarely abandoned and always returned to, he derived the best of his human and poetic talents from this soil. He spent his life in an annex of the monastery of his order, situated far from the city of Shkodra, in the courtyard of which ancient trees provided soothing shade, and there he listened devoutly to the silent inspiration of the Muses. He was not one of those intellectual writers, not uncommon in the Balkans, who spend most of their lives in large cities abroad. He was one of those types who grow slowly and organically from their roots. He was a true son of his people and in his symbiosis with the soil, in a manner quite different from Naim Frashëri, has become the national poet of Albania."

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Gjergj Fishta was indeed universally recognized as the 'national poet'. Austrian Albanologist Maximilian Lambertz (1882-1963) described him as "the most ingenious poet Albania has ever produced" and Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938) called him "the great poet of the glorious people of Albania." For others he was the "Albanian Homer."

After the war, Fishta was nonetheless attacked and denigrated perhaps more than any other pre-war writer and fell into prompt oblivion. The national poet became an anathema. The official Tirana 'History of Albanian Literature' of 1983, which carried the blessing of the Albanian Party of Labour, restricted its treatment of Fishta to an absolute minimum:

"The main representative of this clergy, Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940), poet, publicist, teacher and politician, ran the press of the Franciscan order and directed the cultural and educational activities of this order for a long time. For him, the interests of the church and of religion rose above those of the nation and the people, something he openly declared and defended with all his demagoguery and cynicism, [a principle] upon which he based his literary work. His main work, the epic poem, *Lahuta e Malësisë* (The Highland Lute), while attacking the chauvinism of our northern neighbours, propagates anti-Slavic feelings and makes the struggle against the Ottoman occupants secondary. He raised a hymn to patriarchalism and feudalism, to religious obscurantism and clericalism, and speculated with patriotic sentiments wherever it was a question of highlighting the events and figures of the national history of our Rilindja period. His other works, such as the satirical poem *Gomari i Babatasit* (Babatasi's ass), in which public schooling and democratic ideas were bitterly attacked, were characteristic of the savage struggle undertaken by the Catholic church to maintain and increase its influence in the intellectual life of the country. With his art, he endeavoured to pay service to a form close to folklore. It was often accompanied by prolixity, far-fetched effects, rhetoric, brutality of expression and style to the point of banality, false arguments which he intentionally endeavours to impose, and an exceptionally conservative attitude in the field of language. Fishta ended his days as a member of the academy of fascist Italy."

The real reason for Fishta's fall from grace after the 'liberation' in 1944 is to be sought not in his alleged pro-Italian proclivities but in the origins of the Albanian Communist Party itself. The ACP, later to be called the Albanian Party of Labour, had been founded during the Second World War under the auspices of the Yugoslav envoys Dusan Mugosa (1914-1973) and Miladin Popovic (1910-1945). In July 1946, Albania and Yugoslavia signed a Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance and a number of other agreements which gave Yugoslavia effective control over all Albanian affairs, including the field of culture. Serbo-Croatian was introduced as a compulsory subject in all Albanian high schools and by the spring of 1948, plans were even under way for a merger of the two countries. It is no doubt the anti-Slavic sentiments expressed in 'The Highland Lute' which caused the work and its author to be proscribed by the Yugoslav authorities, even though Fishta was educated in Bosnia and inspired by Serbian and Croatian literature. The so-called anti-Slavic element in Fishta's work is also that which is stressed in the first post-war edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia of Moscow, which reads as follows (March 1950):

"The literary activities of the Catholic priest Gjergj Fishta reflect the role played by the Catholic clergy in preparing for Italian aggression against Albania. As a former agent of Austro-Hungarian imperialism, Fishta, in the early years of his literary activity, took a position against the Slavic peoples who opposed the rapacious plans of Austro-Hungarian imperialism in Albania. In his chauvinistic, anti-Slavic poem 'The

Highland Lute', this spy extolled the hostility of the Albanians towards the Slavic peoples, calling for an open fight against the Slavs."

After relations with Yugoslavia were broken off in 1948, it is quite likely that expressions of anti-Montenegrin or anti-Serbian sentiment would no longer have been considered a major sin in Party thinking, but an official position had been taken with regard to Fishta and, possibly with deference to the new Slav allies in Moscow, it could not be renounced without a scandal. Gjergj Fishta, but a few years earlier the lauded national poet of Albania, disappeared from the literary scene, seemingly without a trace. Such was the fear of him in later years that even his bones were secretly dug up and thrown into the river.

Yet despite four decades of unrelenting Party propaganda reducing Fishta to a 'clerical and fascist poet', the people of northern Albania, and in particular the inhabitants of his native Shkodra, did not forget him. After almost half a century, Gjergj Fishta was commemorated openly for the first time on 5 January 1991 in Shkodra. During the first public recital of Fishta's works in Albania in forty-five years, the actor at one point hesitated in his lines and was immediately and spontaneously assisted by members of the audience - who still knew many parts of 'The Highland Lute' by heart.

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