

An Overview of Eqrem Cabej's Literary Thought

Edlira Dhima

*Ismail Qemal University of Vlora
College of Human Sciences
Department of Language and Literature, Vlora, Albania
E-mail: edadhima@gmail.com*

Doi: 10.5901/mjss.2012.v3n3p341

Abstract For over half a century, Cabej, like a few others, saw great achievements for his contribution to various fields of Albanology and Balkanology. The breadth of his interests and his scientific productivity are perspicuous testimonies of the fact that he was a gifted scientist of European caliber, who dedicated his entire life to science. The writings of great linguists and humanists such as Eqrem Cabej are part of those elements, which constitute the cultural foundations of a nation. Just like the mighty mountains, such contributions cast their shade and rest their weight everywhere. Even when lacking the possibility or the need to analyze them in detail, the wide masses of the common people can feel their irradiating influence, and most of all, they truly believe them. Eqrem Cabej is a profound scholar of the genesis of Albanian literature. He created the theoretical core of Albanian Romanticism and started the theoretical initiative of the Modern Albanian Literature. As a pioneering theorist of the latter, which inevitably includes language too, he put forth prodigious efforts to make it as rich and dynamic as possible, and as developed, and particularly, as aesthetic as it could be. His work, just like the busy hum of the working bee, was persistent and tireless — the work of a great master. His work will be traveling the Albanian-speaking world in perpetuity, due to its being as language-forming as it is world-forming.

Keywords: science, literature, initiator, Romanticism, action.

1. Introduction

For over half a century, Cabej, like a few others, saw great achievements for his contribution to various fields of Albanology and Balkanology. The breadth of his interests and his scientific productivity are perspicuous testimonies of the fact that he was a gifted scientist of European caliber who dedicated his entire life to science. The writings of great linguists and humanists such as Eqrem Cabej are part of those elements, which constitute the cultural foundations of a nation. Just like the mighty mountains, such contributions cast their shade and rest their weight everywhere. Even when lacking the possibility or the need to analyze them in detail, the wide masses of the common people can feel their irradiating influence, and most of all, they truly believe them. Because in times of pressure, when someone tries to attack the foundations: language, culture, art and its mentality, shining examples such as Eqrem Cabej, are even more strongly highlighted, just as the hefty mountains are illuminated by lightning during a storm.

Cabej, is, in the first place, known as a linguist and there are probably not many of those who know that he has been quite dealing even with popular culture, as well as literature. Furthermore, it can be affirmed that during the first years of his scientific activity, he has dedicated almost equal efforts to linguistic problems, as well as to issues related to folklore and literature. He was convinced that linguistics and folklore are “two fields of study that should walk side by side, since the results coming from the findings of one of them, are serviceable to the findings of the other.”

Even from a quick glance at the research, published papers, and speeches on the Albanian literature and popular culture, one finds no difficulty in understanding that even these fields of study Cabej has given valuable contribution. His two pieces of research on *Albanian Literature*, namely *Për Gjenezën e Literaturës Shqipe* [On the Genesis of the Albanian Literature] and *Romantizmi në Europën Lindore e Juglindore dhe në Literaturën Shqiptare*, [Romanticism in East and Southeast Europe and in the Albanian Literature] contain his views on these literature.

An overview of Cabej's multifaceted activity shows that his first article, published in 1929 at the age of 22, is focused on Lasgush Poradeci. In 1936, in his book *Elemente të Gjuhësisë e të Letërsisë Shqipe (Për Shkollat e Mesme)* [Elements of the Albanian Linguistics and Literature (For High School Students)], in addition to imparting information and opinions about a considerable number of Albanian and Arberesh writers, he included many selected portions of their literary works.

Ibrahim Rugova, the greatest standardizer of the Albanian literary criticism, has defined Eqrem Cabej's creative method in literary studies “cultural-historical” and “philological”.

2. Popular Poetry

With regards to popular poetry, in his publication *Për Gjenezën e Literaturës Shqipe* [On the Genesis of the Albanian Literature], E. Cabej was of the opinion that it is not enough to say that it represents an organic part, although humanly higher, of the life of the common people in its everyday manifestations. He adds that our popular poetry is impossible to be understood without knowledge of the old Albanian everyday life and without understanding of such poetry "as a product and function of that life".

In his papers and articles on the Albanian folk poetry, Cabej has noted the wide variety of motifs interweaved in the folk song verses. As a careful examiner of various aspects of Albanian people's life, he has also provided valuable ideas on the tunes used to sing those verses in different regions of Albania.

Cabej admits that folk poetry has exercised some great influence on writers from different parts of the Balkans. Generally speaking, the Albanian poets have risen from the natural soil of folk poetry. At the same time, he also notes that creations of art and literature have "often been simply turned into folk songs."

3. Some thoughts and evaluations of Albanian literature and of his authors

This historian of the Albanian language could not neglect showing interest on the works that deal with the historical evolution of the Albanian language. Alongside the old Albanian authors such as, Buzuku, Budi, etc, Arberesh writers from Italy, starting from Matrenga up to the present day, have also been included in his work. Indeed, judging by several writing he published, it can be stated that if he had committed himself to literature, he would certainly have left us much valuable literary critical research and probably even literary creations of his own.

Regarding the categorization of the Albanian literature, Cabej was of the opinion that it should be based on cultural and literary circles instead of dividing it according to historical periods. Based on this criterion, he distinguished among four literary and cultural circles: The Catholic Circle of North Albania, the Albanian-Italian Circle, The Orthodox Circle of South Albania, and lastly, the national literature of the nineteenth century.

Our great scholar has also written about a number of Albanian and Arberesh authors on the Croatian Encyclopedia (1942).

3.1 Romanticism

The book *Romantizmi në Europën Lindore e Juglindore dhe në Literaturën Shqiptare*, [Romanticism in East and Southeast Europe and in the Albanian Literature] was written in 1945, but was only published in 1994 with a half a century delay, is the most systematic literary research authored by Eqrem Cabej and, at the same time, constitutes the theoretical crown of the Albanian romanticism. Cabej views the Albanian romantic poets as creators of their own works of art as well as nation's patriots and educators. While taking into consideration the cultural heritage, the author views romanticism as belonging to European romanticism and to Balkanic romanticism, thus identifying himself with the great representatives of these views, namely Jeronim De Rada and Naim Frasheri.

Regarding De Rada, in an unpublished paper titled *Nje shkrim i panjohur i De Rades* [An Unknown Piece of Writing by De Rada]. He highlights "... the unfading spirit of this Arberesh colossus...". In addition, in his speech *Vatra dhe bota në poezinë e De Radës* [The Hearth and the World in De Rada's Poetry], Cabej analyzes the multifaceted activity of De Rada — as a writer, linguist, folklorist, Albanian language teacher, and patriot — which is summarized in "The image of an apostle to the national idea."

De Rada's cultural legacy displays nuances of Albanian-Byzantine and Pre-Turkish influences. In order to grasp this poet's work in a more holistic manner, one should not neglect the circumstances that have conditioned his context — as the author himself informs that he found inspiration in both classical and modern literature, just as the majority of the European poets belonging to the same time period. Traces originating from the Italian Renaissance, particularly Ariosto and Thasos are noticeable in some of the literary figures and motifs used in his poems. The motif of the unfortunate love between youths that stem from two feuding families, which is used in a number of European literatures, can also be found in our poet's work while depicting the characters of Bozdar Sires and Serafina Topia in Arta, in Skanderbeg's time. The names of Turkish heroes like Almazore and Algazile, which are mentioned in his poem *Skanderbekku i Pafaan* [The Ill-fated Scanderbeg] and in the elaboration of his poem *Serafina Topia*, transport us into the Arabian world of Medieval Spain, just like Sid's Romansero. Aide's name, a character that appears as Skanderbeg's sister, reminds us of Byron's poems. In addition, The Bible has left a deep impression on the poet.

The romantic characteristics of his poetry are as follows: his foundations planted on folk poetry, his profound research into the nation's past history, his glorification of the Middle Ages, his way of singing praises to a woman's spirit, his subjectivity, his pessimism, his deeply religious nature, his sensibility towards nature, as well as an interest in the Orient. In his book *Elemente të Gjuhësisë e të Letërsisë Shqipe* [Elements of the Albanian Linguistics and Literature], in which Cabej briefly mentions Albanian and Arberesh authors, he states that in Naim Frasheri's work "the apostle and the poet are one and the same... As a result, it is difficult to distinguish the artist from the patriot." He is an offspring of the most recent half of romanticism. His poem "Bagëti e Bujqës" [Herds and Tillage] is considered a masterpiece of our poet. This poem is estimated as his most poetically complete work. Cabej concludes that Frasheri is a product of his nation, and blood of our blood, while generalizing that the ethnic feeling has always been more intense than the religious feeling among the Albanian people.

In Cabej's analysis of Cajupi's works, especially *Baba Tomorri* [Father Tomorr], he asserts "this is a folk poet in the true sense of the word", while adding that "even the content of his poems is mostly reflecting the life of the common people...".

Since the year 1929, when he published his first paper titled "Mbi poezinë e Lasgush Poradeci" [On Lasgush Poradeci's Poetry] to the end of World War II, Eqrem Cabej (1908-1980) showed great consideration and esteem for the personality and poetry of Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940). This was evident both in the publication of his two monographs — *Poeti Shqiptar Gjergj Fishta* [Gjergj Fishta, the Albanian Poet] and *Epika e Gjergj Fishtes* [Gjergj Fishta's Epic], — and in the release of his literary-historic and literary-critic works — *Elemente të Gjuhësisë e të Literaturës Shqipe* [Elements of Albanian Linguistics and Literature] and *Romantizmi në Europën Lindore e Juglindore dhe në Literaturën Shqiptare* [Romanticism in East and Southeast Europe and in the Albanian Literature], with only a slight mention in a number of other publications. In fact, in his textbook *Elemente të Gjuhësisë e të Literaturës Shqipe* [Elements of Albanian Linguistics and Literature], Cabej dedicates an entire chapter (p. 50-52) to Gjergj Fishta.

This man of our era was an important link in the chain of Albanian literary studies, spanning the period between pre-war and post-war Albania, just as Gjergj Fishta was, in a different way, a liaison and very synthesizing link in the development of creative literary thought, from the Renaissance period to the period of Realism and Independence, encompassing the entire history and culture of the Albanian people. In this point of view, Gjergj Fishta and Eqrem Cabej, in their different ways of expressing their creativity, satisfied the necessary criteria, which were also preferred by Horace, who said "Scribendi recte sapere est et principium et fons".

Cabej's appreciation for Fishta's poetry, especially with regards to his poem *Lahuta e Malcis* [Lute of Highlands], is steady and constant, while the comparisons he makes with Frasheri's poetry as well as with additional poems authored by several other Albanian poets who had lived and worked in the East or in the West, render the persona and the great commandment of our national poet even more convincing, while at the same time offer some well-deserved and acceptable support to the development of Albanian literary thought in its entirety. The concepts of the East and of the West, added to the concepts of the hearth and the "Albanian soil" in the poetic creations of De Rada, Frasheri, and Fishta have been presented with the due argumentation of a scientist and a scholar of the Albanian literature in Eqrem Cabej's analyses.

Prompted by the great urge to create a map of the Albanian literature history in the process of cementing the older generation to the next one, Cabej states that, "Asdren provides the transition..." then he specifies that such transition aims at liberating poetry from national obligations in order to resemble more to work of art. After he describes the lyrical work of Asdreni — namely, *Rreze Dielli* [Sun Rays], *Ëndrra e Lotë* [Dreams and Tears], and *Psalme Murgu* [A Monk Psalms], which have a formal poetic structure — praises him as a "master of the form".

The first article published by Cabej is titled "Mbi Poezinë e Lasgush Poradeci" [On Lasgush Poradeci's Poetry], published on *Gazeta e Re* newspaper, when he was still a student. The broad cultural knowledge and the depth of the literary thought of this young Cabej are significantly evident in the eyes of the reader. Based on Poradeci's poetic creations of that time, Cabej beautifully expresses his judgment and appreciations for the talented writer: "Lasgush Poradeci opens for us the gate to a new life in Albanian poetry... a new style is born and is being cultivated in the Albanian poetry, for which you can search in vain amongst other Albanian poets, but also among foreign writers because of the authenticity that distinguishes this young poet."

The modern European poets: the Germans Rilke and Stefan George, the French Baudelaire, Verlee, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Valéry, the Italians Pascoli and D'Annunzio, the Russian Jesenin, are viewed, in Cabej's work, as product of modern times, whose son is also Lasgush Poradeci.

Thus, the preceding time periods of old biblical writers, led by Budi, namely the romantic writers' period, which was highlighted by De Rada and Naim Frasheri, are concluded with the announcement of the modern period of the Albanian literature, which protagonist is Poradeci.

Cabej's most beautiful piece of writing in the field of literature remains without a doubt his short speech dedicated to Fan Noli's literary activity, which, in its brevity, is as packed with information as it is sharp and heartfelt. Briefly, he sheds light on the Noli's colossus work as a writer and a translator of some of world's masterpieces. According to Cabej, "the complex spirit of the writer permeates everywhere in these works — both in his creations and in his translations. He has lived them, he has lived through them in the images of the heroes..." He involuntarily appears in Brutus and Hamlet, in Don Quixote and in Omar Khayyam, in Moses the prophet and the Galilean, in bound Prometheus and in the people's enemy, which in reality is his true friend.

Further on, while elaborating on his poetic formation and linguistic expression, Cabej adds: "He is not a poet of etheric heights, but instead he is the writer of the sod soil. Noli is a forerunner of the Albanian literature, receiving power from the Motherland itself. In this field of literature he is not a blade of grass, which blooms today and withers tomorrow, nor is he a flower, which blossoms today and fades tomorrow. Instead, he appears as an oak, old and knotty — a lone oak, deeply rooted in the profound soil of this country. Such as this is also the language he uses... It does not have the fragrance of flowers, but it brings the healthy scent of the soil."

The literary sensitivity of Cabej is also clearly witnessed by the beautiful adaptation into Albanian of a number of poems written by well-known international poets, including a children's book. Such works include the song of Dante to Beatrice, as well as the following poems: *Song of the Evening* by H. Von Fallersleben, *Green Leaf*, *Heavy Shadows*, *A Woman's Hand* by Th. Storm.

He has also translated from German the children's novel *Bambi*, by the Austrian writer Felix Salten.

Eqrem Cabej is a profound scholar of the genesis of Albanian literature. The Albanologist and the greatest Albanian linguist of all times connected his first studies to literature issues. He created the theoretical core of Albanian Romanticism and started the theoretical initiative of the Modern Albanian Literature. As a pioneering theorist of the latter, which inevitably includes language too, he put forth prodigious efforts to make it as rich and dynamic as possible, and as developed, and particularly, as aesthetic as it could be. His work, just like the busy hum of the working bee, was persistent and tireless — the work of a great master. His work will be traveling the Albanian-speaking world in perpetuity, due to it being as language forming as it is world forming.

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