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In the Footsteps of a Renaissance Figure

Edlira Dhima¹¹ University "Ismael Qemali" Vlorë, AlbaniaCorresponding author: edlira.dhima@univlora.edu.al

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Abstract

Luigj Gurakuqi is one of the most distinguished personalities of our national, educational, and cultural movement at the end of the National Renaissance and the beginnings of Independence. A major polyhedral figure: politician and diplomat, distinguished statesman, linguist, poet and prose writer, aesthetician and literary critic, pedagogue and textologist, economist and financier, orator, man of culture and science, of word and action, of the pen and the rifle. Above all, he was a great patriot, ardent lover of the homeland, co-founder of the Albanian state of the modern era. Luigj Gurakuqi published many poems distinguished for their patriotic content, lyricism, and technique of versification. Through his articles he also made an important contribution to Albanian aesthetic thought and literary criticism. In the personality of Luigj Gurakuqi stands out a broad and encyclopedic culture. He was a profound connoisseur of the cultural heritage of his own people and of classical Roman and Latin culture.

The history of the country and world history were a permanent object of his studies. He knew archaeology and the economic and financial sciences, the national and European educational-pedagogical heritage. Gurakuqi was a polyglot. Besides Albanian, he mastered Latin, Italian, Turkish, and French; he knew Greek, German, and English. He has the merit of being among the principal drafters of the educational and cultural program of our national movement for autonomy, freedom, and independence. By fervently propagating the traditions of our people, he had a clear aim: that Albanians should know their own values, should know and appreciate the values of their own blood. He condemned blood feuds as a harmful act and as a means incited by foreigners in order to divide the Albanian people.

Keywords: *Personality, patriot, culture, poetry, Albanian, people, national, renaissance, literature.*

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Introduction

The biography of Luigj Gurakuqi is simple, painful, even tragic. He was born in Shkodër, where he was also educated. He completed his higher studies in Italy, initially in medicine and later he would dedicate himself to the natural sciences. But the desire to deal with society and its problems caused him not to practice the profession he chose.

Although his life was unjustly taken at the age of 45 after an assassination attempt, he left deep traces in the culture of the Albanian people.

Together with Ismail Qemali he participated in the raising of the flag in Vlora in 1912. He took part in several of the governments that were often formed from the day of Independence until 1924.

He continuously stood out as one of the embodiments of the democratic spirit, at a time when democracy among us was endangered both internally and externally. He often unmasked the exploitative aims of the feudal lords and rulers of the time in his speeches and articles.

He also unmasked the predatory aims of world imperialism in the Albania of that time. But Luigj Gurakuqi was also one of the fighters of our National Renaissance who began his political and patriotic activity also as a poet and publicist, spreading the voice of the call to war against the age-old occupiers and standing in the front lines of the struggle.

Nevertheless, Luigj Gurakuqi is more a fighter-tribune than a poet, more a politician and publicist than an artist. Like many writers of that time, he devoted all his creative inclination to the issue of bringing the country out of its long enslavement; he did not have enough time to engage in literary creativity, although he began his life path, not so long, with such ambitions.

The great problems of the time accompanied him from a young age. While he completed the lycée in Calabria and later the university in Naples, he understood that those were years of struggle

with pen and rifle for the liberation of the enslaved homeland, therefore the awakening of the oppressed and culturally poor compatriots had to be carried out.

The great battle for the rebirth of the homeland had to begin. Meanwhile, the maturity of age showed him the difficult road of spiritual and sometimes even physical battles for the liberation of the country. At the same time, he would fight against the Ottoman occupiers and against the internal enemies: against the rulers and feudal lords who placed individual interest above the interest of the country, and against pseudo-patriots who pretended to be patriots and against pseudo-intellectuals who pretended to be intellectuals.

From early on he became involved in political life, which gradually distanced him from poetic creativity and brought him closer to journalism. Something similar did not happen only to Luigj Gurakuqi; other writers of the last years of the National Renaissance and of the period between the two world wars also embraced journalism for the more direct treatment of the issues of the day.

A Poet Who Precedes Journalism

Luigj Gurakuqi, still young, before reaching 20 years of age, wrote his first poems, which he began to publish in 1898 in *Albania* of Faik Konica¹, which at that time was published in Brussels and more rarely in the *National Calendar* in Sofia.

Among his verses are woven motives similar to those of our National Renaissance: first of all love toward the homeland, the hymnization of the best-known figures such as Skanderbeg, Pyrrhus, Gjin Bua Shpata as great heroes of the past and the patriots who were engaged in spreading education and culture as educators of the nation; these are the portraits of his patriotic poetry.

With the good desire to awaken the Albanians dulled in slavery and to return their pride and touch their dignity, he writes:

¹Luigj Gurakuqi, *Vepra të zgjedhura (Selected Works)* with a preface by Mark Gurakuqi, Naim Frashëri, Tirana, 1961, p. 6.

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*"I wished, poor as I am, to be able to sing
 In a lofty manner, to kindle the brothers;
 To strengthen them in love of the
 homeland,
 Especially the younger generation."
 (To Mr. Gegë Postrippa)¹*

Likewise, as with many other writers of our Renaissance, Luigj Gurakuqi was destined by ill fate to live outside the homeland, with or without his desire. Longing for parents, sisters and brothers, friends, and loved ones overwhelms him deeply. Just like Ndre Mjeda and Filip Shiroka, with warmth and exhausting longing he describes his birthplace, Shkodra.

Although he studied in Italy, Luigj Gurakuqi never forgot that besides education, he had to work for the good of the homeland and together with other patriots seek jointly the paths and possibilities for the salvation of the country from the centuries-old yoke.

Two problems troubled him, against which he would raise his voice later as well: fratricide and the indifference of a part of the Albanians devoted to personal interests:

*"They think only of gaining,
 And of killing one another."
 (To Mr. Gegë Postrippa)²*

He understood very well the mission of the spoken and written word and did everything possible so that the Albanian language would remain preserved and untouched as the principal means for an untouched identity, that it should be an unconquerable pen before which all the assimilating waves of sultans and pashas had broken.

In emigration, Gurakuqi began to engage in poetic creativity not so much driven by inclination as by the demands of the time, when versification had become a way of expressing patriotic and freedom-loving feelings and influencing the feelings of others.

Besides other things, all the magazines and newspapers of that time are full of various poems written about everything: national and religious celebrations, schools, letters, good mothers, teachers, historical exemplars, courageous boys. Among the verses of Luigj Gurakuqi we often find swallows that fly and tell the emigrants the condition of the homeland, what is happening in Albania, what appearance the city of Shkodra had taken, what people think, etc. His swallows cannot fly from Albania without returning to Fusha e Rrmajit to see the graves of our ancestors, suffering but proud in their endurance.

The epistolary character of his poetry shows that it was both his pain and his remedy. A sincere versifier, burning from longing for his birthplace. Here is how he expresses himself in the poem *Desire*:

"To embrace my kin and friends."³

Also in the other poem *To My House*:

"In foreign lands, suffering and languishing."⁴

This longing toward the birthplace and close people, which in some of our Romantic poets was expressed with more manly and optimistic colors, in Luigj Gurakuqi has turned into a softened feeling, lowered to the level of sentimentalism.

We must emphasize that Luigj Gurakuqi did not criticize only his political opponents, but also Albanian poets with whose poetics he did not agree. He was convinced that the heroism of Skanderbeg and Pyrrhus, or the love and longing toward the homeland, could be treated and expressed properly only as they had been sung in ancient Greco-Roman poetry.

Therefore, with the exception of Jeronim de Rada, Zef Skiroi, and Gjergj Fishta, of whom he speaks only well, for the others he claims that they have voices like crows, ravens, owls:

¹Luigj Gurakuqi, *Vepra të zgjedhura* (Selected Works), Naim Frashëri, Tirana, 1961, p. 122.

² Ibid, p.122.

³ Ibid, p. 131.

⁴ Ibid, p. 159.

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*“Do you hear, friends, how they sing like
 crows,
 Today’s Albanians, see how they rage,
 Like sparrows when they have fallen into
 carrion.
 But can it be that thus, as these are doing,
 there will be sung
 The heroisms of Gjergj worthy of a Tyrtæus
 For whom Aeneas and Achilles could be
 praised?”¹*

To Gurakuqi, the level of Albanian poetry appeared low; therefore he reproached the poets by comparing it with ancient poetry or European Romanticism. Enchanted by the verses of Homer, Pindar, Sappho, Anacreon, Virgil, Catullus, Tibullus, Propertius, his understanding of contemporary poetry was not the proper one. He knew classical grandeur and mixed it with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, and Lord Byron. He saw Albanian poets as possessing truncated culture. Equipped with solid knowledge of classical literature, he did not refrain from showing off his own culture somewhat.

But beyond these reproaches, his great desire was that his people should have poets of the caliber of the poets of antiquity. *The Pledge of Honor* he dedicated to the poet who seemed to him that he would become an Albanian Tyrtæus.

Luigj Gurakuqi, the First Codifier of Albanian Metrics

He published the well-known work *Versification in the Albanian Language* in Naples in 1906. The viewpoints artistically expressed in the poem *The Fairies’ Decade*, he attempted to express artistically in this work, which he published continuously in the magazine *Albania*. Benlœw’s book on rhythm and rhyme in Albanian folk epic poetry was not some support that gave very great

encouragement either from the viewpoint of the issues raised or the final solutions.²

“Nevertheless, today Luigj Gurakuqi is rightly regarded as the first Albanian who attempted to codify Albanian metrics.”³

The taste of this late poet had advanced after the theoretical and aesthetic achievements of his time.

Although more by nature a critic than a poet, he had not formed proper viewpoints on poetry as a form of artistic expression, also because literature had not directed his interest toward it. He thought that Albanian poetry was in the phase of its qualitative beginnings or as he said *“still in swaddling clothes.”⁴*

Luigj Gurakuqi divides poets as they had been divided in idealist and Romantic theory since Plato onward: into versifiers, poets, or poets and rhymers. He also gave interesting thoughts on the genesis of poetry. He asserts, like all Romantics, that poetry and song are the result of man’s need to express himself.

With his theoretical work Luigj Gurakuqi attempted to canonize the development of our poetry, which would expand with different currents especially during the time between 1912 and 1940. One of these currents would be the non-principled classicism of the priest-poets of Shkodra, among them Gjergj Fishta and Ndre Mjeda.

Gurakuqi as a Publicist

In the verses of Gurakuqi’s poems, the problems he grasps, their ideological content, factual character, and patriotic inclination have fused Gurakuqi the poet with Gurakuqi the publicist. We cannot overlook the fact that in short literary-artistic prose appears Gurakuqi the publicist, in the sketches

¹ Luigj Gurakuqi, *Vepra të zgjedhura (Selected Works)*, Naim Frashëri, Tirana, 1961, p. 152-153.

² Louis Benlœw, *Du rythme et de la rime dans la poesie epique des Albanais*, Bucharest, 1898.

³ *Historia e letërsisë shqipe II (History of Albanian Literature II)*, Tirana, 1959, p. 388.

⁴ Luigj Gurakuqi, *Vepra të zgjedhura*, Naim Frashëri, Tirana, 1961, p. 250.

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"In the National Garden", "Longing for the Homeland", and "Late Repentance". The prose "In the National Garden"

is written in an elegant style, which influences the awakening of consciousness through the creation of an emotional state in the reader.

The author evokes the past, historical reality, with the aim of serving his compatriots as an example of the resistance and struggle of Albanians for freedom and national rights.

At 16 years of age, encouraged and inspired by his teacher of the Albanian language, Jeronim de Rada, alongside poetic and literary prose creations, he also wrote articles that were welcomed by the Arbëresh and Italian intellectual circles. He began his journalistic activity with Konica's *Albania*. The scholar Vili Kamsi, who compiled the complete bibliography of Konica's magazine, catalogued 58 titles of writings under the pseudonyms of Luigi Gurakuqi: Jakin Shkodra, Lekë Gruda, and Peter and Paul.¹ The fund of Gurakuqi's journalism is rich and with healthy national content.

Gurakuqi also wrote in the Italian language under the pseudonym G. Vico in the magazine *"La nazione albanese"* during 1897–1924, which was published by the Arbëresh Anselmo Lorecchio, in the Italian periodical *"L'Espansionata"*, but also in the magazine *"Albania"* the review *Cenni sui costume di Scutari d'Albania, Proverbi e Favole*.²

Anselmo Lorecchio welcomed Gurakuqi's writings, but Gurakuqi's presence in the magazine *"Albania"* worried him; he even accused him as a collaborator of the magazine *"Albania"*, which was in the service of Faik Konica and playing Austria's game.

To this absurdity Gurakuqi responds in the article *"Albania"* and *"The Bashkimi Society"*³, where he argued that *"Albania"* was an entirely national newspaper and gave valuable

contribution also for the treatment of issues of language, literature, and national culture, and that Lekë Gruda felt honored to express his thoughts in the columns of that Albanian periodical and in the Albanian language.

He continued to publish articles, journalistic prose, pamphlets, and essays in various newspapers.

The Oratory of Luigi Gurakuqi

Master of the pen, well-prepared and spontaneous, Luigi Gurakuqi knew how to intertwine the written word with that expressed in gatherings not only in order to penetrate the minds and hearts of people, but also to propagate and defend his ideas before the opponents of the nation and Albania.

Academician Rexhep Qosja states that:

*"Luigi Gurakuqi is one of the fighters of our National Renaissance who began his political and patriotic activity also as a poet and publicist, spreading the voice of the call to struggle against the centuries-old occupiers and himself standing in the front lines of that struggle. Luigi Gurakuqi is much more a fighter-tribune than a poet, much more a politician and publicist than an artist."*⁴

His lectures paid deep attention to the problems he would raise; he discussed them adapted to the cultural level of the environment and its interests.

Anti-conformist and anti-demagogic, he was often found in the sights of the many politicians of political life before the last war. As a defender of free and just speech, he was surrounded by many enemies who hated him because he did not think like them.

They hated him precisely for his oratory. His intellectual superiority and progressive ideas brought him many admirers and equally many opponents. Continuously he was the polemicist

¹ Vili Kamsi, *Bibliografi kronologjike (Chronological bibliography)*, ALBANIA, 1897-1909, Shkodra, 2008, p. 122.

² Revista "Albania" (Journal "Albania"), Brussels, 1900, no. 4, p. 94-95.

³ Revista "Albania" (Journal "Albania"), Brussels, 1905, no. 2, p. 47.

⁴ Luigi Gurakuqi, *Vepra të zgjedhura (Selected Works)*, Prishtina, Rilindja, 1969, p. 9.

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with prime ministers, ministers, deputies, journalists, beys and little beys as Fan Noli called them, with true and false intellectuals, newspaper directors and finance directors. His whole life passed with sword in hand.

Quite well known already are a series of speeches of Luigj Gurakuqi such as the one held on the opening day of the Normal School of Elbasan; the speech before the national gathering in Korçë on March 14, 1914, the day of the liberation of that city; the debates and replies in the National Assembly during the years 1921–1924, where his talent, ability to convince the audience, strength of rhetorically argued speech, and eloquence shone. Full of figures, tonalities, and reticences, Gurakuqi's oratory stood out above others.

The inauguration of the first Albanian Normal School in Albania and Elbasan, a marked event of the year 1909, was and remains one of the most notable events of the school and the history of our nation.

With a solemn, calm, and enchanting tone he presents the aim of the Normal School, emphasizing:

*"...From this school will come forth those philanthropic men who, like Orpheus and Amphion, with the wisdom and sweetness of their words and counsels, will tame the wild beasts, will move the rocks and cliffs, will civilize and bring people closer together."*¹

After mentioning the history of Albania, he conveys the ideas and ideals of the Renaissance figures, seeing the Normal School and the future teachers as national missionaries: *"Here the Tosks and the Ghegs will merge, will mingle... will become one; ...here the Albanian language... will take one form, one common face."*²

Impressive is the rhetoric delivered in Vlora in the days of the declaration of Independence.

Through episodic descriptions of the path traversed, the heroic struggle of our people, Luigj Gurakuqi invites Albanians: *"...to unite, to come together, to become one..."*³

Among the most powerful speeches in parliament by Luigj Gurakuqi are those for the defense of the Albanian population of Kosovo, where he spoke with full anger and indignation about the Serbian massacre against our brothers. As representative of the opposition in parliament and member of the Liberal Party, he promised and remained faithful to the voters of Shkodra in the National Council:

*"The homeland is the most precious thing we have in life; it is the blessed land where our nation lives, where the bones of our grandfathers rest, where we were born and raised, where we shall be repeated with our sons and grandsons, bound also like us by language and brotherhood."*⁴

Conclusion

An orator in life, an orator also in poetic creativity. A good connoisseur of ancient Greek and Roman literatures, even more of them than of contemporary national literature, Luigj Gurakuqi became a slave of the classicist ideal of poetry. The chains that Apollo placed upon him, he did not tire of removing; indeed he wished to justify them even in the 20th century.

The identification of the Romantics with the "universe," this beloved mother from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Alphonse de Lamartine, Alessandro Manzoni and Giacomo Leopardi, De Rada and Naim Frashëri onward, was also carried out by Gurakuqi, fascinated after the bosom of the universe.

But the adoration of the Fairies of Parnassus he would pour into verses for two of them: Euterpe and Polyhymnia. In love with them, he would

¹ Gazeta "Dielli", (Newspaper "The Sun"), no. 40, 31.12.1909, p. 3.

² Ibid, p. 3.

³ Gazeta "Përlindj'e Shqipëniës", (Newspaper "The rebirth of Albania", no. 26, 1913, p. 2-3.

⁴ Gazeta "Besa shqiptare", (Newspaper "Albanian Besa", Shkodra, March 24, 1921, p. 3.

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pour out his adoration in *The Fairies' Decade* and *The Pledge of Honor* with names from mythology. The value of his own poems he based mainly on the artistic displacement of words and on diction. Under the influence of the Romantics, he expresses himself with their means and feelings; under the influence of the Roman and Greek classics, he adhered to the norms of their poetry. Therefore from Parnassus, at times a Romantic breeze blows, and at times a classicist one. The language used, at times indirect and at times archaic, also has a strange punctuation which in many cases differs from the writers of that time. Luigj Gurakuqi was an activist of culture and a precious exemplar of the history of our people. He will remain as one of the most distinguished fighters for the independence and freedom of the Albanian people.

At the time when he wrote, we had greater need for people capable of comprehensive political, cultural, and patriotic activities than for people who thought only about poetry. He would stand out as one of the intellectuals most dedicated to opening the doors of modern civilization in Albanian life and culture.

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