

## Goethe as an example for Neo-Albanians and their orientation towards the European literary canon

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**Abstract:** *The study examines the reception of Goethe's works in Albania during the 1930s, a period of significant cultural and intellectual transformation for the country. As Albania sought to modernize and align itself with European intellectual currents, the movement of Neo-Albanianism emerged as a key force advocating for cultural exchange and national renewal. Goethe's vision of Weltliteratur emphasized the fluidity of national boundaries and the enrichment of literary traditions through mutual engagement, providing a valuable framework for understanding the role of literature in fostering intercultural dialogue. Neo-Albanian intellectuals, most of whom were educated in Western Europe, emphasized the importance of engaging with Western literary traditions while shaping a distinct Albanian identity, in contrast to that of the East, from whose five-century-long rule they had only recently emerged. Through an analysis of literary journals and the writings of key figures such as Branko Merxhani, Lazër Shantoja, Krist Maloki, Vangjel Koça and others, the essay reveals how Goethe's Werther influenced the emotional tone and thematic concerns of early Albanian novels, while Faust offered a philosophical model of self-overcoming, critical thought, and ethical action. The deliberate engagement with Goethe was part of a broader effort to cultivate a modern Albanian intellectual elite and integrate Albania into the European cultural space. The period saw a surge in translations of Goethe's works, reflecting Albania's aspirations towards European integration. However, such cultural momentum was abruptly interrupted by the rise of Communism following World War II, leading to a drastic ideological shift. Many of the intellectuals who championed Neo-Albanian ideals were marginalized, persecuted or exiled, whereas Albania itself entered a prolonged period of cultural isolation. By setting Goethe's reception against such vehement historical changes, the study underscores the role of literature in shaping national identity, the impact of intellectual movements on cultural exchange, and the effects of ideologies on literary discourse.*

**Keywords:** *Goethe Reception; Neo-Albanianism; Weltliteratur; Literary Modernity; Intercultural Dialogue; Albanian Literature.*

## 1. Introduction

First with *Werther*, which became «*one of the greatest literary successes of all time*»<sup>1</sup> and then with *Faust*, Goethe had an extraordinary reception in many countries and cultures around the world, as his vast creativity and his ideas provided a valuable source of inspiration and artistic orientation for writers and philosophers. Goethe's work comprises an encyclopaedic reflection of the literatures of the world. His work includes elements of various literatures, from those of antiquity and the Middle Ages to the contemporary national literatures of Europe, including Albanian, modern Greek, Lithuanian, and other folk literatures. The list expands with translations from various languages, even from the Old Testament, the Koran, classical Arabic poetry and the Edda. Elements of distant literatures are also part of the productive reception in Goethe's work. One need only mention the West-Eastern Divan and the Chinese-German Book of Seasons and Hours as examples. Goethe's ideas and model suggest that literature can serve as a bridge for cultural exchange, helping societies to redefine themselves by engaging with ideas and experiences beyond their own borders.

## 2. Interculturality, Weltliteratur, and the Search for Cultural Renewal

The development of human culture and identity is inherently intertwined with the process of intercultural exchange. As cultures interact, they influence and enrich each other, leading to the creation of new forms of thought and artistic expression. This dynamic process of cultural exchange is essential, particularly when ideological and cultural shifts call for the formation of new cultural identities of the individual, a member of society, seeking valid models. Hall<sup>2</sup> views the concept of cultural identity as a complex and evolving phenomenon, that is, as something not fixed, but fluid and constructed within specific historical, social and cultural contexts, through the exchange of experiences and external influences. This is a key point in theories of interculturalism, which emphasize interaction rather than the isolation of cultures. The influence between cultures is so profound that, according to Wolfgang Welsch<sup>3</sup>, the idea of a pure and homogeneous national culture, as envisioned in Herder's traditional model, is unimaginable. Welsch makes it clear from

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1 Lange, Victor: *Johann Wolfgang Goethe*, in: *Deutsche Dichter, Band 4, Sturm und Drang, Klassik*, Philip Reclam jun., Stuttgart 1997, 111.

2 Hall, Stuart: *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. 1990; and Hall, Stuart, du Gay, Paul: *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1996.

3 Welsch, Wolfgang: *Transkulturalität. Realität – Geschichte – Aufgabe*, New Academic Press, Vienna 2017, 58.

the outset that every culture is hybrid and always possesses a ‘*mixed character*’<sup>4</sup>. When discussing transculturality, he argues that cultures are neither isolated nor pure but are always composed of a mixture of external influences and internal transformations. Welsch draws parallels between this process and a kaleidoscope, wherein cultural elements intertwine and continuously change. He differentiates between interculturality, which entails dialogue between cultures while preserving their distinct characteristics, and transculturality, where cultural boundaries dissolve, resulting in the emergence of new identities through continuous blending and transformation<sup>5</sup>. According to Welsch, cultures are neither static nor pure but rather dynamic and interconnected, and people should actively engage in creating new forms of cultural coexistence.

This process of cultural interaction, as described by theories of interculturalism and transculturality, has found clear expression in the field of literature. As a cultural product, literature cannot exist in isolation from the contexts in which it is created and developed. This is in alignment with Goethe’s concept of world literature, which posits an approach to literature that emphasizes not only the national origin of works but also the intricate pathways of exchange and influence between different cultures. In this sense, world literature can be regarded as a manifestation of interculturalism in art, wherein national traditions are shaped and redefined through continuous contact with others. The roles of translation and reception, as is well known, have come to the forefront of scholarly discourse. It is known that Goethe was the first to give the idea of a *World Literature* in today’s sense. He adopted it from 1827 onward and gave it a meaning that remains an essential component of the concept today. As is well known, Goethe understood it as literature created from a supranational, cosmopolitan spirit. He used the term in its modern sense in his journal *Über Kunst und Altertum*, initiated discussions on the topic, and today, it stands as one of his most fundamental linguistic contributions.

It cannot be ruled out that it is precisely Herder’s ideas on folk literature and national literature that may have had influence<sup>6</sup> on Goethe’s idea of *World Literature*. Herder is considered by many scholars to be the initiator.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Ibid., 14-15.

5 Ibid., 18-19.

6 Ulrich Gaier states: ‘[...] everyone agrees that Herder developed the concept and the term *folk literature*, as well as the concept of *national literature*.’ By dividing literature into national categories, Herder, in a way, developed the concept of world literature. He also used the term ‘world literature’, but only by linking it to his concept of humanity as a duty of mankind. This term was actually used for the first time by Wieland around the year 1790 and he understood it to mean literature for the *Homme du monde*, i.e., the *Man of the world*. Wieland used the term in a sense that has since been forgotten.

7 Irmischer, Hans Dietrich: “*Weitstrahlsinniges*” Denken: Studien zu Johann Gottfried

According to Herder, through folk songs «foreign way of thinking can be translated into one's own»<sup>8</sup>. However, according to Goethe, these thoughts are *not so foreign*.<sup>9</sup> During a conversation with Eckermann on January 31, 1827, Goethe first mentions a *Weltliteratur*, which he contrasts with national literature:

*«I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men [...] We Germans are very likely to fall too easily into this pedantic conceit, when we do not look beyond the narrow circle that surrounds us. I therefore like to look in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.»*<sup>10</sup>

The mutual influence of diverse literatures plays a crucial role in the development and enrichment of national literatures. By interacting with and absorbing elements from one another, literatures from different cultures contribute to the growth of individual literary traditions. Goethe's ideas in *Über Kunst und Altertum* (On Art and Antiquity) make it a pivotal work in this regard. Goethe envisioned a world in which different national literatures and cultures could interact, exchange, and renew each other. He argued that «every literature needs to be refreshed by the interaction with foreign cultures», warning that without this exchange «all literature will ultimately become useless if it is not refreshed by foreign participation.» The idea was not simply to celebrate one culture over another but to cultivate a shared intellectual space, where ideas from different nations could be exchanged, critiqued, and absorbed. As cultures interact, they influence and enrich each other, leading to the creation of new forms of thought and artistic expression. This dynamic process of cultural exchange is essential, particularly when ideological and cultural shifts call for the formation of new identities, as it was the case with Albania in the 1930's and early 40's.

In the course of research conducted on the reception of Goethe's work by Albanians<sup>11</sup>, it became evident that during this period there was a more intense reception of his work. Given the significance of these years on a

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Herder, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2009, 191.

8 Herder, Johann Gottfried: *Essay on the Origin of Language*, trans. John H. Moran and Alexander Gode, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1986, 79.

9 Eckermann, Johann Peter: *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, Aufbau-Verlag, Berlin und Weimar 1982, 198.

10 Eckermann, Johann Peter: *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, Aufbau-Verlag, Berlin und Weimar, 1982, 198.

11 Blakaj, Albulena: *Goethe dhe receptimi i veprës së tij të shqiptarët*, OM. Prishtinë, 2017.

global scale, as well as their relevance to the development of the Albanian nation, it was deemed important to research the factors that influenced the increase in the intensity of the reception of the figure and work of Goethe precisely in these years. Consequently, the research question that emerged focuses on the specific historical and cultural factors that contributed to Albanians' heightened engagement with Goethe's work during this period.

### 3. Neo-Albanianism and Goethe as a Cultural Model

#### 3.1 *The Endeavour for Cultural Orientation*

The 1930s witnessed a series of significant cultural movements in Europe, influenced by profound political, social and economic transformations. This period was characterised by turbulence, stemming from the repercussions of World War I, the rise of fascism and communism, the Great Depression, and the onset of World War II. These developments significantly influenced cultural trends in various disciplines, including art, literature, music, and philosophy. Within the Albanian context, the early 20th century was marked by intellectuals grappling with questions of identity. The recent declaration of independence left a nation searching for a new path, and European culture, influenced by the prevailing political and social tensions, served as a source of inspiration. The Albanian intellectuals' primary concern was to determine the nation's orientation, particularly in relation to the West and the East, having recently emerged from Ottoman rule. In their discourse, they articulated that the path to the East was perceived as the easier route, because all you had to do was go backwards and walk blindly. Conversely, they identified the path to the West as the more arduous one, emphasising the necessity for meticulous preparation and clarity. Nevertheless, they regarded the latter path as the optimal and the only one for the nation<sup>12</sup>, despite its apparent complexity.

*«But the most severe war that awaits the Albanian youth is ante portas! This war is distinguished from the others for its direction against an invisible enemy, but all the more dangerous for its unity and for the salvation of the nation. The future war is a war of the Albanian youth against the enemy in its heart, it is a war of a worldview of light against a worldview of darkness, it is a war of Albanian Occidentalism against Albanian Orientalism...»<sup>13</sup>*

The prevailing intellectual climate of that period signified a paradigm shift in our nation's evolution, marking the advent of a novel civilisation that stood in contradistinction to the historical antecedents, which had

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12 Kulla, Ndriçim: *Bota shqiptare e Branko Merxhanit*, Plejad, Tirana 2020, 410.

13 Maloki, Krist: *Oriental apo Okcidental*, Plejad, Tirana 2003, 109.

evolved over the preceding five centuries within the ambit of oriental and Byzantine cultural influences. The emergence of a 'new Albania' necessitated the presence of a 'New Albanian', signifying an individual immersed in a newly emergent culture and mentality, who became the agent of transformation. Consequently, the 1920s and 1930s are regarded as a pivotal era in Albania's development. «*The potential derived from European cultural influences during this period enabled intellectuals to formulate a distinct language and cultural code, which we must utilise to incorporate our contemporary perspective and identify a method to synchronise our future.*»<sup>14</sup>

The early 1920s are regarded as a period of transition, characterised by a departure from the deifying and romantic spirit of the *Rilindja*, as well as the emergence of a new spirit that can be attributed to Faik Konica. This period is also marked by the overcoming of mentality, a concept that Konica himself contributed to<sup>15</sup>. Konica was the first to express the view that Albanians could join the European way of thinking and living by returning to the religion of their ancestors<sup>16</sup>. At this time, thoughts of the need for a re-Christianisation, of a return to the 'first religion', the 'first homeland', were also expressed by Gjergj Fishta in the document originally titled 'Questione nazionale e questione cattolica'. Fishta calls for a dissociation of Catholicism and explores the potential benefits of this new situation for Albanians in terms of Europeanising their thought, orientation and culture.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.2 *Neo-Albanianism and the Reimagining of Identity*

The development of the new Albanian mentality, which is also regarded as a boundary between two eras, was significantly influenced by the publication of a series of articles by Branko Merxhani in the newspaper *Demokratia*. These articles addressed the need for reforms and the importance of an intellectual life. During the years 1929-1930, Merxhani articulated the foundational principles of a doctrine known as *Neoshqiptarizma* (Neo-Albanianism), a philosophy that has exerted a profound influence on the intellectual landscape of Albania to the present day. Indeed, this ideology is widely regarded as the «*defining ideological platform that guides Albanians in their orientation towards the West.*»<sup>18</sup>

14 Kurti, Ledri: *Dimensione të mendimit kritiko-estetik në kohë dhe tipologji: Konica, Fishta, Koliqi, Harapi*, in: *Mendimi shqiptar dhe shkolla shqipe*, Plejad, Tirana 2009, 92.

15 Ibid., 108.

16 Sinani, Shaban: *Besimi dhe kombësia në një vepër të pabotuar të At Gjergj Fishtës*, in: *Mendimi shqiptar dhe shkolla shqipe*, Plejad, Tirana 2009, 229.

17 Ibid., 231.

18 Kulla, Ndrëçim: *Bota shqiptare e Branko Merxhanit*, Plejad, Tirana 2020, 407.



The other founder of Neo-Albanianism was Vangjel Koça, translator of Epictetus, Lucian, Goethe and Descartes.

According to Elsie, even Neo-Albanianism, although an Albanian creation, must be seen within the context of other nationalist ideologies that arose throughout Europe in the 1920s and 1930s (Elsie, *ibid*). Aurel Plasari proposes the idea that Merxhanis Neo-Albanianism can be treated as a science, because it gives us a special definition of an independent state.<sup>19</sup> However, the formula with which Merxhani led the Albanian effort was: *No politics! Only culture!*<sup>20</sup> According to the intellectuals of the time, the only path that would lead Albanian society toward the West was through cultural and intellectual development. By emphasizing, in a way, that reality is determined by knowledge and thought, they attempted to awaken Albanian idealism in the hearts of the people. This was, in a way, a continuation of the ideas of the *Rilindja Kombëtare* (*National Awakening*), but as mentioned earlier, Neo-albanianism moved away from the sentimentalism of that period. Kurti asserts that, «*in the context of the Rilindja, the adoption of a more active stance in matters of love for the homeland, longing for the homeland, and demand for education and culture, under the constitution of the Empire, transformed this sentiment into an obligation.*»<sup>21</sup>

Also according to Elsie, «*Neo-Albanianism was an intellectual and philosophical movement that emerged in Albanian society around 1928, although its roots, as its supporters emphasized, should be sought in the Renaissance movement.*»<sup>22</sup> All the energy of the Albanian nationalists of the nineteenth century was focused on gaining independence from the Ottoman Empire, but it later became clear that this was only half of the work. What was now needed was the creation of a national identity, an Albanian consciousness to bring the people out of the darkness of ignorance, i.e., there was a need for a second national movement. (Compare: Elsie 252). In the context of 1930s Albania, the promotion of a Western-oriented identity was actively encouraged by political elites, intellectuals, and cultural institutions, here first and foremost by writers, many of whom, having been educated abroad, were deeply influenced by Western literature and philosophy. As Migjeni (1934) poetically expressed: «*Our souls wander through the wondrous lands of the West.*»

This fascination with the West was a major theme in contemporary

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19 *Ibid*, 52.

20 *Ivi*, 52.

21 Kurti, Ledri: *Dimensione të mendimit kritiko-estetik në kohë dhe tipologji: Konica, Fishta, Koliqi, Harapi*, in: *Mendimi shqiptar dhe shkolla shqipe*, Plejad, Tirana 2009, 93.

22 Elsie, Robert: *Histori e letërsisë shqiptare*, 1997, 252, available at <http://www.elsie.de/pdf/B1997HistLetShqip.pdf>.

literary journals. When different ideological currents seek to shape a new cultural identity, they often look for valuable models, making cultural exchange an essential process. As Goethe insightfully observed:

«[...] for the nations, flung together by dreadful warfare, then thrown apart again, have all realised that they had absorbed many foreign elements, and become conscious of new intellectual needs[...], and a desire for a freer system of intellectual give-and-take.»<sup>23</sup>

A factor that helped in this 'battle' was the phenomenon of, 'Fletorizmës së ndritur' (*Enlightened journals*) especially in the 1920s-40s, during which the national aspirations had at the forefront, dozens of newspapers of a high cultural standard, such as: *Hylli i Dritës*, *Leka*, *Demokratia*, *Iliria*, *Përpyjekja shqiptare*, etc., which brought to the public a 'strong wave of civilization and emancipation.' «The important moral principles and ideals were the most significant and primary tools they chose to address the great Albanian problems.»<sup>24</sup>

The significance of these cultural magazines in Albania during the 1920s-to early 1940s can be compared to Goethe's perspective on the role of literary journals in shaping intellectual discourse. In this regard, his opinion on the prominent French journal *Le Globe* is particularly relevant. Goethe regarded *Le Globe* as a model of a modern cultural journal around 1827, praising its «group of young intellectuals of incredible cosmopolitanism, who informed French readers up-to-date and thoroughly about the most important foreign productions (including Goethe, of course), thus influencing the development of French literature[...]».<sup>25</sup>

### 3.3 The Weimar Ideal: Goethe and the Intellectual Elite

The reception of Goethe's work among Albanians began early, with Jeronim de Rada<sup>26</sup> being the first to mention him in Albanian culture in 1834. De Rada's journalistic, literary, and political activities were instrumental

23 Strich, Fritz: *Goethe and World Literature*, Routledge & K. Paul, London 1949, 32.

24 Kulla, Ndrim: *Bota shqiptare e Branko Merxhanit*, Plejad, Tirana 2020, 409.

25 Koch, Manfred: *Geistiger Handelsverkehr. Die Metaphorik in Goethes Weltliteraturkonzept und die Tradition der Gelehrtenrepublik*, in: Knoche, M./Ritter-Santini, L. (Hrsg.) *Die europäische Republique des lettres in der Zeit der Weimarer Klassik*, Wallenstein Verlag GmbH, Göttingen 2007, 124-125.

26 De Rada is a key figure in the Albanian National Awakening, De Rada was an influential Arbëreshë writer, folklorist, and journalist who played a crucial role in shaping Romantic nationalism. As the founder of *L'Albanese d'Italia*, the first Albanian-language periodical, he significantly contributed to Albanian literature and cultural revival. His efforts helped foster national consciousness among both the Arbëreshë in Italy but also in laying the foundations for an Albanian national literature. His journalistic, literary and political activities were instrumental not only in fostering an awareness for the Arbëresh minority in Italy, but also in laying the foundations for an Albanian national literature.



not only in fostering an awareness for the Arberesh minority in Italy but also in laying the foundations for an Albanian national literature<sup>27</sup>. However, as mentioned above, the reception of Goethe's work by Albanians in the 1930s was particularly significant. In this context, literary magazines played a crucial role in introducing and engaging readers with major European authors, including Goethe. Across these cultural journals, we find a considerable number of articles dedicated to Goethe and his literary works.

In numerous articles by well-known figures such as Father Gjergj Fishta, Branko Merxhani, Lazër Shantoja, Tajar Zavalani, Ali Kuçi, Mihail Zallari, Stefan Shundi, His Excellency Dr. V. Luckwald, Kostaq Cipo, A. Vinçenc Prennushi, Dr. Krist Maloki, Father Fulvio Cordignano, Et'hëm Haxhiademi, Dr. Corrado Colacito, Sterjo Spasse, Karl Gurakuqi, Besim M. Qorri, and others, there is a recurring call to seek knowledge through the works of great minds such as Goethe, the '*Half-God of Weimar*' and a '*UNIVERSAL GENIUS*', «*in the pursuit of cultural refinement and the formation of a civilization that a new Albania requires.*»<sup>28</sup>.

On one hand, according to the ideologues of Neo-Albanianism, the proper philosophical foundation to follow during this period was that of Descartes. As Merxhani writes: «*All philosophical ideas that have emerged since the era of Humanism—whose aim and ultimate result have been to awaken the human mind from its centuries-long slumber and open new horizons—are systematically united in Descartes' worldview.*»<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, Goethe and his work were seen as the most suitable literary model and guide for the Neo-Albanian on his path toward self-improvement. While Goethe had already been known to the Albanian public—whether through brief mentions, poetry translations, or newspaper articles—it was during the years of Neo-Albanianism that his reception became significantly more intense. As this movement marked a major turning point in the nation's orientation toward Western ideals, it also reinforced Goethe's influence in shaping both Albanian literature and national identity. Because: «*GOETHE is a whole world, not only a POET, but also a THINKER, not content merely to express in pure, colorful, and harmonious form his deep and numerous feelings, but also striving to solve the highest problems of life and death.*»<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Goethe, as an unparalleled professional in his art, together with being a man of science and an indefatigable seeker of the mysteries of nature, a man of action,

27 Elsie, Robert: *Historical Dictionary of Albania*. Rowman & Littlefield, Maryland 2010, 106.

28 Meksi, Jorgji: *Demokratia*, Nr. 348, Gjirokastër 24 Shtator 1932, 1.

29 Kulla, Ndriçim: *Bota shqiptare e Branko Merxhanit*, Plejad, Tirana 2020, 418.

30 *Demokratia*, Nr. 348, Gjirokastër, 24 Shtator 1932, f. 1.

a politician, diplomat, theater director, and journalist, was placed in the articles of the time: «*on the level of Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare, as part of an unbroken line [...]*». <sup>31</sup> Fishta also expresses admiration for Goethe's multifaceted genius, recognizing him as a universal figure who embodies the highest intellectual and artistic achievements of human civilization: «A man with such a broad horizon that he alone could represent the entire civilized culture and progress of his time. He had such an aesthetic taste for the fine arts that he can be compared to the greatest Greek and Latin classics of ancient times. No other poet of modern times can express his thoughts as well and with such beautiful, fitting words as he can.»<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. Werther and Faust as Literary Models for a Changing Society

Branko Merxhani claims to have grown up with Goethe's work: «*For twenty years, I have carried it within me. WHERE I first encountered it, I don't even remember. My earliest memory fades in the dimly lit room of a high school classroom. From a young age, almost from the cradle, I felt his language—my first love. Poetry and Werther. No one taught them to me, nor did I seek them from anyone. They came to me on their own. [...] Since then I've been carrying it within me.*»<sup>33</sup> The intellectuals of the time demand that Albanians also have a work like *Werther* translated, knowing that *the recognition and appropriation of the work of great thinkers and artists is always a significant event for the cultural life of the peoples of the world, among whom they saw Goethe.*

The importance that intellectuals of the time placed on introducing Albanians, particularly the youth, to literary works that had a profound impact on world literature is evident in Merxhani's call, in which he writes: «*There is no language, neither European nor Asian, that does not have its own Werther. Even the Chinese Werther is now 100 years old. [...] The only language that lacks Werther, the only youth, within the entire world—whether enlightened or semi-enlightened—that lives without this 'sacred book' of human sentimental longing, is the Albanian language and the Albanian youth.*»<sup>34</sup> The stance of other intellectuals of the time toward *Werther* was similarly aligned. Just a year later, in 1933, the first Albanian translation of *Werther*, by Vangjel Koça ('He read *Werther* in three languages'<sup>35</sup>), was

31 Ivi.

32 Fishta, Gjergj: *Në rasë të Qindvjetorit të WOLFGANGUT GOETHE (1832-1932)*, in: 'Hylli i dritës', nr 6, Shtypshkroja françeskane, Shkodër 1932, 273.

33 Merxhani, Branko: *GOETHE, si një prallë*, in: *Demokratia*, Nr. 348, Gjirokastër, 24 Shtator 1932, 3.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

published. How the intellectuals of the time perceived themselves and their role in society is best reflected in the motto of the cultural section of the newspaper *Demokratia*, where, as mentioned, Merxhani had published his articles on Neo-Albanianism. This addendum, published under the title *Lëvizja Mendore* (The Intellectual Movement), had as its motto a quote from Goethe: «*We are members of a generation striving to emerge from darkness into light*» – *GOETHE*. And this sentiment is echoed in the articles published within this section.

At this time, all literary magazines featured numerous articles about Goethe, with a strong call for Goethe and his work to serve as a model for Albanian society on its path toward improvement and development. A notable example is *Demokratia*, which published many articles on Goethe, including a special issue dedicated to him in 1932, the centenary of his death. Supporters of Neo-Albanianism used this occasion to present their ideas about the ideology and to clearly express their stance on Goethe's work. Although many articles were published on this occasion, as well as in subsequent issues, the editor-in-chief, Jorgji Meksi, initially states: «*This small issue should be regarded more as a sincere contribution of Albanian culture in honoring Universal Culture, which will remain for us an inexhaustible and invaluable source for perfecting our own culture and for shaping the civilization that the New Albania requires.*»<sup>36</sup> The reflections of the intellectuals of that era unmistakably illustrate their aspiration and anticipation for the culture, people, and state they envisioned, and the trajectory they hoped to pursue. Dr. Maloki, in particular, expressed his desire for Albania to come under the influence of Weimar and to emulate its cultural advancements. He remained hopeful that by 1949, on the 200th anniversary of Goethe's birth – a figure he refers to as the *German Olympian* – «*a cultural renaissance will also begin among us, that a profound longing for Goethean thought will spread, and that we may be enveloped in a Weimar-like Albanian shadow!*»<sup>37</sup>

A statement, made by Dr. von Luckwald, the German ambassador to Albania at the time, in the article published in *Demokratia* in 1932, emphasizes how Goethe's influence was felt in Albania, as well as the growing admiration for German culture. The ambassador's remarks show that the cultural and intellectual legacy associated with Goethe was embraced and celebrated: «*Goethe's work is a treasure of the German nation, but also of the entire cultural world, and the year 1932 is a year that is marked under his shadow. The celebrations that take place in Germany also find Albania under 'a hearty cheer and sympathy', since even in Albania there are now many*

36 Meksi, Jorgji: *Demokratia*, Nr. 348, Gjirokastra, 24 September 1932, 1.

37 Krishna, M. (Maloki, Krist): *Nen hijen e Veimar-it*, in: *Demokratia*, Nr. 348, Gjirokastra, 24 September 1932, 3.

people who speak Goethe's language, but many more who appreciate and love German culture.»<sup>38</sup> Von Luckwald, further characterized the period as 'a time of turmoil and confusion for all humanity', and he underscored that Goethe represented the 'the symbol of the unity of all culture'. His assertion reflects the view that Goethe's works transcended national boundaries, offering a vision of unity through shared intellectual and cultural ideals. Von Luckwald hoped that for those who honored Goethe's memory, his legacy would guide them toward spiritual greatness, which he saw as «the only path that can lead us to the salvation of today's culture».<sup>39</sup> In this sense, Goethe was not just a German cultural icon but a universal figure whose values could lead Albania—and the world—toward a more enlightened and unified future.

This *Numero unico*, dedicated to Goethe, includes writings by what editor-in-chief Jorgji Meksi refers to as "*Albania's foremost literary figures*", such as Father Gjergj Fishta, Father Vinçenc Prennushi, Jorgji Meksi, Lazër Shantoja, Kostaq Cipo, Branko Merxhani, Vangjel Koça, Dr. Krist Maloki, and many others. The numerous articles collected for this occasion were subsequently published in the following issues of the magazine.

#### 4.1 *Werther's Sentimental Legacy in Albanian Literature*

*Werther* by Goethe had a profound impact on the development of Albanian literature, especially during the early stages. As we observe in the first Albanian novels written in the 1930s, there is a noticeable resemblance to *Werther*, particularly in terms of the romanticism and idealism that characterized these works. For instance, the novels *Nga jeta në jetë. Pse?! (From Life to Life. Why?!)* (Tirana, 1935) by Sterjo Spasse, *Sikur të isha djalë (If I were a boy)* (Shkodër, 1936) by Haki Stërmilli, and *Gremina e dashunis (The abyss of love)* (Tirana, 1944) by Mustafa Grebelleshi, among others, show clear influences from *Werther's* emotional and philosophical depth. Even Pashko Vasa's *Bardha e Temalit (Bardha of Temal)* (1890), published in Paris in French, can be seen as first in the line of this tradition, though it was found later, translated in 1967 and was not known to the Albanian public for a long time. It was published in Albanian long after *Werther*.

It is clear that, as in many other parts of the world, young Albanian writers of the time were drawn to *Werther* as a model, finding in it a reflection of the emotional turmoil and spiritual transformation that resonated with the needs of their young readers. In a story published in the magazine *Illyria* in 1934, around the time he was working on his first novel *From Life to Life. Why?!*, in a manner similar to Merxhani's, who refers to *Werther* as

38 Luckwald, von: *Zum Gedenken Goethe's*, in: *Demokratia*, nr. 348, Gjirokastra, 24 September 1932.

39 Ibid.

the «*sacred book of human-sentimental longing*», Spasse employs a similar rhetorical device in his narrative:

«Still! – said Gjon. Very good. Today the Albanian people prefer to read Goethe's *Werther* and other romantic writings. Look here: the Albanian seems to be a romantic by nature. Today he is going through a spiritual change, which civilized nations went through several centuries ago.»<sup>40</sup>

Spasse's belief that he should give his people such a work, was that it would aid them in their spiritual transformation, in a manner similar to the manner in which poets such as Goethe helped their own people. So, it is to be noticed that there was a clear demand for literary education through Goethe's translations, as Albanian intellectuals sought to align with European literary trends. Goethe's works, with their wide range of universal, philosophical, and ethical themes, provided a rich source of inspiration. When examining the influence of his work on the first Albanian novels, it becomes evident that idealism and romanticism were the primary aspects that made Goethe's work an ideal model for authors in the 1930's.

#### **4.2 *Faust and the Neo-Albanian Ideal***

However, in the above mentioned articles published in literary journals during this time, the value placed on *Faust* was even higher. Goethe, is considered to be the 'personification of genius', and 'the greatest poet of Germany, if not of the entire modern era', with Faust 'reached the pinnacle of poetry'. This work «assured him the immortal title of the unsurpassable poet of Faus».<sup>41</sup> Or, Goethe, «the great creator of *Faust*».<sup>42</sup>

While *Werther* remained an important influence, it was the figure of *Faust* that began to be seen as the ideal model for the "Neo-Albanians" – the generation seeking spiritual and societal renewal. *Werther* is mentioned more rarely by literary critics or taken as an example, because while *Werther* might reflect the emotional depth of the past, it is *Faust* who offers the guidance needed for facing the challenges of modern life and the pursuit of societal progress. Merxhani employs the example of Faust to demonstrate the trajectory that Albanians must pursue in order to overcome adversity and achieve societal advancement. By utilising Faust as a model to convey the message that fortitude, diligence, and perseverance are indispensable in confronting the vicissitudes of life:

«*Faust understood human life better than anyone: Courage is our duty. Courage - work! Patience and courage, dear brother! But above all, courage! Courage! This gives appetite for work, gives patience and persistence. The*

40 Spasse, Sterjo: *Frymat letrare*, in: *Illyria*, Tirana, 6 may 1934, 4.

41 NN.: *Rreth qindvjetorit të vdekjes së Volfgang Goethe-s*, in: *Gazeta e Tiranës*, Tirana, 13. Dezember 1931, nr. 18, 3.

42 B.M. (Merxhani, Branko): *Goethe*, in: *Demokratia*, Gjirokastra, nr. 320, 12 March 1932.

*words of fate are carved long time ago at the top of this third page of ours:*

*Wir bekennen uns zu dem Geschlecht,  
das aus dem Dunkeln ins Helle strebt.»*

After these verses, he placed a quote from Goethe, which, as mentioned, *Demokratia* had adopted as its motto:

WE ARE MEMBERS OF A GENERATION STRUGGLING TO EMERGE FROM DARKNESS INTO LIGHT.

Goethe, for Merxhani, is a model, because he had what Albanians need today: *«the wave of the inner storm, realistic thinking and idealistic action make him strong.»*<sup>43</sup>

And further ads:

*«When I wander through the mountains [...] he seems to appear before me and show me the direction with his cane, in good times».*

With the words: *«Dhe udha jonë tani sapo nis –(And our path is just beginning)»*<sup>44</sup>, Merxhani closes this appeal to neo-Albanians, suggesting that the period of revival, of the search for identity and societal development is now. He calls for immediate action, inviting Albanians to begin their journey toward a bright future.

Despite the fact that, in their writings, they explicitly articulate a yearning to cultivate a deeper appreciation of Goethe, and to this end seek to emulate the literary figure of *Faust*, Albanians, in a manner consistent with global trends, have adopted *Werther* as a paradigm and muse for their own creative endeavours. It is evident that the genesis of a *Faust* is predicated on more than mere adoration and desire; this fact, in turn, serves to underscore the unique and non-replicable nature of the Faustian narrative. Fishta states that he read this tragedy at the age of 19 (1890): *«I was nineteen years old when I first read “Faust”, the masterpiece of Wolfgang Goethe»*. He describes the experience as one of profound aesthetic impact, noting that the poetry captured his imagination *«and the lights of beauty flashed through my mind»*. He found the poetry to be particularly affecting, and it left a lasting impression on him. Fishta states that the adoration he felt for *Faust* had prompted him to consider translating the parts *‘that strongly emphasized his fantasy’* and initially planned to write a work of his own adapting parts of the work to fit Albanian context, including his *«own Albanian Faust, another Mephistopheles and an Albanian Margaret and Walpurgis night»*<sup>45</sup> and elements like witches and magicians. However, he eventually abandoned this imitation, acknowledging that his creative capacity was not on a par with Goethe’s genius, so Fishta.

43 Merxhani, Branko: *GOETHE, si një prallë*, in: *Demokratia*, Nr. 348, Gjirokastrë, 24 Shtator 1932.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.



### 4.3 Translating Culture, Shaping Minds

That the intellectuals of the time were multilingual, or even more so in this case well-versed in German, is also shown by the fact that Merxhani left all the quotations from Goethe's works in German, that is, without any translation. This detail shows Merxhani's effort to cultivate an Albanian intellectual class that would have deep knowledge of Western culture and meet the demands of the critical and philosophical thought of the time. Maloki, Zallari and others acted similarly in their writings. Because: «*Even here in Albania, the number of those who know the German language, who appreciate and love the German culture and spirit, is not small. Therefore, the celebrations that are held today in Germany and that unite in our world on this day the memories and thoughts of all Germans, are finding a strong support in our country as well as a true and complete sympathy.*»<sup>46</sup>

In parallel, efforts to bring Goethe's works closer to the public led to widespread attempts to translate his writings. As another quote illustrates, «*without rest, the light of the gods shines, which illuminates the heavenly and mysterious paths of the souls of the world. Among them comes the light of Homer, of Virgil, of Dante, of Shakespeare, of Goethe: that royal road of culture, which illuminated the whole world; that a life that has no conflict, no wave, no storm, no confusion; that a gathering of souls that overshadow the philosophy of human history, will connect the life of peoples with the string of CULTURE.*»<sup>47</sup>. As mentioned, in 1933, the first translation of *Werther*<sup>48</sup> was published, and in 1934 the first part of Goethe's masterpiece *Faust*<sup>49</sup> was published - but this was a prose version. The first translations of the work from the original are those of Don Lazër Shantoja. Parts of this translation were published between 1935-1944 in various literary and cultural magazines already mentioned, such as: *Leka*, *Shkëndija*, *Illyria* and *Hylli i Dritës*. In 1936 – the translation of Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea* by Lazër Shantoja was also published.

In the numerous articles published during this period, it is frequently asserted that the populace must be provided with what is necessary to elevate and direct them towards what is good and valuable. This is based on the idea that what the people perceive as good is not always so. The work should not be judged according to the crowd, but according to the intellectual elite, 'according to the cream of society'. Or further: «*Our goal now is to increase the taste for reading among the people, then let the people*

46 NN.: *Kujtim i poetit gjerman Goethe (1749-1832)*, in: *Shqipëria e Re*, Konstancë, nr. 495, 1 march 1932. And: NN.: *Qindvjetor' i Wolfgang Goethes*, in: *Gazeta e Tiranës*, Nr. 41, 23 March 1932.

47 Cordignano, Fulvio: *Kultura*, in: *Demokratia*, Gjirokastra, 24 September 1932, 3.

48 Gëte, J. V.: *Werther*, Korçë, (pa shtëpi botuese), 1933.

49 Gëte, J. V.: *Tragjedia e Faustit*, Tiranë, 1934.

*be saturated with romanticism – with beauty –, and, ultimately, the time will come when they themselves, with the why in mind, guided by reason, will embrace the new literary spirit.»*<sup>50</sup> In the preface to the 1936 translation of *Hermann und Dorothea*, when writing about Goethe, Shantoja's perspective on the role of the intellectual and writer of the time is most clearly revealed. Among other things, he writes that the poet fulfills his noble mission in the best possible way: when ignited by a fiery love for his homeland, he becomes a leader, protector, and prophet of his people.<sup>51</sup> When Goethe presents the idea and speaks of *Weltliteratur*, he also states: «*Translation, [...] is and remains one of the most important and honorable tasks in the global exchange of ideas.*» In this spirit, Shantoja writes that, in order to be translated, authors must always be «*selected for their works that are, in every respect, the most notable, and from among them, only the most perfect works should be chosen [...]. Only in this way can we prepare our Albania with a solid and progressive foundation for literary culture.*»<sup>52</sup>

How seriously and wholeheartedly he took the work of the translator and prophet of his people, bringing them closer to valuable literature, is evident in the lines that «*The indefatigable Fan Noli, 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*», when he read the translations that Shantoja had made of *Faust*, Noli wrote to Shantoja himself 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.*»<sup>53</sup>

#### **4.4 The Disruption of a Cultural Renaissance**

Unfortunately, just as Shantoja's translation of *Faust*, so too the momentum and path that Albanian culture took during this time, remained half-completed. The Second World War brought communism to Albania, and many of the personalities mentioned in this article were imprisoned, tortured inhumanely, and killed. Those who were fortunate enough to escape, remained forever distant from Albania, and Albania without them. «The persecution of intellectuals, especially those who had been abroad before 1944, and the factual severance from all cultural traditions, created a literary and cultural void in Albania that lasted until the 1960s. Its consequences can still be felt today. It will never be known exactly

50 Ibid.

51 Shantoja, Lazër: *Vepra*, Botime Françeskane, Shkodër, 2005, 601.

52 Ibid., 604.

53 Elsie, Robert: *A Biographical Dictionary of Albanian History*, I. B. Tauris&Co. Ltd, New York 2013, 409.

how many intellectuals and new literary talents were sent in the years that followed to work in heavy industry sectors, or were exiled forever to the provinces, or interned in some remote mountain village, with no hope of ever returning to their original places of residence.»<sup>54</sup> Cultural developments in Kosova are an exception to this.

The reception of Goethe among Albanians will also change. «*In the changes in Goethe's figure, in the changes in the demands placed on his work by different nations, we can almost read the changes in the intellectual (mental) history of all of Europe.*»<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

This study has shed light on a remarkable yet underexplored chapter in Albanian intellectual history: the strategic reception of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as both a literary and philosophical model by the Neo-Albanian movement of the 1930s. The reception of Goethe's work among Albanian intellectuals of the interwar period was not merely a literary interest, but a deliberate cultural and ideological choice. As Albania sought to redefine its national identity in the aftermath of Ottoman rule, intellectuals turned to European models to guide the country's cultural and intellectual development. Due to the political and social structure of the Ottoman Empire, within which Albanians remained until 1912, they experienced a delay in cultural advancement. To overcome this situation as quickly as possible, Albanian intellectuals—particularly those of the interwar period—sought a new path for the nation to follow. Among them, Branko Merxhani stood out with his ideology of Neo-Albanianism, which aimed to lead Albanian society toward the West through cultural and intellectual renewal. One of the most significant figures to serve as a model in this pursuit was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

Through an in-depth analysis of literary journals, cultural discourse, and key translations, this study demonstrated that, the 1930s marked a period when Goethe's works began to be widely translated and read in Albania, with *The Sorrows of Young Werther* influencing the early development of the Albanian novel. However, it was ultimately the figure of *Faust* that provided intellectuals with a guiding philosophy for societal transformation. Faust's relentless pursuit of knowledge and self-overcoming resonated deeply with Neo-Albanian ideals, offering a blueprint for national progress and intellectual awakening. More than a literary influence, Goethe became a symbol of spiritual renewal and cultural orientation. Figures such as Branko

54 Elsie, Robert: *Histori e letërsisë shqiptare*, 1997, 260. Available at: <http://www.elsie.de/pdf/B1997HistLetShqip.pdf>.

55 Kindermann, Heinz: *Das Goethebild des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1966, 14.

Merxhani, Lazër Shantoja, Krist Maloki, Vangjel Koça, Gjergj Fishta, etc. recognized in Goethe not only aesthetic brilliance but also a template for the formation of an Albanian intellectual elite—one that could think critically, act ethically, and envision a modern, European future. Their engagement with Goethe's work was reflected in translations, commentaries, and the role his figure and oeuvre played in intellectual debates about the direction of Albanian identity.

As this research has shown, in Goethe's oeuvre, Albanian intellectuals found both a literary and philosophical framework to articulate their aspirations for a modernized and European-oriented Albania. Despite the significant momentum gained during this period, historical events—particularly the rise of communism—interrupted this cultural trajectory. The intellectual class that had championed these ideas was marginalized, exiled, or persecuted, leaving Albania in a state of isolation that would last for decades. Cultural developments in Kosova are an exception to this.

Nevertheless, the reception of Goethe in Albanian culture remains a testament to the transformative power of literature in shaping national consciousness and fostering intercultural exchange. It highlights how, even in times of ideological and political uncertainty, literature serves as both a mirror and a map—reflecting the past while guiding societies toward new horizons.

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