

Martin Camaj
Selected poetry.

Leonard Fox, transl.

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Never has there been a tradition of writers-in-exile in Albanian literature. Whereas Russian and Polish, or indeed Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian literatures, the latter being comparable in size to the Albanian, would be unthinkable without the contributions made by writers-in-exile, little Albanian writing has been produced abroad or in exile, and that which does exist has had minimal impact on the mainstream of Albanian literature and culture. The Albanian-speaking world is simply too minute and too isolated a cosmos to have diffused its written culture far beyond the traditional areas of settlement.

This said, one name nonetheless comes to mind, that of Martin Camaj, an emigrant writer of far from negligible significance both for Albanian scholarship and for Albanian literature. Camaj was born in Temal, in the Dukagjin region of the northern Albanian alps on 21 July 1925. He received a classical education at the Jesuit Saverian college in Shkodër and studied at the University of Belgrade. From there he went on to do postgraduate research in Italy where he taught Albanian and finished his studies in linguistics at the University of Rome in 1960. From 1970 to 1990 he was professor of Albanian studies at the University of Munich and now lives in the mountain village of Lenggries in Upper Bavaria.

Camaj's literary activities over a period of forty-five years cover several phases of development. He began with poetry, a genre to which he has remained faithful, but in recent years has also devoted himself increasingly to prose. His first volumes of classical verse, *Nji fyell ndër male*, Prishtinë 1953 (A flute in the mountains), and *Kânga e vërrinit*, Prishtinë 1954 (Song of the lowland pastures), were inspired by his native northern Albanian mountains to which he has never lost his attachment, despite long years of exile and, until very recently, the impossibility of return. Camaj's mature verse, as represented in the present volume, betrays the influence of the hermetic movement of Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888-1970), a phenomenon quite unusual for Albanian letters. The metaphoric and symbolic character of his language has increased with time as has the range of his poetic themes. Leonard Fox's English version of the eighty-eight poems in this bilingual selection is surprisingly palatable considering the English version of Camaj's *Albanian Grammar* (Wiesbaden 1984), which remains quite baffling at times without a knowledge of German. Together with the Italian-language edition of Camaj's verse (Palermo 1985), the present volume will certainly help introduce to the international public the long undiscovered talents of an unusual though not always easy poet-in-exile.

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