

Arshi Pipa

*Contemporary Albanian literature.*

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Over the last half a century, there has not been a single work of literary criticism published in Tiranë which is worth the paper it is written on. The cultural vacuum created by the forty-six-year Hoxha dictatorship blunted all critical thought and objective judgment-making. There has thus been a conspicuous lack of serious studies on Albanian literature and Pipa's *Contemporary Albanian literature* is a welcome introduction to fill the void.

Arshi Pipa (b. 1920) himself was a literary figure of note in Albania until the communist takeover in 1944 and his internment there for ten years in concentration camps. His verse collection, *Libri i burgut*, Rome 1959 (The prison book), and his subsequent studies on Albanian literature and politics have confirmed him as a leading Albanologist. Despite his long years in American exile, Pipa has never lost his keen insight into the political realities below the bland surface of Albanian letters and culture. The first section of *Contemporary Albanian literature* is devoted to the all-pervading doctrine of 'Albanian socialist realism', firstly as a theory and then in its practical implementation throughout the grim decades of the Hoxha regime. Pipa's approach to Albanian socialist realism is highly selective, as he says himself. His judgments and at times irascible views are idiosyncratic, but more often than not, convincing. Much of this section is devoted to Ismail Kadare whose literary production has always reflected the vicissitudes of Albanian political life and whom Pipa regards as a dissident and heretic from the very start of his career.

The second section of the monograph, entitled 'Camaj's Poetry and Poetics', focuses entirely on the works of Martin Camaj (b. 1925) who, although still an outsider, may with time prove to be a central figure of Albanian literature. Camaj is a difficult author and not widely read as yet. Indeed he was completely unknown to the vast majority of Albanians until very recently. As such, the place reserved for him in this work is significant.

A point of criticism which must be made about the book, or at least about the use of such a comprehensive title, is the complete lack of treatment of the other half of 'contemporary Albanian literature', i.e. that written and published in Kosovo. Despite Belgrade's continual efforts to keep the 'Kurds of Europe' as uneducated malleable peasants, Kosovo has up to now been producing the best poets and most imaginative critics of the Albanian nation, without whom no work on modern Albanian literature can be complete. Pipa's monograph remains nonetheless the most original and interesting study to date of Albanian letters from the motherland, now liberated from itself.

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