

Anton Berisha.
Vepra letrare e Martin Camajt.
Cosenza (Italy). Radhohjtë e Zjarrit. 1995. 97 pages.

The position of Martin Camaj (1925-1992) in Albanian literature is rather difficult to determine as yet. As an exiled author who escaped from the Hoxha regime in 1948, Camaj remained a taboo in Albania throughout the long years of the communist dictatorship. He was never mentioned in public even though he had made quite a name for himself abroad as a linguist and as professor of Albanian studies at the University of Munich. Indeed until 1991, virtually no one in Tirana had ever heard of him. In Kosovo, too, where as a student under Henrik Baric in Belgrade, he had managed to publish his first two influential volumes of verse: *Nji fyell ndër male*, Prishtina 1953 (A flute in the mountains), and *Kânga e vërrinit*, Prishtina 1954 (Song of the lowland pastures), the writer was ostracized from the budding literary establishment for two essentially political reasons: firstly, because Martin Camaj had abandoned Yugoslavia for Italy in 1956 and secondly, because many Kosovo editors, in a mistaken token of intellectual solidarity with Hoxha's Albania, refused to publish works banned across the border. In subsequent years in Munich, where Camaj edited and printed most of his literary works, intellectual circles and his university colleagues in particular were often puzzled and bemused by the linguist who spent much of his time publishing obscure works of fiction in a language nobody in central Europe could understand (and in Geg dialect at that) and for a public consisting of no more than a handful of other Albanian emigrants. Martin Camaj was an author in exile in every sense of the word and was to remain so until the end of his days.

It is only over the last five years that the literary works of Martin Camaj (see WLT 65:4, p. 746) have really begun to become known to Albanian readers. Recent publications in the Balkans include: *Pishtarët e natës*, Prishtina 1990 (The torchbearers of night); *Në hijen e gjarpnit*, Prishtina 1991 (In the serpent's shadow); *Djella*, Prishtina 1994 (Djella); and *Lirika mes dy moteve*, Tirana 1995 (Lyrics between two ages).

Accordingly, Camaj has finally begun to enjoy some of the praise and acclamation he was denied as a writer during his lifetime. Arshi Pipa's monograph (see WLT 66:3, p. 558-559) on *Contemporary Albanian literature* (Boulder & New York 1991), for instance, is devoted almost exclusively to two authors: Ismail Kadare and Martin Camaj, the latter being a close personal friend of the Albanian-American scholar. The press in Albania itself has a marked inclination for superlatives, and terms like *kolos*, *gjigant* and *poliedrik* now abound for literary figures who reached safety and managed to live and work in exile at a time when Enver Hoxha was busy wiping out what remained of Albanian culture at home. While most critics have been unbounded in their adulation and praise of Camaj as an author of national significance, reception of his works has in fact proved very mixed. Many readers have been confused and perplexed by the author's hermetic prose, his borderline genres and a literary style quite new to them.

It is to the merit of Kosovo scholar Anton Berisha (b. 1946) now that he has presented the first critical study devoted entirely to the 'Literary Works of Martin Camaj'. The 97-page monograph has appeared at just the right time and will serve as a useful guide not only to the interested scholar but also to the Albanian reader, bewildered and fascinated by a new horizon in Albanian literary culture.

Berisha's study, composed in a scholarly and erudite language, is divided into three major sections: 'Camaj the poet,' 'Camaj the prose writer,' and 'Camaj the dramatist' and concludes with a short biography of the writer. Noting in his preface that he intends to offer an independent treatment and a sovereign dialogue with poetic structures, levels of interpretation

and subtexts, Berisha covers all essential aspects of the writer's creative path and makes it apparent that Camaj's contribution to Albanian letters has been a significant one indeed.

Be this as it may, just what impact Martin Camaj will have upon readers in the Balkans and upon Albanian literature as an organism will only be seen when his works are better known to the Albanian public at large. A start has been made and, to this end, the present volume is a very welcome contribution. One would only wish this monograph to have been published in Tirana or Prishtina, and not in distant Cosenza across the water where its effect will, as a matter of course, be limited.

Robert Elsie
Olzheim / Eifel , Germany