



ISSN: 2617-6548

URL: www.ijirss.com



Between memory and modernity: The poetic geography of martin Camaj

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Abstract

This study explores the poetic universe of Martin Camaj, a seminal figure in Albanian literature, positioned at the intersection of Albanian cultural memory and European modernist aesthetics. Anchored in the mythic and natural topography of Albania, Camaj's poetry evolves through a cosmopolitan lens shaped by exile, displacement, and intellectual engagement with European literary movements. His early verse reconstructs Albanian identity through symbolic landscapes and ancestral memory, while his later work adopts a hermetic style that reflects the existential and aesthetic dimensions of exile. Thus, his poetry emerges as a layered *palimpsest*, wherein archaic myth, symbolic geography, and linguistic experimentation coalesce to articulate a poetics of restoration. Camaj's engagement with themes of loss, solitude, and regeneration is interpreted within broader frameworks of cultural displacement, modern identity, and literary resistance. The paper further argues that Camaj's transnational position and stylistic hybridity challenge traditional conceptions of Albanian literature, offering a model for understanding the exilic condition not as marginalization but as a site of creative renewal. Drawing on close readings of key poems, this study argues that Camaj's poetics enact a restoration of cultural continuity, transforming absence into an aesthetic and ontological paradigm. His work stands as a testament to the power of poetry to preserve, reimagine, and unify identity across fractured geographies.

Keywords: Cultural memory, Exile literature, Fractured symbolic geography, German environment and culture, Italian Hermeticism, Linguistic archaism, Martin Camaj, Modernism, Old Albanian tradition, Ontological paradigm, Poetic identity.

DOI: 10.53894/ijirss.v8i9.10671

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

History: Received: 22 August 2025 / **Revised:** 25 September 2025 / **Accepted:** 30 September 2025 / **Published:** 16 October 2025

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Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Transparency: The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

Publisher: Innovative Research Publishing

1. Introduction

Camaj [1] stands as one of the most significant figures in twentieth-century Albanian literature and Albanology. A poet, philologist, and intellectual shaped by political exile, Camaj developed a body of work that bridges the cultural

memory of premodern Albania and the aesthetic strategies of European modernism. His poetic voice, emerging from the mountainous landscapes of Dukagjin (Albania) and reverberating through Rome, Munich, and beyond, offers a rare synthesis of mythic depth and linguistic innovation. Operating from outside the Albanian nation-state and often in opposition to its ideological constraints, Camaj crafted a literary vision that transcends borders: linguistic, political, and temporal ones.

This paper examines Camaj's poetic oeuvre as a paradigmatic instance of exile literature, marked by a persistent dialectic between rootedness and displacement, memory and modernity. Drawing on myth criticism, and comparative poetics, particularly the affinities with Italian Hermeticism—the study analyzes how Camaj reactivates cultural memory through symbolic landscapes, linguistic archaism, and metaphysical imagery. Central to this inquiry is the way exile is transformed from a biographical condition into an aesthetic structure, enabling a poetics of restoration that engages the ruins of tradition while forging a modern, transnational identity.

1.1. Purpose of the study

This study investigates the poetic universe of Martin Camaj, focusing on how his work articulates Albanian identity through myth, memory, and exile. It aims to position Camaj within both Albanian literary tradition and broader European modernist movements, particularly Italian Hermeticism.

2. Material Methods

As this paper adopts a literary-critical and comparative methodology to examine the poetic oeuvre of Martin Camaj within the frameworks of exile poetics, cultural memory, and transnational literary identity, the textual analysis focuses on a representative selection of Camaj's poetry, including *For the Ox Drowned in the Time of Hunger*, *Two generations*, *The Lichen*, *The Loneliness of the Southerner in the North*, *The Buried Poet*, and *The Found Thread*, *The legend of Shota*. The study incorporates interpretive tools drawn from myth criticism, Edward Said's concept of exile, and intertextual approaches to modernism and Hermeticism (Ungaretti, Quasimodo, Montale). Comparative dimensions are established by aligning Camaj's stylistic and thematic devices with those of Italian Hermetic poets and by situating his literary output within broader European modernist and diasporic paradigms.

The research employs a close textual analysis of Camaj's poetry, supported by comparative literary frameworks and cultural theory. Key poems are examined through the lenses of narrative identity (Ricoeur), contrapuntal reading (Said), and the concept of the "stranger within" (Kristeva). The study also integrates historical and linguistic context, including Camaj's engagement with the Arbëresh diaspora and his academic work in Munich.

Primary and secondary sources include critical studies, such as Arshi Pipa, Anton Nikë Berisha, Ardian Klosi, Sadik Bejko and interpretive frameworks from cultural theory and structural anthropology.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis reveals that Martin Camaj's poetry constructs a distinctive exilic poetics that fuses cultural memory with modernist aesthetics. Key findings include:

- **Temporal and Spatial Duality:** Camaj's work juxtaposes mythic time and modern alienation, particularly through symbolic geographies such as the highlands of Dukagjin and Bavarian Alps. His revival of archaic Albanian forms functions as cultural reclamation, resisting linguistic erosion and asserting continuity.
- **Symbolism and Ritual:** Archetypal imagery: axe, ox, wolves, oak are used to construct mythic structures of death, renewal, and communal cohesion. These symbols transcend ethnographic detail, functioning as metaphysical instruments in a cosmology of transformation.
- **Myth as Narrative Identity** Camaj's poetry uses myth to reconcile fractured time-space. His figures (e.g., Shota) embody internal conflicts between origin and transformation, memory and progress, constructing a poetic self in permanent narrative reconstruction.
- **Arbëresh Legacy and Cultural Memory:** Camaj's engagement with the Arbëresh communities of Southern Italy enriched both his linguistic scholarship and poetic imagination. The Arbëresh experience of migration and survival becomes a metaphor for exile, memory, and cultural transmission. In *Deti Anmik (Hostile Sea)*, the sea symbolizes both separation and burden, while dialectal inclusivity (e.g., Arbëresh and Gheg) underscores a vision of national unity through linguistic diversity.
- **Hermetic Influence and Linguistic Innovation** Camaj's poetry demonstrates clear affinities with Italian Hermeticism, particularly in its cryptic brevity, lexical density, and symbolic abstraction. Most of his poems reflect a linguistic economy akin to Ungaretti's purified lyricism, emphasizing the intrinsic power of the word.
- **Munich as Symbolic Space** Munich, the "City of Millions," emerges as a poetic metaphor for modernity's alienation. Camaj's urban verse dramatizes the tension between tradition and industrial civilization, solitude and intellectual rigor. *The Bee in the North* and *The Legend of Shota* articulate this duality through mythic and dramatic structures.
- **Diasporic Continuum.** Camaj's position in exile, while marginal within national literary canons (especially those of Socialist Realism), enables a transnational redefinition of Albanian literary modernity.

3.1. Discussion

The study situates Martin Camaj at the intersection of tradition and modernity, rootedness and dislocation, making his work emblematic of a broader diasporic literary condition. Camaj's poetry is not merely a lament for loss but a creative act

of reconstitution, where the poetic word becomes an archaeological tool for unearthing and reactivating suppressed or endangered cultural layers. His relationship to the Arbëresh tradition, the Albanian oral imaginary, and the European literary avant-garde underscores the complexity of his literary identity.

The symbolic figure of the *ox*, or the *leafless olive tree*, or *My barefoot brother/- cold wind on the horizon -/And blew at the autumnal fire/With full cheeks,/And all the sparks became/Sons-* might illustrate a metaphysical poetics that transcends biographical circumstance and enters the realm of philosophical inquiry and ontological longing.

Importantly, the internalization of exile is aestheticized through symbolic landscapes and mythic structures, forming a unique synthesis of personal experience and collective memory. By invoking cities like Munich as symbolic sites of modern alienation and classical dualities (e.g., city vs. wilderness), Camaj engages with archetypal tensions that are as much psychological as they are civilizational. His dialogue with Italian Hermeticism further reinforces the view of Camaj as a poet of concealment and revelation, where meaning emerges through silence, suggestion, and spiritual introspection.

Findings Camaj's poetry reveals an aesthetic that fuses Albanian mythic structures with modernist stylistic innovation. Myth in Camaj's work functions not as nostalgic ornament but as a dynamic framework for negotiating displacement and identity. His use of symbolic imagery, dialectal inclusivity, and hermetic brevity constructs a poetics of cultural preservation and existential reflection. The city of Munich emerges as a symbolic space of intellectual exile, while the Arbëresh legacy in Italy informs his linguistic and thematic depth.

Practical Implications This study contributes to the understanding of diasporic literature and cultural identity formation under conditions of displacement. It offers a framework for analyzing how poetic language can serve as a vehicle for cultural survival and renewal. The findings may inform future research in comparative literature, exile studies, and linguistic preservation, particularly within marginalized or transnational literary traditions.

3.2. Martin Camaj as a Foundational Figure in Albanian Letters and Studies

Martin Camaj was born in Temal, in the region of Dukagjin, on July 21, 1925, and passed away in Munich on March 12, 1992. A prominent writer and scholar of Albanian studies, he is widely acknowledged as a foundational figure in modern Albanian letters. Educated in classical traditions at the Jesuit College in Shkodër, Albania, Camaj's intellectual path was soon shaped by political exile.

A resolute opponent of Albania's communist regime, he went into hiding before fleeing to Yugoslavia, where he pursued higher studies in Belgrade.

In 1956, he left Yugoslavia for Italy, enrolling in postgraduate studies and earning his doctorate in Rome. During this period, he edited the cultural and literary journal *Le Pleiadi/Shejzat* under the mentorship of Ernest Koliqi, another resolute opponent of Albania's communist regime and prominent writer and scholar of Albanian studies. He also lectured at the Institute of Albanian Studies, initiating linguistic research on the Arbëresh dialects and contributing to the broader field of Albanology.

In 1961, Camaj moved to Munich, Germany, where he was appointed professor and went on to establish the Chair of Albanian Studies at the University of Munich (LMU). Until the end of his life, he lectured in Albanian literature, significantly advancing both the institutional presence and academic credibility of Albanian studies in the European university system. Under his leadership, the Department of Language and Literature at the University of Munich achieved full academic recognition, enabling the conferment of all academic titles within the field.

3.3. Rooted in Myth, Reaching Beyond: The Poetic Universe of Martin Camaj

The poetic universe of Martin Camaj is profoundly anchored in the natural, mythical, and cultural topography of Albania, while simultaneously shaped by a cosmopolitan consciousness cultivated through years of exile. His literary work navigates the interplay between memory and modernity, articulating a poetics that oscillates between the concrete and symbolic landscapes of the northern Albanian highlands and the urban spaces of Rome, Munich, and New York to abstract and universal images.

In his early creative phase, Camaj seeks to reconstruct a holistic image of Albanian identity—conceived as cultural memory, mythic origin, and poetic transcendence of temporality.

His later poetry, by contrast, adopts a denser and more hermetic style, where spatial and historical dimensions converge in more complex and enigmatic forms. Exile, in this trajectory, becomes not only a lived existential condition but also an aesthetic paradigm. The Bavarian Alps emerge in his later verse as a spectral echo of the homeland to which return was impossible, underscoring the dialectic of presence and absence that defines his oeuvre.

Though unmistakably influenced by broader European literary movements—most notably Italian Hermeticism—Camaj maintains a distinct poetic voice. His work is characterized by a fusion of stylistic innovation and thematic rootedness, giving form to a kind of aesthetic of preservation and resistance in which endangered cultural identity becomes both substance and structure of poetic expression.

3.4. Margins of the Canon. Diaspora and the Fragmented Continuum of Albanian Literature

Albanian literature, historically intertwined with the fate of its people, has remained largely unknown outside its linguistic and regional boundaries. It has been shaped and often fractured by profound political, historical, economic, and geographical upheavals. Each time it approached a moment of literary flourishing, it was compelled to confront renewed struggles for continuity and survival. The literature of the 16th and 17th centuries emerged in sharp disjunction from the broader shifts of early modern Europe, and the imposition of socialist realism during the post-war period constituted a second rupture, suppressing the literary momentum achieved during the 1930s and 1940s.

- It is essential to note that the Albanian linguistic and literary continuum does not coincide with the territorial boundaries of the Albanian nation-state [2]. Albanian literature encompasses a transnational corpus: it is produced in Albania, Kosovo, and other parts of the former Yugoslavia, as well as within diasporic communities in Italy (especially among the Arbëresh) and Zadar, Croatia.
- Among the *diaspora*, cultural production was often fragmented and geographically dispersed. One of the most significant intellectual centers emerged in Rome, where Ernest Koliqi and Martin Camaj, through the journal *Shejzat* cultivated a modern Albanian literary discourse in exile. Kuçuku [3] From there, Camaj would eventually relocate to Munich, where he laid the foundations for a new scholarly and literary platform. Two additional, though less cohesive, centers developed in the United States. Within Albania itself, however, the literature produced by exiled writers remained inaccessible, censored by the communist state (1954-1990) and their authors were stigmatized as traitors.
- The Arbëresh communities of southern Italy, descendants of Albanians who fled after the death of Skanderbeg in 1468, lived as a cultural enclave within Italian society. Often romanticized as a microcosm of a lost Albania, the Arbëresh cultivated a literary tradition that developed independently of the mainland. Despite formal and stylistic divergences, arbëresh poetry remains deeply tethered to a shared historical consciousness, charged with longing, memory, and the aspiration for cultural continuity.

While writers of the diaspora rarely occupied a central position in the canonical development of Albanian literature, figures such as Martin Camaj constitute important exceptions.

The following analysis examines how Martin Camaj's poetic universe emerges as a unique topography suspended between memory and modernity, belonging and displacement, how his work articulates a deep-seated connection to Albanian nature, myth, and cultural archetypes, while simultaneously negotiating a cosmopolitan and exilic sensibility shaped by his life outside the Albanian state.

3.5. *Old Times, Wild Land*

Martin Camaj describes where he was born (and we think here is the starting point and the end): *In a wild land, "where the horse's hoof has never stepped," so brittle this place is.*

My land is notorious for deep abysses among the inhabitants of the mountains and the plains down to the sea. In the evenings, one hears the cries of the grizhla¹ caught in the eagle's claws and its spirit is sacrificed to the shadows.

The Camayan *chronotope* [4] thus becomes the structural element of the life path and the literary ground, connected to Camaj's human purpose to project Albanian being and essence into infinite space and time.

After fleeing Albania, Martin Camaj passed through former Yugoslavia, stayed in Camaj [5]: *where I got to know the inhabitants of the Great Highlands more closely* [4]; in Belgrade also, and he had two poetry volumes published in Pristine, Kosovo. The contacts with the Albanians of Kosovo have been remained continuous: *many think I am an authentic Man of Kosovo, which would be a great honor for me, but I am not.* [4].

A striking example of Camaj's engagement with time and memory appears in the poem *For the Ox Drowned in the Time of Hunger* from the volume *Legjenda (The Legend)*. The internal temporality the poem evokes is one of haunting retrospection—an ungraspable past that continues to shape the present self. While no external action takes place, the poem's introspective force lies in its attempt to reestablish contact with a part of the self left behind in the terrain of memory.

In this early phase of his work, Camaj is particularly attuned to the emotional and symbolic residues of his homeland—its landscape, mythology, and inherited worldview. His native Dukagjin, its mountainous wilderness, and pastoral life become not only recurring themes but the very grammar of his poetic imagination.

The loss of tradition, solitude in a changing world, and the search for origin form the thematic spine of Camaj's poetry. In this regard, exile is not simply a biographical fact but an existential condition that informs both the substance and structure of his verse. As Sadik Bejko notes, Camaj was a "captive of absence" who spent his life poetically reviving the memory of bloodline and homeland, ultimately giving ontological shape to the void: an eternal Dukagjin [6]. It is a poetics of restoration, an attempt to recover what has been severed by history and dislocation.

The cult of the ancestors features prominently in this project of recovery. In the poem *Dy brezni (Two Generations)*, the Father is likened to a leafless olive tree, a powerful image of silent majesty and generational continuity. No boast or heroic declaration is made; instead, the dignity of the past is passed on in quiet, elemental terms.

In this vivid and tender image: (My barefoot brother) *blew at the autumnal fire/With full cheeks,/And all the sparks became/Sons.*[7] - Camaj evokes not merely fertility, but the life-force of transmission itself, a breath that animates memory and legacy. Against the backdrop of historical amnesia and cultural erosion, the need for regeneration asserts itself not only as a biological instinct, but as a poetic and spiritual strategy for survival: forgetting threatens, creation responds.

¹ Grizhla: a magpie-like bird from northern Albanian dialects, often used symbolically in Camaj's poetry.

3.5.1. Two Generations

*My father was
A sad-looking fellow,
A leafless olive tree
With black pits on every bough.
His words rumbled loudly
Within us
As if they were a famished wolf's howling
Alone in the barren cliffs.
My brother took*

*His place,
My barefoot brother- cold wind on the horizon –
And blew at the autumnal fire
With full cheeks,
And all the sparks became Sons. [7].*

This vertical logic—from father to son, from memory to presence—is a core feature of Camaj's aesthetic archaism. It is especially visible in *Bukëvala e re (The New Bukëvala)*, where generational layers are juxtaposed in the figures of the old woman and the young girls. Here, Camaj disrupts linear, historical time to access a more archetypal temporality. The poem collapses millennia into a moment of anthropological depth, drawing on the imagery of Paleolithic fertility and female embodiment. The swelling of the female breast becomes not merely a physiological detail but a metaphor for life's enduring generative force—rendered in the style of an eternal, folkloric melody that wanders through timeless space.

What Camaj achieves through this is not a nostalgic return, but rather a radical reactivation of cultural memory. His poetry functions as a cognitive archaeology, a vertical excavation of cultural strata in which belief systems, rituals, and narrative structures are unearthed and recomposed. The result is a synchronic and diachronic vision of Albanian identity that resists both ideological flattening and ethnographic essentialism. His poetic voice becomes a conduit through which a millennia-old culture—fragmented by geopolitics and linguistic dispersal—continues to resonate with profound emotional and philosophical urge.

In choosing to live in the Bavarian Alps, Camaj inhabited a landscape that mirrored, albeit from afar, the mountains of his youth. Scholars have remarked that this was likely not coincidental. The alpine solitude of Bavaria offered not only geographic resonance with the northern Albanian highlands but also a symbolic terrain in which Camaj could reconstruct, in poetic terms, the homeland from which he was permanently exiled. The calm of the Bavarian Alps has summoned another calm, the lost one, seeking a past time. Thus, the Bavarian Alps do not merely appear as setting—they become metaphors of memory, standing in for a lost world that continues to echo through the poet's language.

Martin Camaj's poem *Drekë malsore (Mountain Feast)* carries a tragic monumentalism embedded in its very simplicity and lyrical fluency. Its power lies not in rhetorical excess but in the compression of words and images—its density. A chilling and visceral atmosphere rises between the lines, where the breath of fate moves with quiet force. This is a fate as precise and irreversible as the fall of an axe from above, as heavy and final as the trunks of beech trees—bodies entwined with roots of stoicism and self-erasure, of epic resolve and simultaneous self-destruction. Bejko [8] Camaj's verse, though linear and seemingly tranquil in movement, stuns the reader with a haunting refrain: *Blood was avenged today*, repeated three times, this line interrupts the calm, introducing the solemn ritual core of the poem.

3.5.2. Mountain Feast

*Blood was avenged today.
Two bullets felled a man.
Blood was avenged today.*

*Under the axe-head
The ox's skull bursts by the stream.
(Today there will be great feasting!)*

Blood was avenged today.

*The wailing of men gone wild
Mingles with the smell of meat on the fires
And the autumn foliage falls
Scorched on the white caps
At the tables, outside.*

Night. At the graves on the hill

*Fresh earth, new moon.
The wolves have descended from the mountains
And drink blood at the stream.* [8]

Mountain feast does not concern itself with the moral or sociological dimensions of blood vengeance. Instead, the focus is on the mortuary feast—on death as a communal rite, and reconciliation as its central act. Details, sparse yet precise, construct the scene: two bullets lay a man on the ground; the blunt edge of the axe cracks the ox's spine by the stream; the wailing of men mingles with the scent of roasted meat over open fires; autumn leaves fall onto white caps at outdoor tables; night falls; fresh earth is laid in the cemetery beneath a new moon. The closing image is among the most visceral: *The wolves have descended from the mountains/And drink blood at the stream*. That is all. Nothing more is said, and nothing more is needed.

The poem makes no mention of the individual who has died, nor of the bereaved family. In the highlands, life and death belong to the community. The *feast* as a cultural situation, absorbs the entire weight of mourning. The ritual meal seals the dead, like a door that must never reopen. Life begins anew from this point—through sacrifice. The blood of the ox becomes the necessary offering, a cleansing. Hands are washed in death; tears and lamentation are washed away. People sit at the tables. Life continues. After this: fresh earth, a new moon. Even the wolves are soothed by the blood of the funeral offering—harmony is restored. [8]

If *Drekë malsore* depicts the ceremonial mechanisms that uphold communal order, *Hija e lisit* (The Shadow of the Oak) offers a poetic architecture of shadow, weight, and permanence. This is a poem of closed form, tightly self-contained—sealed, with no keys left outside, no hidden paths waiting to be opened. The oak's shadow dominates, all-encompassing, as thin and dark as silk in a shrine, stretching from mountain to mountain, from dawn to dusk. It clings to the rock like a serpent to the root.

A somber temple with human figures turned to lifeless stumps. In both poems, Camaj employs an aesthetic economy to construct deeply resonant mythic structures. The imagery is never decorative but charged with archetypal significance. The axe, the ox, the earth, the wolves—these are not merely ethnographic signs, but metaphysical instruments in a cosmology of renewal and decay. Life persists not in resistance to death, but in its ritual containment and transformation.

In Camaj's vision, poetry becomes a vessel for that transformation: a space where memory is metabolized, not preserved; where myth is not only recovered, but reenacted.

This phase, encompassing works such as *Nji fyell ndër male* (A Flute in the Mountains), *Kanga e vërrinit* (Song of the Lowland Pastures), *Legjenda* (The Legend), and *Lirikë mes dy moteve* (Lyrics Between Two Seasons), is marked by the intense poeticization of origin. Yet even within these early works, Camaj moves beyond ethnographic fidelity to engage in a subtle process of universalization. The traditional elements—the folk meter, the symbolic resonance of the “mali” (mountain) and “vërrini” (lowland pasture), and mythic archetypes are transposed into poetic universals, allowing his work to converse with broader literary traditions, including European modernism and Italian Hermeticism.

3.6. Italy and the Arbëresh Legacy: Nexus of Exile, Memory and Linguistic Identity in Martin Camaj's Oeuvre

Following his departure from Belgrade, Martin Camaj's trajectory led him to Italy, an important locus not only politically but also linguistically and culturally. His prior education with the Jesuits had provided him with knowledge of Italian, facilitating his integration into the academic milieu of Rome, where he pursued advanced studies in the Department of Literature and Philosophy. There, Camaj completed his doctoral thesis on *Meshari i Gjon Buzukut* (The Missal of Gjon Buzuku), the earliest known Albanian book, an endeavor that decisively oriented him toward a career in linguistics.

Under the mentorship of Ernest Koliqi, who had recently founded the literary magazine *Shëjzat* (Le Pleiadi), in Rome, Camaj assumed the role of editor and contributor, publishing poetry, essays, and his third poetic volume *Djella*, a hybrid work blending prose and poetry. Over the course of approximately two decades in Italy, Camaj devoted considerable scholarly effort to the Arbëresh community of Southern Italy, producing numerous studies on their language and culture.

He described the Arbëresh dialects as “very difficult,” yet profoundly captivating, even for a linguist of his caliber. [1]

The Arbëresh world—Albanian communities established in Southern and Insular Italy between the 14th and 18th centuries following the death of Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg served as both subject and symbol in Camaj's work. His engagement with this diasporic culture extended beyond scholarship into personal and familial realms. As Erika Camaj recalls, annual visits to Italy and the Arbëresh were a fixture in their lives, with Italy becoming, in many respects, a “second homeland” for Martin Camaj—a reality echoed throughout his literary corpus [9]

Martin Camaj's prolonged engagement with the Arbëresh communities in Southern Italy not only enriched his linguistic scholarship but also profoundly informed the thematic core of his poetic and academic work. The Arbëresh experience of migration and cultural survival epitomizes broader motifs of exile and memory that permeate Camaj's oeuvre. Positioned between homeland and diaspora, tradition and modernity, Camaj's poetry and linguistic studies reveal how language becomes a living archive of collective identity and historical consciousness.

The Arbëresh, as descendants of Albanians displaced centuries earlier, embody the tension between loss and preservation, an enduring “in-betweenness” that parallels Camaj's own condition as an exile navigating multiple cultural spaces—from Dukagjin to Rome, Munich, and beyond. His deep linguistic and cultural analysis of the Arbëresh dialects thus transcends mere philology; it becomes a form of cultural resistance and reclamation.

Several of Camaj's poem titles—*Arbëresh Dance*, *The Black Snakes*, *We Touch the Sea with Our Hands*, *Jeronim De Rada's Winter*, and *Spring in the Arbëresh Village*—evoke the lived reality of the Arbëresh. These poems reflect a

profound attachment to both the ancient heritage arbëresh carried and the new geographical and cultural contexts they inhabited.

3.6.1. *Memory Versus Cultural Trauma*

This preoccupation with displacement is inseparable from the theme of exile in Camaj's work. Exile is not merely geographic but existential—a rupture in belonging that entails a continuous negotiation with memory. His poems evoke the enduring presence of a lost homeland, with the sea serving as a recurring metaphor for both physical separation and the fragile transmission of cultural memory across time and space. The sea is simultaneously carrier and barrier, symbolizing the burden of history and the painful act of remembering.

In the poem *Deti Anmik (Hostile Sea)*, the sea emerges as a multifaceted symbol. It embodies both the force that carries the history and fate of the nation and an isolating, immutable power. The poem's linguistic form hinges on the Albanian root *bar* (from *mbart*, “to carry”), creating a semantic field of burden and transmission. The sea becomes a vessel carrying the layered pains, memories, and triumphs of the Albanian people.

3.6.1.1. *Hostile Sea*

*The sea bears everything with it, say the old people,
With the ever-blowing wind on one side
And pine and fruit trees on the other
Pressed to the ground.
We, the ancient inhabitants,
Love the land. Even the crickets
Bursting in the hot roots of the pine trees
Smell of resin and not of the sea.
Even the spirits of gods
Are hidden in the rocks and not in the salty
Sea! Sweet figs
Swoon red-lipped on their heads
In sacrifice. [10].*

The recurring motif of the wind that always blows from the same side suggests the stagnation and cyclical nature of Albanian history: a perpetual state of uncertainty and entrapment. The image of the strong wind bent and pressed the wheat to the ground, further exemplifies a natural force of great impact, one that respects and preserves the form and stability of what it touches, rather than destroying it outright.

The crickets (in original: *gjinkallat/cicadas*) “burst by the heat” provide a potent symbol of nature's spirit: energetic, vibrant, yet subjected to oppressive intensity. The sensory detail of *crickets* (or *cicadas*) not carrying the smell of the sea, but rather the resin scent of pine trees, is crucial. It signals a shift in environmental and cultural memory for the Arbëresh, who experienced profound dislocation from their Albanian homeland. The sea, once a symbol of migration and hope, becomes in Camaj's poem an alien and “hostile” force, evoking separation, loss, and existential rupture.

This nuanced interplay between nature and displacement articulates a deep cultural trauma: the impossibility of return to a known and beloved nature and the transformation of identity under exile's pressures. The ever-blowing wind on one side thus becomes a metaphor for interrupted continuity, an involuntary submission to separation and loss.

The memory encoded in Camaj's poetry is deeply ambivalent: it is at once a source of identity and a site of trauma. His invocation of natural imagery: *Cicadas* (in original: *Albanian*) or *crickets* (in the translated version) bursting in oppressive heat, the resin-scented pine winds, the shadow of the oak—functions as a poetic palimpsest where ancestral narratives, myth, and lived experience converge.

Memory here operates not as static recollection but as an active, often painful, process of cultural survival under conditions of loss and transformation. Camaj himself framed the historical predicament of the Albanian nation in terms of survival against displacement, remarking:

Martin Camaj: *We clung to the historical memory of the nation like a drowning man to a raft. Don't be surprised that nearly one-third of humanity today is displaced or emigrated from their homeland. They found themselves in a very large society. [1]*

Connected to exile and memory is the theme of linguistic identity, which Camaj treats with both scholarly rigor and poetic sensitivity. His studies of the Arbëresh dialects highlight language as a dynamic vector of cultural continuity, one that simultaneously preserves archaic forms and adapts to new sociocultural realities. By weaving multiple dialects and linguistic registers into his poetry, Camaj constructs a polyphonic Albanian voice that resists fragmentation. This linguistic inclusivity serves as a metaphorical bridge across historical and geographic divides, fostering a vision of national unity rooted in diversity.

Taken together, the Italy-Arbëresh nexus crystallizes the core tensions in Camaj's work: the interplay of exile and belonging, the entanglement of personal and collective memory, and the constitutive role of language in sustaining identity. His poetics and scholarship illuminate how displacement shapes not only the content of cultural production but its very form; the search for “the lost word” is also a quest for new modes of expression that articulate a complex diasporic reality.

3.6.2. Symbolism, Ritual, and National Unity. Throughout Camaj's Poetry, Symbolism Functions on Multiple Levels.

Camaj's poetry is full of elements that suggest more than what is literally said in his verses.

Just as the resin-scented wind suggests something that happened over time and has already influenced the feelings and daily life of the people, so does:

Swoon red-lipped on their heads/in sacrifice which brings an image of rituals and sacrifice, where sweet figs may symbolize sacred gifts and sacrifices, and sacrifice itself raises questions about the faith, rites, and traditions of this particular community.

We can see the sweet figs, blood-red on the lips that fall upon the peaks of sacrifice evoke sacred rituals of offering, linking personal and collective faith with enduring traditions. These ritualistic images gesture toward the communal efforts to sustain identity and spiritual cohesion in the face of fragmentation.

Finally, Camaj's linguistic inclusivity—manifested in the harmonizing of uttermost different dialects such as Arbëresh (south): *domi mirë token* (*Love the land/we love the earth best*) and Gheg (north): *anmik* (*hostile/enemy*)—underscores a persistent effort to forge a unified national consciousness that transcends geographic and historical divides.

In the end, the creation of an inseparable homeland is also linked to the harmonizing of very different dialects, as:

-domi mirë token/we loven be earth best (Arbëresh) and:

-anmik (in Gheg) – that suggest a deep national unity, an effort to create a place for all Albanians regardless of historical and geographical divisions.

The poem is a figurative puzzle that contains a deep logical density and powerful suggestion, using natural and cultural elements to create a shared and eternal meaning but also a constant sense of loss and concern.

The use of dialects, poetic figures, contrasts and images helps build a multiple and open meaning, inviting the reader to explore and interpret each part of the poem in their own way.

3.7. Italy and Italian Hermeticism: Influence and Poetic Resonance in Martin Camaj's Later Work

This section focuses on the poetics of Martin Camaj during this second phase of his creative trajectory, developed predominantly in Italy, with particular attention to the reception and transformation of Italian Hermeticism's aesthetic principles (as he was a student of Ungaretti).

Thus, it explores the complex cultural and literary dialogues with one of the world's major literary centers. Beyond this, the analysis engages with broader questions of how national identities activate and articulate themselves within distinct value systems.

Camaj succeeds in discovering—more precisely, in gradually uncovering—the originality of his poetry by cultivating two fields simultaneously: modern European poetry and early Albanian literature [11] His poetic language and expressive system, within which, metaphor, symbolism, and abstraction operate—rise to a high level, while the lexical material is reduced in favor of semantic richness and expressive intensity. Through transposition, confrontation, and contrast of specific phenomena, sensations, and meanings, the author creates a unique and complex reality [12]

We begin by identifying key thematic and stylistic convergences that elucidate the affinity between Camaj and Italian Hermeticism:

1. The Concealed Essence of Reality. Camaj's poetics align with the Hermetic impulse to eschew straightforward representation in favor of revealing the deeper, often unconscious dimensions of being. In this vein, the poet's quest centers on distilling the "essential word" — stripped of rhetorical ornamentation and sentimentality — restoring language to a primordial, generative state capable of forging an intimate ontological link between being and phenomena. The poet functions as an intermediary, illuminating the hidden existential roots that underlie surface reality.

In the Shade of Things

In the shade this afternoon where I took my rest

I plucked a blade of grass in my thoughts.

The night crickets are chirping.

Near the hearth I hear the pods

Of ginestra

Bursting in my breast. [13]

2. The Cognitive and Suggestive Power of Language. The highly subjective language encouraged innovation in literary language and content. The cryptic brevity, obscurity, and involution of the Hermetics has influenced in poems such as *Trajta* (*The Form*), Camaj echoes the linguistic economy and evocative density of Ungaretti, underscoring the word's intrinsic potency.

Like Quasimodo, Camaj revives archaisms and archaic lexical forms, integrating them syntactically to assert the word's resilience and dignity amidst social flux. This lexical reclamation signals a form of cultural resistance and continuity.

This exemplifies a principle articulated by Camaj in his poem *Trajta* ("The Form"): *A featherlight pen in appearance / but heavy as iron in weight / tone or hue / cleared up to the light.*

3. A North-Central-South Symbiosis. Camaj's identity as a highlander poet finds resonance with Quasimodo's Sicilian origins and Montale's evocative attachments to childhood landscapes, despite their respective migrations within Italy. This triadic geographic consciousness manifests in Camaj's work as a literary symbiosis linking northern Albanian motifs with southern Italian sensibilities, articulating themes of nostalgia and cultural displacement.

4. Themes of Solitude, Suffering, and Mortality. The Hermetic preoccupations with existential pain and the interplay between transient and eternal realities permeate Camaj's oeuvre, mirroring Ungaretti's *Il Dolore* ("Pain") and recurring in poems such as *The Lichen*, *Loneliness*, and *The Loneliness of the Southerner in the North*. A comparative reading of *The Buried Poet* and *Far from those who speak like me* reveals intricate correspondences and thematic continuities. Camaj lived far from those "who speak like him"; therefore, in his poetic reality, solitude, love, and wandering are intertwined and unified [12]
5. Other thematic resonances. Evocative Lyric Imagery of the country. The poets' use of concise lyric stanzas produces vivid, emblematic landscapes—whether the islands and seas of Quasimodo or the ancient cities suffused with history and myth in Camaj's *There as Before the Tribes Came*. This corresponds to similar thematic resonances in D'Annunzio's *Il nome (Alcyone)*, underscoring a shared poetic lineage of place as evocative signifier.
6. Illumination Emerging from Darkness. Its initial leader was Ungaretti, in his first volume of poems, *Il porto sepolto* (1916; "The Buried Port"), Ungaretti introduced an intense, purified sort of short lyric, from which punctuation, syntax, and structure had been eliminated to stress the evocative power of individual words. Montale (with *Ossia di seppia*, 1925; "Cuttlefish Bones") and later Quasimodo (with *Acque e terre*, 1930; "Waters and Lands") became his disciples. Ungaretti's *Sentimento del tempo* (1933; "The Feeling of Time") had an obscurity and abstruse symbolism that caused the critic Francesco Flora to name the movement, in a series of essays collected as *La poesia ermetica* (1936).
A fundamental Hermetic motif, especially in Ungaretti, is illumination as revelation emerging from the "dark sprouting" of the self. Camaj internalizes this dialectic within the chaotic microcosm of the individual, articulating a dynamic interplay of shadow and light that engenders creative transformation and ontological discovery, exemplified in poems such as *The Found Thread*.
7. Stylistic Features: Analogical Shifts and the Dissolution of Logical Syntax. Hermetic poetics employ analogy as a tool to render the inexpressible, producing "lightning" effects through metaphorical precision. Camaj's poems such as *A Bird Laments* and *The Old Deer* demonstrate a fluid crossing of dimensional boundaries, evoking a shared ontological space closely connected to Montale's *You*, where identity is fractured and interpenetrated.

*When they slew it, the shepherds pried its eyes open
And saw in the pupils
The reflection of many deer drinking water from the stream.*² [10]

This analogical free movement disrupts conventional syntactic logic, advancing a more essentialist, concentrated poetic form.

3.8. Transformations, Originality, and the Question of Artistic Identity

1. Camaj's originality resides not in the novelty of themes, which often mirror those of Italian Hermeticists but in the distinctive tonal and affective registers through which he articulates ineffable experiences. His poetic voice reveals a secretiveness and introspection unique to his cultural and existential position.
2. Camaj transcends the isolating typical melancholy of Hermeticism by embracing illumination and positing human reason as embedded within a greater, often elusive reality that defies purely rational or conceptual apprehension.
3. After World War II all three of Hermeticism's major poets developed their own individual styles: Ungaretti incorporating more structure, and a more straightforward tone; Montale moving in the direction of greater human warmth and simplicity and Quasimodo writing powerful, socially committed works.
Camaj persisted in the introverted, formalized Hermetic style, but its great poets had already passed on to work that was more universal than simply influenced. Whereas Ungaretti's tone is tense, Quasimodo's vibrant, and Montale's rhythmic, Camaj's poetic voice is characterized by an inward steadiness and contemplative stability.

² *The shepherds abandoned the alpine pastures
For the warmth of the lowland valleys,
Sauntering down the trails, talking loudly
About women and laughing
Beside the water of the stream bubbling forth
From well to well.*

*The old deer raised its head from the scorched earth
And observed the pale foliage. Then
It departed to join its sons,
They too with their minds on the does.*

*Broken, it too abandoned the alpine pastures and followed
The merry murmur of the stream below, a fiery arrow,
The wanderer in search of warmer pastures and winter grass
Which it will never touch!*

*When they slew it, the shepherds pried its eyes open
And saw in the pupils
The reflection of many deer drinking water from the stream.*

4. Embedded within his work is a profound connection to the Albanian cultural and geographic milieu—most notably the Dukagjin Highlands—which serves as a mythopoetic backdrop evoking stoicism, endurance, and elemental existence. This “exile within exile” informs an artistic construction of refuge and resistance, as epitomized in poems like *Mountain Feast*, whose stark simplicity conveys monumental tragedy.
5. Camaj’s poetic evolution renews Albanian tradition by filtering and enriching it through the search for a purified word and innovative musicality. He challenges the “sluggishness” and conventional musicality of traditional verse, instead forging a coherent, evocative poetic fabric where every image and impression is meticulously calibrated. His oeuvre reflects a subjective journey shaped by individual psychology, talent, and a profound engagement with the spirit of his cultural and existential environment.

Hermetic Traces in Martin Camaj’s Poetic Voice. Ultimately, Camaj’s engagement with Italian Hermeticism should be understood not as mimicry but as a dialogical matching of worldviews and a path toward articulating a deeply personal poetics. His work exemplifies a laconic, essentialist wisdom reminiscent of highlander cultural modes while simultaneously transcending geographic and cultural boundaries.

His poetry emerges as a site of continuous exchange between universal aesthetic principles and local cultural ferment, asserting a cosmopolitan intercultural awareness grounded in a resilient ethnic core.

3.9. *The Symbolic and Poetic Weight of the “City of Millions” (Munich)*

Here we are focusing particularly on the broader opposition between South and North, tradition and modernity, myth and industrial civilization.

The dualities like North vs. South, tradition vs. modernity, and myth vs. rationalism are not just geographical or external; they are internalized by the poet and articulated through symbolic imagery across his poetry, particularly in poems such as *The Bee in the North*, *Between Two Worlds*, *The Loneliness of the Southerner in the North*, *That Mountain of Ice Divides Time* and *The Legend of Shota*.

3.10. *Munich As “The City of Millions”: Symbolic Space and Cultural Displacement*

The analysis now in this section identifies Munich as a crucial yet ambiguous site in Camaj’s imagination. It functions not only as a physical location where he worked, studied, and ultimately lived but as a symbolic urban epicenter, embodying both the progress and alienation of Western civilization.

The analyze by his critic and friend Arshi Pipa’s reading of *The Bee in the North* suggests that Camaj’s poetic production in Munich is shaped by solitude, intellectual rigor, and an almost monastic withdrawal—conditions likened to a monk’s dedication to manuscript preservation [14] This metaphor captures the tension between spiritual persistence and cultural estrangement. Furthermore, Munich becomes paradigmatic of the “northern city” archetype: it is simultaneously attractive and spiritually inhospitable, a theme that echoes through European modernist literature.

3.11. *The City as Myth and Modernity: Tension and Temporality*

The *City* in Martin Camaj poetry is interpreted through an archetypal lens—both as a site of civilization’s pinnacle and a space of existential dissonance. The invocation of dual classical definitions of the *City* (as both a refuge and a hostile structure) gestures toward a timeless philosophical conflict about urbanity, one that Camaj allegorizes in his poetic form.

This duality is sharpened by drawing in *The Legend of Shota*, which acts as a bridge between ancient myth and modern fragmentation. The poem is not merely a folkloric retelling but a structure of internal conflict that mirrors broader civilizational contradictions between harmony with nature (the River Drin) and the controlling grasp of industrial modernity (the “Man of earth”).

The Legend of Shota is a dramatic model rather than a purely lyrical or narrative one. This framing allows us for a deeper understanding of how internal tensions—between desire and duty, memory and progress are not resolved but dramatized in dialogic form. The poem’s structure is thus likened to a symbolic microcosm of the poet’s broader civilizational and existential stance.

The analysis points to three interpretive layers of conflict in *Shota*:

- The individual’s emotional dilemma between spaces and times
- The poet’s existential positioning between cultures, and
- The metaphysical struggle of humanity between mythical harmony and civilizational exhaustion which aligns Camaj with thinkers like Eliot and Milosz, for whom modernity signals both decay and the necessity of renewal.

Thus, the mythic structures in Martin Camaj’s poetry, especially in *The Legend of Shota* are not simply residues of folkloric tradition but serve as deep allegories of the exilic condition. Camaj, like other modernist writers shaped by geographic and cultural dislocation, turns to myth as a narrative structure that accommodates contradiction, multiplicity, and ambivalence—core elements of the exilic self.

Drawing on Edward Said’s seminal notion of *contrapuntal reading*, we may interpret Camaj’s poetic voice as one that simultaneously holds together the homeland and the host land, the past and the present. Said writes that “exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience... it is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place.” Camaj’s use of myth—especially in its structurally unresolved form—mirrors this very rift [15] *The Legend of Shota* can be read as a contrapuntal myth: one narrative unfolding in the symbolic register of Albanian cultural memory, and the other shadowed by the modern ruptures of Western industrial civilization.

Similarly, Paul Ricoeur’s concept of *narrative identity*—the idea that we construct ourselves through the stories we tell and inherit—offers a valuable lens. In Camaj’s poetry, myth becomes a vessel for transmitting *memory-as-identity*, a means

of “emplotting” the discontinuities of exile into something tentatively whole. The persistent tension in his work between the South and the North, the organic and the technological, the native and the foreign, are not merely dualistic structures but expressions of an identity in permanent narrative reconstruction. Ricoeur’s dialectic between *idem* (sameness) and *ipse* (selfhood) resonates here: Camaj is the same poet shaped by his cultural origins, yet also perpetually reinterpreting himself through the migratory experience.

Further deepening this poetics is Julia Kristeva’s reflection on the *stranger within*, where exile is not just geographical but ontological. For Kristeva, the exile or *étranger* embodies a psychic doubleness—the capacity to dwell between languages, cultures, and symbolic orders. In this light, Camaj’s mythic figures (like Shota) are not merely cultural archetypes but internal figures of a subject negotiating split allegiances—between the “waters” of origin and the “earth” of foreign settlement, between the maternal homeland and the rationalized West [16]

Thus, the mythic structures in Camaj’s poetry serve as what Ricoeur [17] might call “narrative frameworks of mourning and hope”—ways of preserving memory while making loss bearable. This mythic-dramatic model allows Camaj to poeticize the *fractured time-space of exile* without resorting to closure. Instead, he stages a “drama” of unresolved tensions, wherein the self remains suspended between desire for rootedness and the inevitability of transformation.

This is a recurring theme of memory and return, a longing for the “organic civilization” lost to modern fragmentation. In this regard, Camaj emerges not merely as a poet of exile but as a *poet of civilization*, using the tools of folklore, archetype, and linguistic preservation to resist the homogenizing pressures of Western modernity.

By relocating fragments of Albanian cultural memory into a Germanic landscape, Camaj performs an act of poetic transhumance: carrying the south to the north, the past into the present. The house and Camaj’s life in the Bavarian Alps is a symbolic reconstruction of Kosovo, Dukagjin, and Arbëresh culture, which confirm that exile, for Camaj, became a constructive, not destructive, condition.

3.12. The Question of Balance and Resolution

His wife Erika Camaj living today, more than 30 years after he passed away, in the very house, in the Bavarian Alps does not offer a simplistic resolution to the poet’s existential and poetic tensions. Rather, she suggests [9] that Camaj cultivated a form of internal balance, a harmonizing of the intellectual, private, and poetic self. This is subtly contrasted with the unresolved tensions in his work, suggesting that while his poetry thrives on contradiction, his life sought synthesis.

Camaj assertion - “We are a European people” - is not a politically used but it is a civilizational thesis. It positions Albanian identity within the European tradition while recognizing the historical ruptures that have obscured this continuity. Camaj, both in life and literature, becomes a mediator of this European-Albanian synthesis.

4. Conclusion

Camaj’s oeuvre enacts a poetic transhumance, carrying cultural memory across geographies and generations. His work resists closure, instead dramatizing the tensions between tradition and modernity, homeland and hostland, selfhood and estrangement.

Martin Camaj’s poetic and intellectual legacy offers a profound meditation on exile, memory, and cultural regeneration. His work resists simplistic binaries: between homeland and diaspora (from the mountainous landscapes of Dukagjin to the cosmopolitan intellectual centers of Europe), tradition and modernity, solitude and synthesis and instead, constructs a polyphonic vision of identity, a layered form of belonging that is both rooted and cosmopolitan, fractured and resilient.

Camaj’s poetry operates as a complex semiotic puzzle that intertwines natural and cultural elements to exemplify how poetry, when rooted in cultural specificity yet open to cosmopolitan influence, can articulate complex experiences of displacement, identity, and historical rupture through themes of survival and belonging, carrying the South into the North, the ancestral into the modern, the fragmented into the whole. This duality is not a flaw but a defining feature of his aesthetic: contradiction becomes a generative force, and fragmentation a site of poetic reconstruction.

His use of multiple dialects, symbolic imagery, and evocative contrasts creates a rich, open-ended narrative inviting continuous exploration and interpretation.

Through poetic innovation and hermetic resonance, Camaj not only preserves but revitalizes the spiritual and mythic substratum of his native tradition. His body of work constructs a lyrical cartography of exile that speaks to both the continuity and fragmentation of Albanian cultural memory.

His work deserves a central place in both Albanian and comparative literary studies for its singular ability to transform loss and longing into aesthetic vision.

Through all this, Camaj emerges not only as a poet of exile but as a poet of civilization, whose verse offers a resilient model of cultural continuity.

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