

THE MINISTRY OF NATIONAL EDUCATION
„1 DECEMBRIE 1918” UNIVERSITY, ALBA IULIA
THE PHYLOLOGY DOCTORAL SCHOOL

**OCTAVIAN PALER – A TRIP TO THE LABYRINTH
OF AN ASSUMED SOLITUDE**

SCIENTIFIC COORDINATOR:

PH.D. UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR: CONSTANTIN CUBLEȘAN

PH.D. STUDENT:

VÎRTAN (PLEȘA) MARIANA SIMONA

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-MONOGRAPHIE -

ABSTRACT

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Octavian Paler is one of the personalities of the Romanian cultural and social space, who has laid his life under the vibrant aura of a solitary adventure, by means of which, this *caminante*, cognitive and deep, has left to his successors, an interesting and unique lesson about how to live in the turmoil of a world, the impetuous unfolding of which amplifies, endlessly, the struggles of the soul. A world that has motivated, at the same time, the aspiration towards escaping from the negative constraints of the historical and geographical time, determining it to turn towards the loneliness that creates freedom, the nature of a confessional and contemplative spirit by definition. Loneliness and isolation, while in the middle of the people around, become attributes of this conscience that lives according to the values. I haven't met Octavian Paler as people meet, face to face, because his time and mine haven't crossed paths, although I would have liked enormously to have this honor, but I have met him through his writings, his TV or press appearances, a file of existence that incites by means of its charming and captivating complexity. Even such an encounter gives you the possibility to change something in the way in which life can be seen, understood and built, to a degree that allows us to have time for everything, before we die. My Ph.D. thesis is about this encounter: Octavian Paler – *Călătorie în sânul unei singurătăți asumate* (A trip to the core of an assumed loneliness). A trip I have taken together with the author, in order for us to find, to understand and to analyze the meanings of this *decatalogue of the waiting* within the loneliness and to complete the paradox of our times with other countervailing realities of the existential normality, the focus of which is always represented by the being who tries to regain its sacredness. The *topic* of this paper work is a confirmation of this option to see the world, following the path, no detours, towards the self-withdrawal. And such a complex and challenging world could only have unfolded and could only have been rebuilt, as a whole, within the context of an extensive monographic work. The idea of such a paper work seemed interesting, although, at first sight, it could make anyone exclaim, expectedly, "Another monographic work?" We ought to give a short, sharp and ironic answer to this question: „Yes. Why not?" We will try to provide a pertinent justification, necessary in order to clarify the importance of creating this paper work and the reasons that led

us to writing it. Many writers, both among the old and the contemporary ones, have been the topic, throughout time, of critical, interpretative or historical-literary monographic works. An overview of all the levels that build the entirety of such a research, requested by both types of monographic works, becomes a challenge that never ceases to show, beyond its Sisyphean side, engaging the cumulative gain of approaching the argument from many points of view, a sure instauration within what Lucian Blaga called the Luciferian knowledge. The monographic view throws upon a writer the hegemony of the overall research, entailing a close vigilance of the emotions, of the acts of life, of his/her relationships with the world around, of the thinking's corollary, of the symptomatology of the writings. The monographic work becomes thus an authentic statement of finding the connection between the man – writer with his work, with the social, historical and cultural period of time he lives in, with posterity then and a quicksand context as well, as soon as the absence of the writer from the real life implies the impossibility to confirm or disconfirm the substantiality and truthfulness of the things written about him/her and his/her work. And the one who begins this approach is forced to acknowledge the symbolic difficulty of such an excursus and to undertake, at the same time, the courage to let the stone of the searches roll endlessly from the top of the mountain, just as Sisyphus teaches us. It is the only possibility to rebuild *hic et nunc* an overview, in which, the existential epiphanies mingle in a guided and controlled manner, with the period of time he/she belongs to, which he/she lives and which lives him/her alike. Even if this kind of literary writing, methodologically diversified and renewed, focuses on the texts written by the author and on his biography, the monographic work becomes important and causes interest when the two preconditions creating it are treated equally.

Our research is not the first monographic writing about this *uomo universale*. Prior to this research, other monographic studies have appeared or which follow closely the characteristics and guidelines set out by such a paper work and we mention, among all these studies, as examples, the Ph.D. thesis of Mrs. Cristina-Eugenia Burtea-Cioroianu, *Octavian Paler – Studiu monografic (Monographic Study)*, which has been published by the Aius Publishing House from Craiova, in 2012, the Ph.D. thesis of Ph.D. assistant professor Cristina-Eugenia Mitrică, *Octavian Paler: Studiu monografic (Monographic Study)*, coordinated by

Professor, Ph.D. Marin Beșteliu, (Craiova, 2009), the Ph.D. thesis of Mrs. Lidia Ghiulai, *Octavian Paler între autobiografie și mitologie (Octavian Paler between autobiography and mythology)*, (2014) coordinated by Professor Ph.D. Ion Simuț or the Ph.D. thesis of Mrs. Judit-Mária Szilágyi-Szövérfi, *Octavian Paler: Conștiință și scriitură – Monografie (Conscience and writing – Monographic work)*, (2016), coordinated by Professor Ph.D. Cornel Moraru and by Professor Ph.D. Iulian Boldea.

However, we have no information about the existence of a comprehensive study in which, a descriptive, an interpretative and an analytical approach exist, meant to probe from the esthetic, meta-textual and contextual point of view the entire existence and activity of Octavian Paler, the writer and the man. Thus, we believe we are lucky to be able to pave the way towards carrying out such a comprehensive work. We are not saying that this paper work manages to fully comprise the life, the emotions, the thoughts, in and out the scene of the Romanian cultural, political, literary, social and publishing space that the author activates during his weighty years of life, because this is not our goal and we could never exhaust all the relevant facts of his acts of life or of his work.

The novelty of the research, as compared to the works we have mentioned dealing with the same topic, is brought precisely by the attempt to rebuild the image of a universe in which all the areas of interest involving the author, subject to a careful study, are re-engaged, in an undeniable balance, within five different chapters: his biography, his literary debut through poetry, definitely placed under the sign of the dismissed oath, the literary glory achieved through his travel diary: *Drumuri prin memorie. Egipt (Travels through the memory, Egypt)*. *Grecia (Greece)*, *Drumuri prin memorie. Italia (Travels through the memory, Italy)* or *Caminante*, key elements of the essayistic prose, the relationship with the mythology, the space for escaping from the day-to-day life towards the knowledge, Paler-style novel and finding his own self and last, but not least, the tumultuous period before and after the communist one, connected with the tough realities of the censorship, face to face with the courage of saying the truth about the deadlocked and silent world. The documentation related to the paper work is integrated in the contents of a comprehensive bibliography. The second part of the study, attached in the annexes, emerges as a close research, a creative and pertinent one, of a few of the most important points which, more or less involved in the author's life, have had a decisive impact on his destiny.

The paper work claims its *originality* and *creativity* due to the attempt to combine the hermeneutical research, activated by means of the point by point and step by step splitting of the ideas, of the topics and cognitive-affective substrate or even pragmatic ones that the writer's work combines, following a *close-reading*, essential method of the modern criticism that has given us the possibility to find ourselves in the sophisticated gear of the compensating spaces by means of which the author provides his readers with his own interiority, based on an ontological picture that obliges everybody to a game of the adaptive movements.

Thus, the paper work achieves its *double importance*. On one hand, it probes the existence of the writer, addressing the actual documenting, in libraries, archives or "on the field" and, on the other hand, it activates the penetration deep inside his soul, reflected in the impetuous unfolding of his work, which has become the object under a special analysis that implied the connection to the principles of different, innovative and interesting methodologies, part of the literary study field. Seen from this point of view, the paper work may be considered not only a *current* one, but it also makes it possible for the favorable counter-point encounter of the two approaches to take place, the modern approach and the traditional one, which, paradoxically, find an interlock usefulness inside it.

It is also true that about the complex personality of Octavian Paler, the man and the writer, this is the only way we can talk. His biography becomes amazing if it is tightly connected to his work. We can only talk about him as an accomplished and complete whole. Both become memorable if Paler, the man, is placed in front of them and everything that his being represents, in relation to the world he has tried to fix through his words, getting it near, little by little, to perfection.

From a *subjective perspective*, this topic urges for reflection, for searching and analyzing the emotions, the feelings, the beliefs, the fears, the un-fulfillment and even the hopes of Paler, the man. Seen and analyzed, in an objective key, the topic proposes the attempt to place Octavian Paler where he actually belongs, on the main floor, in the acknowledged gallery of the really important writers of the Romanian literature, on the highest step of the political-social-cultural life of Romanian, during his eighty years of existence. The title of the paper work proposes a

wide opening towards all the reading scales, in the attempt to subscribe to an attitudinal model that abounds with topic, style and discourse diversity.

The purpose of the research is that of presenting all the aspects stating that Octavian Paler is a reference system for the literature, for the social, the cultural and even the political space. The ideas gathered under this topic band together in order to be able to provide, this way, an objective image, woven by means of the approach of the human profile data combined with the esthetic profile data, which is somehow different, vibrant and impossible to exceed or equal. Thus, the paper work materializes in a successful approach meant to bring together sequential information, critical articles, opinions and analyses, which, put together, would trigger an encounter of all the dimensions of the Palerian human: the life, the social, the politics, the literature and the creation, in all its splendor. The paper work consists of five chapters divided in such a way as to be able to highlight separately, but also together, its key-points.

Chapter 1, suggestively entitled *The Biographic Experience* organizes the life events and moments and the activity of Octavian Paler and his being acknowledged as a visible and indispensable mark within the Romanian space, for eight decades. An imaginary stroll through Lisa, the protective topos during his childhood, the cradle of longing during his adolescence and a *locus amoenus* of his senescence, built from a mix of objectivity and subjectivity, the mark of a narrator who combines the valences of the *heterodiegetic* and those of the *homodiegetic* as well. Leaving this paradise, an Ithaca for which, just as Ulysses, he always had a deep and heavy longing, triggered in the young man's conscience once he forcedly left for Bucharest to carry out his studies, a moment evoked within his work called *Viața ca o coridă (Life as a corida)*. The work remakes the „self-portrait” of the author, fragmentary dissipated in his other writings, as if gathering, under the corida harsh metaphor, the experience of living: a conglomerate in which, the literary autobiography, the confession, the conscience, the honesty, the past and the present, the spiritual or social ascension, the memory, the writing or the subconscious mingle in an inexhaustible way, just as many facets of the composition of the self, which the author uses while trying to create the writer's profile, exponent of the 60s generation. The same chapter highlights the tribulations of the physical disease, engaged in a confessional discourse, in which, the story-telling goes through the last identification of the self

with the origin, with the present moment and with the confrontation of the end. The actor experiments and relives, in an assumed manner, the Epicurean drunkenness of the senses when the self-existential meanings slip in a disconcerting manner towards the childhood he spent at the foothills of the Făgăraș Mountains, in the Lisa village and then resignedly slip towards the Bucharest urban atmosphere, which stills his childhood from him, irrepressibly, establishing the forced adolescence upon the first years of school and high-school.

Chapter 2, entitled *Placing the "Creation vs. Life" Idea in Asceticism*, presents the early evolution, but also the literary apogee of the author, by addressing a series of key moments without which this evolution would not have been that interesting: the oath he had enunciated in his youth, along with the loss of the manuscripts and the late breach of it, an opportunity for the appearance of the first poetry book *Umbra cuvintelor (The Shadow of the Words)*. We intended to identify the recurrent topics and motives of Paler's poetry, trying a brief analysis of the poems as well – lyrical definitions. This uncouth beginning will be subsequently overcome by the following writings, the travel diaries and the essays, allowing the writer to achieve the literary glory. We have carried out herein an intra-textual and meta-textual analysis of the three travel volumes, through which we have come to know the locations described, not from a traveler's perspective, but even more than that, from that of the bookish reminiscences: *Drumuri prin memorie. Egipt (Travels through the memory, Egypt)*, *Grecia (Greece)*, *Drumuri prin memorie. Italia (Travels through the memory, Italy)* and *Caminante*. Beside the mentioned volumes, we bring into discussion, by means of the filters of the same analysis, the following works: *Scrisori imaginare (Imaginary letters)*, *Polemici cordiale (Cordial Polemics)*, *Aventuri solitare (Solitary Adventures)*, *Un muzeu în labirint (A History in a Labyrinth)*, *O istorie subiectivă a autoportretului (A subjective History of the Self-portrait)*, *Eul detestabil. O istorie subiectivă a autoportretului (The Abhorrent Self. A Subjective History of the Self-portrait)*, *Rugați-vă să nu vă crescă aripi (Pray so You Don't Get Wings)*, *Apărarea lui Galilei (Defending Galilei)* and *Autoportret într-o oglindă spartă (Self-portrait in a Broken Mirror)*.

Chapter 3, entitled *The Mythology and the Road Back to Rediscovering the Existential Condition* rebuilds, within its content, the world in which Paler found a refuge

during his adolescence, the world of mythology. This land, widely researched and closely known, will make it possible for him to detach himself from the space of the Bucharest boarding school space, in which the eleven-year-old boy sees himself abandoned to and which encapsulated the humility feeling in his heart and that of the rancor, deepening the split within the interiorization abyss, the withdrawal away from the world, a loneliness that he assumed as his guide, companion and emotion, in a world in which it was impossible for him to integrate. As a consequence, settling in the other space, of the mythical, allows him to survive in a place where he does not fit in, where he feels like a stranger as he confesses, many times, in his writings. The nostalgia emerging around this dual world becomes much more serious once the Palerian question arises: Why is the world not capable anymore of creating myths?

Chapter 4, entitled *The Book of the Authorial Sincerity. The Palerian Novel*, is built on the analysis of the two Palerian novels: *Viața pe un peron (Life on a Railway Station Platform)* and *Un om norocos (A Lucky Man)*. These works sum up the ways in which the human being related to a series of unrests, dominated above all, almost in an ostentatious manner, by fear and, even more than that, by death. The two novels talk about the moral condition of the human being in a stand-by mode and loneliness, through the eyes of a history professor, whose experience is a consequence of a long string of failures and who retreats in a deserted railway station, where he tries to save himself. The other character in *Un om norocos (A Lucky Man)*, Daniel Petric, a different kind of loser, but "luckily" retired in a retirement home, reformulated the same image of retreating in front of confinement, of terror, of error and of injustice as well.

The last chapter, entitled *The Nostalgia of the Lost Humanity. Before and After December 1989*, renders the tormented period of time of the communism and censorship, but also the events that see Octavian Paler in the spotlight of the written media, television and political stage. Settled under Don Quixote's sign, permuted in the post-communism East, the author memorizes the image of Bucharest, which had become a space that was rejecting the dreamers wrongly placed in the world of the total denial. The other volume analyzed within this chapter, *Vremea întrebărilor. Cronică morală a unui timp plictisit de morală (Question Time. The Moral Chronicle of a Moral Bored Time)* is the confession-book of a "moral bored" time,

based on which, the author and along with him the reader as well claim certain questions as a consequence of the change that the 1989 revolution had promised to the new society through the sacrifice of the dead ones. The questions elaborated within this book serve, all of them, the same reality of that period of time, which had proved to be contrary to the expectations and the aspirations of the oppressed ones, who had been subject to the tortures and the terror staged by the regime. The entire book is impregnated with such articles, in which Octavian Paler is the journalist, the writer and the moralist, writing as a man who had faced history, living it, living the moments he writes about, which he accuses and defends, meeting people around whom he had created true metaphysical auras when people around him, most of them with no right, tried to distort their activity and their life in order to silence them, people around whom he had not been able to spend more than a moment, sensing or proving chameleonic, burlesque or even abject characters. He had met people extremely similar to I.L. Caragiale's characters, demagogues and cowards, but he had met beautiful, respectable and honest characters as well. Together with all these people, he had lived the reality of changing times, a long-expected change, but which proved to be a faithful copy of the past.

The second part of the paper work, attached to the annexes, gathers a series of information meant to complete the spiritual and civic profile of Octavian Paler, the man, hosting, at the same time, a field diary carried out in the first point, with a strong role within the process of becoming a great writer and a man of culture – his native village, Lisa.

The otherness image of Octavian Paler is that of a withdrawn personality, retired in solitude, as the author himself confesses, but he often used be seen outside this comfort area, blaming, accusing and justifying the existence's tangled algorithms. Just as a "hired spectator", he talked about the turmoil of a world he used to describe as seriously in trouble, deeply shaken, either by the social realities or by the political or social-cultural ones, in a context that was clearly connected to honesty and transparency. Our research has followed closely, while analyzing the trip within the assumed solitude, the connotations, the truth, the expectations, the regrets, the fears imprinted in his entire existence: "the meaning of life is the life itself".

Key words: monographic work, biography, loneliness, corida, communism, Lisa, myths, desert, cordial polemics, Sisyphus, Icarus, Oedipus, Don Quixote, anti-traveler, *România liberă*, desolation, old age, death, love, life, destiny, travel, Sphynx, pyramids, Greece, Italy, Spiru Haret, censorship, Olympus, Galileo Galilei, revoked oath, parable, self-portrait, labyrinth, memory.