# PAGES OF BIOGRAPHIC LITERATURE IN THE VOLUME OF OCTAVIAN PALER LIFE AS A BULLFIGHT

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*Abstract: The volume Life as a Bullfight is almost an autobiographical novel, of the author's self-definition and spiritual self-definition and contains important biographical elements in the evolution of the personality of the writer Octavian Paler and it is precisely this that makes it more interesting. This book, as well as almost all the work of the author, contains disturbing pages about the myth of village and childhood, built on the edge of the essay. It is an important book in his becoming a writer because here are mentioned the significant moments that have put him face to face with literature, for the experiences of Octavian Paler's initiation in literature are ways in which destiny makes his presence felt. Octavian Paler's confession in this autobiographical volume focuses more on the development of an epic thread of memory, the circumstances in which facts and people have one way or another marked his existence. Life as a Bullfight is a dense book, strongly motivated, and because epic fiction and ideas linking the texture of the text appear biographically conditioned. The author is at that moment of his life where he can look somewhat detached at the stages of his becoming, deformed only by the passage of time and his sensitivity contaminated by culture.*

*Keywords: autobiography, confession, essay, memory, Octavian Paler*

## INTRODUCTION

The most significant moments in the life and work of Octavian Paler, with emphasis on the biographical elements, important for his later evolution, are widely treated in his books: *Life as a Bullfight*, *Desert Forever* and *Self–Portrait in a Broken Mirror*. Almost an autobiographical novel, of the characterological and spiritual self-definition is *Life as a Bullfight* (1987).

Thus, the writer's "obsession with the mountains, for example, is more defining, (...) than many other biographical details. (...) the mountains were my first teacher of morals and aesthetics. (...) This is the reason why, before seeing in my love for the mountains a virtue, I see a luck in it. In our region, the land is fertile and rough. It does not allow to cheat on the effort or just imitate it. It is from there that the respect, a cetain stubbornness, a pride resistant to disappointments and accomplice to melancholies probably spring. My weaknesses belong to me."[1] The author's writings will extensively develop from his deep-rooted belief in the land of Lisa, the writer's village from Ardeal, while his poetic soul will cyclically go through four distinct, emotional seasons: "(...) the summers embody the light of childhood and adolescence, the autumns the colour of departures, while winter belongs to the tombs, (both of my parents died in the winter); spring is neuter."[2]

In most of his essays, especially in *Life as a Bullfight*, are mentioned the significant moments that put the writer face to face with literature. The experiences of Octavian Paler's initiation in literature are ways in which fate makes its presence felt.

A literary biography contained by the pages of several books, where the writer's soul is skimmed through page by page. Such a book seems to be ***Life as a Bullfight***published in

[1] Adrian Păunescu, *Questionable Issues*, the fourth edition, added, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1979,pp. 384-385.
[2] *Ibidem*, p. 384.



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1987, that contains troubling pages on the myth of the village and childhood, comparable, as Constantin Coroiu noticed: " (...) only to those of *The Chronicle and Song of the Ages* by Lucian Blaga and *Life Like a Prey* by Marin Preda."[3] It is a kind of writing that is difficult to be associated with one genre or another, as it free of any canons or imposed exterior thematics. The author reconstitutes in the first person, in a calm manner, the itinerary of life that is subjected more to the happening than to destiny. Octavian Paler's confession focuses on the development of an epic thread of the memory, of the circumstances and people that left their mark upon his existence: "I suffer from an excess of memory, such as other people suffer from an excess of gastric acid. I always here steps behind me and I just cannot help remembering. I turn my head. All of a sudden, my eyes become impreganted with something unclear, and from this nebula, a smell, a sound, or a patch of road come back to life, things I thought I had completely forgotten and that the mysterious plottings of the subconscious reveal."[4] This confessive context, that gives emphasis to the key moments of his own existence, make us believe that we are the witnesses of an essayistic journal, mainly based on the problems of the self, on self–searching and the development of his literary vocation.

## BIOGRAPHY AND LITERATURE IN THE VOLUME OF OCTAVIAN PALER*LIFE AS A BULLFIGHT*

*Life as a Bullfight* is a complex book, strongly motivated, due to the fact that the epic fiction and the ideas that contribute to the harmony of the text are described as bigraphically interrelated. The author experiences now that moment of his life when he can look somehow detachedly at the stages of his evolution, distorted only by the passage of time and by his cultural sensitivity.

The style is that of the "imaginary letters," more precisely of a monologue wearing the mask of the dialogue. The writer permanently addresses somebody, an imaginary Marcellus, the character of his first novel, lost before being published and maybe before being finished. It was then that he had made the childish decision to never write again. "Similar to a curse, the self seems to be completely taken away by the act of writing, whereas in Octavian Paler's writing, the most rudimentary, simple aspects of reality pass into the imaginary sphere, the happenings are absorbed by the idea and the description by the essay. The author himself considers himself to be «a turning point man», that usually combines the unreal with the real elements, considering his illusions as authentic targets. We are not surprised by the fact that he feels both victim and symbol."[5]

Octavian Paler's book is similar to a balance whose ends bow to the past, to the magical Lisa, to his native village, to the school years, or to the writer's present, that we discover in a moment of essential interrogations, when he turns reality into abstractions. This fertile dialogue with the past is complemented with the imaginary contemplation – from multiple perspectives – of the Spanish phenomenon of the bullfight, as well as a series of the writer's revelatory dreams. This journal seems too poor in secret revelations, able to stir the reader's imagination. The writer prefers not to fill the space of remembrances with too many sensational facts or events, but to thoroughly investigate the depths of his own self. Whatever the descriptions he makes reference to or the events he writes about, we have got the feeling that he says the same thing, insisting on the same limited circle of his past. However, the simple objective description is counterbalanced by the intensity of personal undergoing, meant to confer the ideas and gestures that predominate in the text, something of the features of character specific to the writer himself: "(...) the man that makes confessions is a writer

[3] Constantin Coroiu, *Appeal to Memory* "Adevărul literar şi artistic," Year IX, no. 528, July 25, 2000, p. 5.
[4] Octavian Paler, *Life as a Bullfight*, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1987, p. 8.
[5] Cornel Moraru, *The Obsession of Credibility-Contemporary Prose Writers, Literary Critics and Essayists*, Didactical and Pedagogical Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996, p. 119.



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and the writer's life is, to a great extent, the life of his ideas and models. According to Valéry, the man who writes is never alone. Octavian Paler wants to demonstrate that the man that makes confessions, when he happens to be a writer, is supervised by myths and his character is actually his destiny. The *Autobiographical Pact*, mentioned by the narratologists, is dominated in Paler's confession by a *historical pact*, that is essentially a *moral pact*. Thus, the confession becomes a meditation on life, understood as a terrible confrontation, and on the responsibility of the individual forced to suggest a life model appropriate to oneself."[6]

Similar to Marin Preda in his autobiography entitled *Life as a Prey*, Octavian Paler is concerned with following the path of his spiritual development, giving shape to communication bridges between the past and the present, having the data of an existential matrix and the courage to take a look at himself and reveal himself in front of us "without further complaisances: " "(...) *Life as a Bullfight* is in a relation of synonymy with *Life as a Prey*; Octavian Paler provides extra features to the writer's profile, established by Marin Preda: the same obsession with the authenticity and the same avoidance of the plausible (the novel deals with) for truth decoding (the essential clause of the autobiographical pact). By these books, followed by *Saturday in the Afternoon* and *The Sunken Bell* by Valeriu Cristea and Livius Ciocîrlie, the contemporary literature resumes its relations with the tradition. *Life as a Bullfight* and *Life as a Prey* (these titles look very alike; any bullfight involves a prey: the bull and the matador!), are to be found at the end of a «series» that begins with the unknown Teodor Vîrnav and continues with Ion Creangă, Ibrăileanu, Sadoveanu, Iorga, Blaga."[7]

For Octavian Paler, destiny is closely related to his character, according to Heraclitus' statement, whereas life is "an accidental sum of details, a continuous improvisation between a birth and a death"[8], beyond which there is a logic, Ariadne's thread, that guides his path. The writer's stepping into life takes place together with his breaking with the idyllic universe called Lisa: "a place worthy of Hesiod's praise (...)"[9] and the penetration into a new world, that of Bucharest, where: "He generally spends his time between the library and and the street, without entirely belonging to any of them and without being able to give up on one or the other, as he finds it impossible to do that. (...) He is tempted to bet on both the books and life, having two altars and making two rows of offerings in order to obtain the feeling of fullness. (...) Everything happens as though he had two souls fighting each other. (...) Actually, only he knows how many prejudices dominate him, while he boasts with his freedom of mind"[10]. The arrival in the capital, at "Spiru Haret" highschool, depicts the author as "(...) a savage, doubled by a civilized man"[11], as: "Despite his loneliness, I have remained a social animal and I could not do without the effects and defects of civilization, to taste the delights of wilderness, considered by some people to be refined"[12]. "The flaws of civilization" were going to pave the way, according to the author's manner of relationg to the others, to history, for a series of classical reactions, such as mildness, self-control, retractility, outlining the inner mechanism of the innate moralist.

However, the state of contemplation and an inclination of the spirit towards the analytical side predominate in Paler's work, his sensations and concrete experiences being

[6] Eugen Simion, *The autobiographical pact, the moral pact*, "România literară," Year XXI, no. 8, Thursady, February 18, 1988, p. 10.
[7] Ioan Holban, *Octavian Paler: A Turning Point Man*, "Convorbiri literare," Year CXLI, no. 5 (137), May 2007, p. 45.
[8] Octavian Paler, *Life as a Bullfight*, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1987, p. 90.
[9] *Ibidem*, p. 144.
[10] *Ibidem*, pp. 151-152.
[11] *Ibidem*, p. 152.
[12] Idem.



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pushed to both the abstract and the general, and volatilized in lapidary and sentential considerations. Cutting a feather and his talent to bring forward the hidden core of phenomena, "to thoroughly investigate," to fill the blank spaces of the text with symbols, ecryptions, "lessons." The story of the writer's life can take the form of a fable with a moral content, which is only a decipherer of his own existential text. Octavian Paler does not narrate his life, but he analyzes it through the perspective of his times, of that absolute present, beyond the sentimentalism that characterizes him and the loneliness that has always haunted him: "The hazard has also given me the antidote of an abusive memory: a painful hunger for the present"[13].

Similar to a Roman speaker, speaking enthusiastically about his own life, trying to convince his listeners nut also himself about the straight or curved lines of his existence, Octavian Paler considers himself to range "among those writers that can only see the light by fumbling, approximating, closing his eyes in order to better distinguish the nuances, and that are faced with big difficulties if they want to study the truth in detail. Despite the differences between us, I probably resemble Cicero in one aspect,"[14] namely that he does not think himself capable of "such clarity. I resume my doubts, my uncertainties and fears with each of his books"[15] .

Actually, writing reprsented for the author "(...) the freest way of communication; the most appropriate way to speak up one's mind"[16], whereas literature "was an admirable citadel where I could freely meditate upon my foggy, unsafe projects of the future"[17].

The intersections between several episodes completely separated from the text's essence, in order to return to the details related to his own life, lead towards an apparent inconsistency and incoherence, but also to a certain charge of the epic plan with details on the *bullfight*, the trip to *Arcadia*, the visit to the *Parthenon*, etc, meant to divert the reader from the area of the autobiographical satiability: "The epic elements are few in *Life as a Bullfight*, the narrator constantly hurries in the esaay, so that it is easier to reconstitute from his book a life of ideas than a memorable biography."[18] Thus, the life's course of the one that had once been a child is predictable. He is ahard-working pupil, a student who attends three faculties and that audits the courses of George Călinescu and Tudor Vianu, writing secretely at night verses, essays and a novel that he loses, and that decides not to write literature until the age of 44. As a young man, he is tempted to write an essay on the "problems of the Tower of Babel"[19], a history of suicides and a "Rehabilitation of the Middle Ages," where he wanted to fight against the "prejudice according to which the Middle Ages is a thousand years night, interrupted by the dawn of Renaissance"[20].

The motto of Octavian Paler's life seems to be contained by Stendhal's words: "wish a lot, do not hope for too much, do not ask anything"[21]. His consciousness resembles that of a home-lover, that imagines life as a bullfight, although he confesses that he has never seen one: "I must mention that I have never seen a bullfight and I have not wished to see one, either. I wanted to know Spain because of other reasons, completely different from those related to tauromachy, namely in order to rebuild Don Quixote's route, but fate did not foresee this travel, probably the only travel I had longed for. (...) Theoretically speaking, I am

[13] Octavian Paler, *Life as a Bullfight*, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1987, p. 24.
[14] *Ibidem*, p. 313.
[15] *Ibidem*, p. 328.
[16] Octavian Paler, *Life as a Bullfight*, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1987, p. 295.
[17] Idem.
[18] Eugen Simion, *The Genres of the Biographical*, Univers Enciclopedic, Bucharest, 2002, p. 68.
[19] Octavian Paler, *Life as a Bullfight*, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1987, p. 294.
[20] *Ibidem*, pp. 297-298.
[21] *Ibidem*, p. 231.



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ready to accept the fact that there are analogies between a bullfight and an ancient tragedy, an idea very important for those in love with the bullfights, (Hemingway is not the only one that supports it), but my weaknesses would not have allowed me to do that, and I suspect they would not allow me now, either, to enter a real arena"[22].

The Iberian obsession with honour seems to have fascinated the writer devoted to myths and history. Unleashing the forces in the arena glowing with the looks of those that enjoy the scenes between the and the bull, is comparable to the fire of creation, projecting us in a game with ribbons coloured in shades of red and black, in an embracement of life and death: "In a bullfight, everything is woven by means of three threads of hemp, the Evil, Love and Death. There is no room for something else. Sincerity and the truth take the shape of a dramatic simplicity"[23]. Spain and the bullfight are just pretexts for the author willing to write about himself, the reflection covering entirely the external subject: "It is neither the itinerary, nor Don Quixote's achievements, but the bullfight that suggests the writer the parable of destiny."[24] The very name of the book, *Life as a Bullfight* is inspired by the discovery at a second-hand bookshop of a manual taht contained the rules of tauromachy. Octavian Paler manages to maintain a certain equilibrium between his bookish obsession related to Spain, the bullfight and the legendary toreadors and his own biography, making a natural transition from one to the other: Manuel Benítez, a Spanish boy, clang to the grid of an arena to witness a bullfight. Seeing him, the owner of the arena wanted to chase him away and, failing to do that, he threw him scornfully three «duro» coins. The boy descended, took the coins and threw them in his face: - One day, your arena will be overcrowded due to me! Manuel Benítez has become El Cordobés. There is among his trophies, one single photograph where he does not smile. (...) I also have a photo, about the same age. I do not smile, either"[25].

We can talk about the idea of a writer - toreador that instead of fighting against a bull, in his room full of books, (transfigured viewers), he fights against his own doubts, (as aggressive as a bull). The magic of bullfight resembles somehow the magic of literature, the typewriter being for Octavian Paler a weapon against the merciless passage of time, or perhaps a source of illusions such as those of the Knight of la Mancha: "Octavian Paler speaks convincingly, through the «limit-case» of the bullfight, about the risk and the bet of each creation: similar to the «art in the arena», writing «puts in question», «the life of the creator», his *conciousness*, more precisely. If during the fight, the prey is most often the bull, in front of the typewriter, but also in front of the spectators, more often than not, the victim is the matador: confession is a form of confrontation with equal chances between the «combatants» (narrator and reader), but also a relation of *mutual genesis*, as the one who makes confessions *needs* the confessor, he cannot do without him, both existing according to the laws of coexistence of the pearl and the shell. (...) A dense network of links is woven between the narrator and the matador, starting with the biography, with the first confrontation, when «the myth's shield breaks down», and ending with the fear that hides before the courage displayed by El Cordobes; the condition of the toreador is the same with that of the writer."[26]

The self-critical spirit characterizes the writer that always looks back *inside* himself, in a permanent standoff between what "is right to" and what "is not right to do," judging his own existence and behaviour, without hesitating to evaluate his flaws: "(...) I have done so

[22] *Ibidem*, pp. 39-41.
[23] *Ibidem*, p. 371.
[24] Constantin Coroiu, *The bullfight as a metaphor of the writer's existence*, "Adevărul literar şi artistic," Year V, no. 324, June 23, 1996, p. 4.
[25] Octavian Paler, *Life as a Bullfight*, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1987, p. 141.
[26] Ioan Holban, *Octavian Paler: A Turning Point Man*, "Convorbiri literare", Year CXLI, no. 5 (137), May 2007, p. 47.



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many things (...) that I should not have done. Sometimes I kept silent when I should have spoken up my mind. I found justifications when I did not have one. I went for a while by the highly questionable principle, according to which any happiness is good, just because it is superior to boredom and the void"[27].

The choice of the literary profession is not accidental, it is in complete resonance with the writer's nature: "I may have become a writer because, instinctively, acting in accordance with my deepest nature, I leaned towards a profession, due to which I always felt caught between Scylla and Charybda, I was never sure of anything and I could go on with the odyssey endlessly, still keeping a stake; or its illusion"[28]. The author's conception of life is that of a Stoic that increases his self–disappointment, with the serenity of the man who considers everything is natural. Although he denies his philosophical calling, Octavian Paler's moralism designates him as an authentic bearer, that he offers us in small doses, as the liquors contained by the little bottles with strong essences: "The bad committed by the supreme Good is not a reason to despise the good itself"[29]; "Destiny has no more power on a man who does not fear anymore (...)"[30]; "(...) the pain teaches us to suffer for another person, or, at least, not to despise her because she suffers"[31]; "Turmoil is not a virtue, even if it gave shape to values more important than the interior peace"[32]. This courage of the writer to appear before us by means of hos own limits, of his insufficiencies and weaknesses, aim not only at his personal, lucid and assumed ethical option, but also at the creator's relation to those he addresses himself to. The author becomes more credible in his quality as an unconceited man, purifying himself by a public confession, meant to gain the reader's trust.

The conscience of the classical writer feel obliged to resonate with the problems of his people, acquiring a political and moral identity, his literary preoccupations being doubled by the social ones. In fact, the struggle for the affirmation of the values, in a century dominated by dogmatism, also depends on the writer's actions beyond the writing table, at the visible level of the social. The art cannot remain impassible to the truth and justice and it cannot isolate itself in its ivory tower, without being forgotten: "A literature that would refuse any duty in the name of aesthetic purity, that would stop to be interested in the threshold between truth and lie, between justice and injustice, between the victim and the executioner, cannot fail to remind you talent is nothing else than the tool of the creator. It served sometimes only to the digging of a tomb. After everything that happened during this century, after so many crucifixions and traps, the issue concerned with the ethics in the field of art can no longer be reduced, in my opinion, to the famous warning according to which good feelings do bad literature. (...) indifference takes part in history, the freedom to be indifferent is nothing more than a more discreet manner of guilt. I find it difficult to believe that an artist that does not mistake the freedom of being indifferent for the freedom of creation does not care about the world he dreams in. He is also free to make his own choice"[33].

We notice in this book more than in others the writer's desire for ubiquity, that only the imaginary can fulfill, as this means to live in the present, always looking back on the past of his childhood, of his adolescence and of his stepping into life, relying on his precious memory: "There are, undoubtedly, happenings and experiences that can clearly notice only in our memories, with all the meanings, some of which we did not even suspect before. Remembrance is in that case a second life, compared to which the lived life seems to be a

[27] Octavian Paler, *Life as a Bullfight*, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1987, p. 341.
[28] *Ibidem*, p. 325.
[29] Octavian Paler, *Life as a Bullfight*, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1987, p. 346.
[30] *Ibidem*, p. 352.
[31] *Ibidem*, p. 354.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 355.
[33] *Ibidem*, p. 310.



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simple sketch"[34]. The author's desire to reconcile "the present with the past, his personal undergoing with that of mankind, the ordinary with the world of gods, the street with the library can be felt on each written page."[35]

His inner nature is reflected in his writings, as Narcissus' own image was reflected in the water of the fountain. The author of *Life as a Bullfight* writes "(...) about himself, thinking about Spain. He is writing about a lot of things, with a contagious vivaciousness, with an authentic talent – the words flow naturally, with irony, self-irony, they are pleasant, natural and neo bombastic -, about the village of his childhood, Lisa, about how his father had died, because he had not been administered antibiotics. Only those who had «voluntatirily» given their land to the communal ownership were entitled to antibiotics. He is also writing about how, during the war, when he was fifteen years old, he had fallen in love with a girl in the neighbouring village, «one year older than myself, that attended housekeeping courses in Sibiu». This short biography, against the background of a war the two adolescents were not interested in, but that made its presence felt somewhere at the end of the railways, is quite moving. This is also valid for the book's form, that is highly courageous: small digressive chapters, sometimes having a direct connection with Spain, (at one point, the author narrates truthfully, using a lot of details on the atmosphere specific to an imagined bullfight), that thread like the beads on the string and that catch the reader's attention not because of the Spanish subject, but of the story with a character in the make, of the bildungsroman with the little child of a very poor peasant that falls in love with a girl in his village, who is then hosted in Bucharest, in a small, cold chamber, together with a church singer in the neighbourhood, then at the internee of «Spiru Haret» High School, to finally turn into what we knew from the very beginning, more precisely a successful journalist, radio reporter, a traveller to foreign countries, although he was a home-lover, dreaming about the North Pole, although he likes summer and the smell of the herbs full of sap and especially to lie on the beach in Costineşti..."[36]

## CONCLUSION

Retrospectively, Octavian Paler's entire work is an uninterrupted diary, in whose mirror the writer's personality is reflected, not with a view to admiring himself narcissistically, but to getting an in-depth knowledge of himself.

There seems to be a real similarity at the level of ideas, that Ioan Holban has noticed, between the two writings: *Life as a Bullfight* and *Life as a Prey* by Marin Preda: "*Life like a Bullfight* unveils its distinct personality by the narrator's special manner of *feeling* the past (...), but that strikingly resemblances the light and anxiety of *Life as a Prey*. Furthermore, the main character of *Life as a Bullfight* sets the same «protective distance» between him and reality, as the adolescent Marin Preda, that had come in Bucharest, during the 1940s; it is, actually the same lack of trust in the deed's power of signification, in relation to the other reality, of the language: life *exists* as long it is trans-*formed* into the text."[37] As a conclusion, as Eugen Simion stated, "*Life as a Bullfight* is (...) a confession that avoids the biographical data at the anecdotical level, the personal indiscretions, relying on the ideas and especially on the morality of ideas. It is well written and we can detach from this discourse rendered in solemn tonalities, many meaningful phrases, memorable by their formal concision and beauty. It would have needed, we believe, more «interior epicism» (according to one of Eugen Ionescu's old sayings) and, perhaps, from place to place, a more ironical perspective

[34] *Ibidem*, p. 242.
[35] Cornel Moraru, *op. cit.*, p. 121.
[36] Luminiţa Marcu, *The Attic with Oranges –a Spanish Puzzle*, Polirom, Iaşi, 2006, pp. 72-73.
[37] Ioan Holban, *Octavian Paler: A Turning Point Man*, "Convorbiri literare," Year CXLI, no. 5 (137), May 2007, p. 48.



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on the real. We are talking about that irony also recommended by the philosophies and to which this substantial moralist resorts when he quotes, if I am not wrong, Herder's opinion on the laugh that forces us to be more serious than we are."[38]

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[38] Eugen Simion, *The Genres of the Biographical*, Univers Enciclopedic, Bucharest, 2002, p. 72.



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