OCTAVIAN PALER'S IMAGINARY LETTERS *AS A WAY FOR EXPOSING HIS OWN UNIVERSE*[1]

***Abstract**: Octavian Paler's essays celebrate culture, as a way of existence in the world, through an obvious inclination to the intellectual speculation and the righteous aspiration, through meditative solitude and solidary conscience, through memory, lucidity and rigor. Through the essay Paler seems to assume the myths and the essential problems of the entire world. He projects the myths into his inner world, contaminating them with his existential obsessions through which he assigns them his own judgments. Paler's qualities as an essayist are also visible in the volume Scrisori imaginare (Imaginary Letters), that sums up a series of fictitious letters, messages addressed to some of Europe's elected figures, such as Miguel de Unamuno, Albert Camus, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, etc., to whom history mirrored itself differently. In this writing the imaginary blends with the reality, becoming just a pretext for exposing the author's soul.*

***Key words**: essay, culture, letter, world, memory*

Octavian Paler's essayistic works are revaluated by placing them within the structure of the essay. The advantages that this species found at the border of literature are highlighted: *the essay*, as well as the freedom it grants to writing. His essay works: *Scrisori imaginare (Imaginary Letters)*, *Polemici cordiale (Cordial Polemics)*, *Aventuri solitare (Solitary Adventures)*, *Rugați-vă să nu vă crească aripi (Pray You Don't Grow Wings)* emphasize the ease with which their author expresses his free spirit, unconstrained by patterns, through an obvious tendency of involving it into the text, whose consequence is the sliding of literary genres. An unprecedented book, expertly build by the refined essayist, proves to be *Imaginary Letters* (1979), which sums up a series of fictitious letters, messages addressed to some of Europe's elected figures, such as Miguel de Unamuno, Albert Camus, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, etc., to whom history mirrored itself differently. The autobiographical insertion subtly recognized in the former writings, is found here clearly for the first time "(…) the author's thinking tries to reflect itself in the prism of this continental consciousness, represented by the splendid constellation of recipients of some letters who, obviously, can never receive an answer" (Vîjeu, Titus, 2004: 229).

The volume *Imaginary Letters* is interesting through the way of organizing the discourse, through the author's ability and capacity of reaching to himself through others, for: "In order to give another appearance to confession, he invents letters to the great spirits (*Unamuno*, *Camus*, *Erasmus*, *Proust*, *Seneca*, *Gide)* and accompanies the imaginary letters with reflexive poems" (Simion, Eugen, 1984: 520). The book is symbolically structured into three themes: *love, loneliness* and *wisdom*, each having seven letters. The titles of the essays are both thematic and metaphorical, the latter designating a poem found at the end of the work. Though it remains interesting this affinity for the number seven, the number of perfection, motivated maybe, through its inexhaustible symbolism, for seven indicates the passing from a just finished cycle to another that is merely beginning: "Thus the number seven illuminates the passing of the human essence through time and metamorphoses the image from one stage to another" (Bidel, Eugen, 1997: 120). According to some specialists, the number seven can be directly put as against man, in whose life appear at regulate intervals of seven years important changes of physical, psychic and intellectual nature, the action of this number

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being temporal. In ancient times there was a true cult of numbers, the ancients showing a great wisdom regarding them and it is no wonder that Paler is attracted to this numerological symbolism. The *Imaginary Letters*, veritable inner dialogues full of drama, pass beyond the spatial-temporal limitations, in fact revealing us a reflection of the author in his own being, in a narcissist attempt to self-assess and contemplate his *ego*. This epistolary setting can be but "an artifice of display" (Pamfil, Alina, 2000: 196), for all these letters addressed to some gone recipients are already compromised. The text is filled with philosophical speculations on the fertile field of the writer's imagination, which oscillates between doubt and Epicureanism.

In *Letter to Mister Unamuno* or *The First Love* Paler intentionally reports himself to "the knight with the sad looks" (Don Quixote), whom he mentions in some of his works and to whom he identifies in the rush for illusions. A man irremediably subject to utopia can only be defended by arguments, in a world that forgot how to dream: (…) does the fact that we will never get to touch the horizon really mean that we should not reach for it? (…) And let the detractors of the Knight tell us what a world without illusions would look like" (Paler, Octavian, 1998: 10-11). As he would want us to believe, the author emphasizes the fact that "a world without illusions", without a Don Quixote, can be but one that refuses its own knowing and transcendence, a self-sufficient world, that distracts itself the hope and existential motivation through lucidity: "And wherever there is no more hope we should call our Knight" (*Ibidem*: 13). The same idea, transposed in the space of the ancient Egypt, shows us in a merging of meanings that beyond the pyramids' purpose of guarding "the pharaohs' peace" there is that of "contesting the desert" and death and to show: "(…) to the living that man has never entirely accepted the idea of death" (*Ibidem*: 16). We notice a strange association of Don Quixote with the Sphinx, for: "the Sphinx's smile resembles the knight's" (*Ibidem*: 17). From behind these masks of duality, the ephemeral of the world shows itself in all its splendour. The solution of salvation of this world is not resignation but the fight beyond it, the freedom behind the masks. Behind the pyramids hope remains among the grains of sand, invisible for those who "(…) believe in nothing but the desert in themselves" (*Ibidem*). And for those who "are made of sand before dying", for those sceptics that having a good laugh "do but agree with us", there will come "the same age", of one's own initiating adventure, "the age at which Don Quixote started his adventures" (*Ibidem*: 20-23). Love finally remains the one that enlightens, beyond any mask and beyond any desert: "To love means, perhaps, to light our most beautiful part." (*Ibidem*: 19). The poem that ends the letter-essay, dedicated to that we will meet again under a form or another in the pages of Paler's texts, Don Quixote, is like a beginning of a journey through the labyrinth of a soul that has the same need to believe.

In the *second love*, that for poetry, Paler addresses to Hölderlin, to a great poet, who has the mission of bringing hope to the people's hearts, hope that: "(…) in front of a burnt sky, in front of a burnt field / that is incapable of believing in rains, / let it remind us that rain exists" (*Ibidem*: 26). The face of poetry that the poem chants moves to Sisyphus's mountain, through the third letter addressed to Camus. Paler, through his imaginary dialogue with Camus about Sisyphus, shows that myths revive possible experiences of humanity, there existing "(…) entire lists about the participation of suffering to the history of art and literature" (*Ibidem*: 32). On the mountain, as a space of existence, are discovered the great tragedies consumed throughout history, but also love, as a solution against the *fatum*, for Sisyphus "(…) takes his revenge on destiny loving the mountain he climbs" (*Ibidem*: 37). The entire tragedy of Sisyphus, subject to a "vain and hopeless work" (Camus, Albert, 1994: 191), from the essayist's perspective,

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is the solution to discovering every minute the climb, the miracle of life and the refuse to give up: "While rolling up his rock again and again, he had time to think about his mountain and himself and learned to understand the painful beauty of a sunrise" (*Ibidem*). This ascendant metaphor of the mountain is also found at the level of creation, of suffering through and for art, which "(…) is a wound transformed into light" (*Ibidem*: 34).

Besides, the existence cannot be refused: "If nothing justifies death, life has all the justifications" (*Ibidem*: 38), and suicide cannot be "(…) o solution against the absurd" (Camus, Albert, *op.cit.*: 192), but a defiance of the laws of the entire universe. Suicide is nothing but the pettiness of our own being, the surrender to the burdens of life, we become our own executioners, arguing ceaselessly that the great geniuses were born out of suffering and always only remembering that "(…) Homer was blind, Dostoevsky was epileptic (…) or that Baudelaire had syphilis" (*Ibidem*: 38-39). Overcoming their helplessnesses, purifying themselves through art, Van Gogh, Goya, Proust, Keats, Leopardi, Nietzsche, Dostoievski, Gogol, etc., though under the mark of an absurd human condition, they have conquered eternity through their act of creation: "Many of those whose heart bled were vanquished as people, but they were victorious as artists. Art was their revenge. The only justice they had left" (*Ibidem*: 43). The paradox of this world is that those who pity Baudelaire's or Kafka's incurable diseases are those who are barren, subject to their own helplessnesses, those who will turn to dust in front of the pyramids: "After all, what is the purpose of these habits of dividing people into healthy or sick people when we should divide it into those who exist and those who burn?" (*Ibidem*: 42). The inner burning, the suffering reminds us in a strange way about life, about existence, about the fact that: "(…) prisons help us talk even more convincingly about freedom, that judicial errors have stimulated justice, that we owe solidarity to solitude and dignity to the disgust for the cowards" (*Ibidem*: 40). And maybe, understanding that "(…) the road to Paradise goes compulsorily through the Inferno", will we know that "Only he who has known despair can understand the violence of the light from Van Gogh's paintings" (*Ibidem*: 39).

The end of *The Letter to Camus* is a contemplative one, showing us the picture of a Sisyphus under the sign of the absolute silence, stopping for a moment time and the entire universe, for "Somewhere, halfway along the climb, he has stopped and is watching the stars" (*Ibidem*: 47). The poem that continues Sisyphus's reverie, suggestively entitled *The Nights*, comes as a natural flow towards love, that love which maybe will not climb the mountain the next day. The successive passings through the feelings of a Zweig, Loti, Burkhart, could not stop but at Chamfort, the one who denying love does nothing but "(…) demolish the statues of the goddess of love, ending by demolishing as well the statues of hope and happiness, raising on the empty socles the terrible conclusion that the only true language is that of nothingness" (*Ibidem*: 103). Only the sea, the first and last love of the author, is called to permanently remind of love, "continuously hitting the breakwater" (*Ibidem*: 109).

The First Solitude is a confession addressed to Rilke, resembling rather an attempt to break free from the trap of solitude, through dialogue, the writer's solitude being "haunted by words" (Sorescu, Radu, 1996: 84). Solitude is a recurrent theme in Paler's work, all his characters suffering from a suspect solitude. Sign of a melancholic temper, inclined to watch the world from the outside, solitude is not intentionally searched, or aesthetically exploited, but we deal with a psychic constant. One of the solutions proposed by the author would be memory, as an experience of recovering the past time through "the fascination of memory". Paler proposes a return to the past, for

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"we cannot hold public conferences" about solitude (Paler, Octavian, 1998: 110), and not in the sense of Proust's recovery of the past time, but to reconstruct the line of errors and acknowledge the refuse of our own human experience, of the imperious need to deliver ourselves through love: "We need somebody to love us, and especially somebody to love. Maybe our great problem is not to be happy, but to be less alone." (*Ibidem*: 115). The lesson that Rilke proposes us about solitude as it is identified by Paler, is that it can protect us, can hide us from the world and from ourselves, that "life is always right, any way we look at it and that, given the perils, we must try to love them" (*Ibidem*: 111). Between solitude and existence there goes our way through the labyrinth, at the crossroad of two ways: "one that leads to the deepest wound of our solitude (…) and the other to what will deliver us" (*Ibidem*: 120). Solitude is a way that one learns, that one assumes, being aware that "the fruit of this learning will never satiate us", for we cannot share them with anyone (*Ibidem*: 120-121). The perfect antidote for solitude is sincerity, being aware of it until saturation: "(…) I lack the courage for the wedding with solitude and only my pride has prevented me from recognizing earlier how many times I have realized it. It is like a tight coat in which I suffocate; it does not fit me or I do not fit it. And it is better to face the truth without deceiving myself. Even when I desired solitude I was afraid of it." (*Ibidem*: 120). The selfish need for ourselves condemns us to solitude, for not being alone means to give up "(…) the pride to consider us the most important truth of the world" (*Ibidem*: 122). Paler remains tempted by the need for confession, though he vindicates a silent solitude, each phrase becoming a confession and each silence turning into word: "But you are right, Mr Rilke, at least in certain circumstances we are alone, with or against our will. (…) And what could we do? First, we should probably know that solitudes do not resemble each other. (…) Books are written in solitude, but against it. At the end of this solitude bloom the sunny gardens of solidarity" (*Ibidem*: 85). The poem of the essay addressed to Rilke and entitled *Solitude* penetrates like an echo our own solitudes: "You who return home / and after closing the door / say "good evening" / you do not know what it means / to enter a door being silent" (*Ibidem*: 124).

The Third Solitude, or *Letter to Mr Proust*, is a reference to memory as a possible salvation from solitude. In the essay the problematic of the memory is filtered through the vision of the French writer, but also by telling some stories where the allegorized memory has its own senses. Reflection, or better said auto-reflection, analyses heard, lived, read life experiences and transposes them into a discourse whose nature is essentially dubitative: "One might say, Mr Proust, that memories cannot kill us anymore. (…)"; "But if things are not this way (…)"; "And maybe each one has his own wolf" (*Ibidem*: 138-139).

The essay begins with doubting the belief on which is based *In Search of Lost Time* – that is that memories cannot kill, that in their labyrinth there is no Minotaur – memories helping is forget the real threats, that "involuntary memory" would be a paradoxical form of oblivion (Paler, Octavian, *op. cit.*: 138). In fact, through the parable of a winter night spent in the mountains when wolves were hauling and circling around the cabin, the essayist does not want but to trigger the memory in which: "(…) our memories haunt us and want to tear us up" (*Ibidem*: 139). The text returns to Proust's vision of the past, now expressed in time, in the duration with the help of which "(…) we can build, if needed, from the mere perfume of a flower, a shelter against death" (*Ibidem*). The essayist highlights the permanence of Proust's regained moment also from within an imaginary scenario, built with elegance and subtlety: "As for you (Mr Proust), I imagine a discrete Antaeus who exchanged the earth with his own memory

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and, with its help, tries to transform the phosphorescence of a moment into an inexhaustible light. But how much sadness do we need in order to reach a happiness defended by turned back hours?" (*Ibidem*: 140).

The discourse strategy is radically modified. For direct reflections on Proust's vision are replaced with the presentation of the experiences lived by the essayist after returning to the city of his adolescence, because of a need of regression to the memory of that age. All the stories in this text-letter intersect, include one another, they all interweave in the essayist's story. It comprises, along with the facts, an explicit dialogue with the French writer, a dialogue that always puts in balance Proust's vision and the image of the memories that kill, a dialogue that reiterates the question: "(…) are we not born without a destiny, but we gradually receive one, our memory" (*Ibidem*: 142). The problematic of memory thus gains an explicit status, that of memory-destiny, that can any time incline the pointer of the balance either to the hospitable past or to the other, where memory wolves stay. The end of the essay is made up of interrogative phrases in which are comprised "the force of memory" and "the logic of unfair destinies" (Pamfil, Alina, *op. cit.*: 29), in which memory can haunt and kill: "Maybe, indeed, each has his own wolf that lies dormant or is waiting for the right moment to leap" (*Ibidem*: 165). The final poem is a reopening of the perspective on the subject of reflection, memory being more than a problem, it is a wound in the wing of a bird torn between flying in its sleep and the silence of the light, "(…) a bird with a wing left to hope (…)" (*Ibidem*: 167).

The voyage of solitude seems longer than love's, through the overwhelming solitude and through scattering the ashes in us. The *seventh solitude* is the letter addressed to Mr Kafka. The essayistic pretext is constituted by an analogy between two trials: Socrates's and Kafka's, an analogy only possible in the plan of ideas. Though, this reference of Socrates's trial to Josef K's is somehow forced, for we deal with two different dimensional universes, one situated in the plan of reality and the second in the plan of fiction. *The Trial* is about, as Camus states, "an image of the human condition" (Camus, Albert, *op. cit.*: 198) in which "the spirit casts on the concrete its spiritual tragedy" (*Ibidem*). Socrates, instead, knows why he is going to die and is free to refuse the cup of hemlock, but his choice will be that of drinking it with dignity "(…) with the greatest peace of mind" (*Ibidem*: 220). Josef K seems to have missed this inner peace, the representative of all who accept the sentence of conviction to their own ignorance. Built on the theme of Borges's *Sand Book*, for "neither the book, nor the sand have a beginning or an end", the poem entitled suggestively *The Death of Words*, is a return to silence, among the grains of sand scattered by the hand of the past: "All that I have loved has turned to sand / all that I have done wrong has turned to sand / and sand judges / judge me / and sentence me to death / on a sand scaffold" (Paler, Octavian, *op. cit.*: 230).

The cycle of the seven wisdoms that close the volume of *Imaginary Letters* could start but with a letter addressed to Lucius Annaeus Seneca. On this occasion the writer comes back to an older obsession, that of comparing the wisdom and the tyranny. The stoic philosopher, Nero's counsellor, who has become an accomplice to the emperor's horrors, lets himself to be devoured by the remorse demons: "If philosophy does not reside in words, but in facts, what is your true philosophy? The one you have lived by or the one you have died by? The one by which you have remained silent in front of the horrors that came over Rome or the remorse you have probably felt in your villa in Campania where you have retired? (…) Have you regretted not protesting against the crimes committed by the emperor or have regretted criticizing his poetry at a

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reckless point? And maybe Nero would have rather tolerated reproaching him with his crimes than criticize his poetry. Executioners are sometimes strange. (…) But you knew. You knew, Lucius Annaeus Seneca! That is the problem. You knew and you have remained silent. You knew and you have consented to it. You knew and you have not been terrified, overwhelmed with horror. You have remained Nero's counsellor even after Rome had no more doubts that he lived like a monster. You have remained around him, and by your silence, you have approved of his crimes" (*Ibidem*: 235-237). The moralizing tone undoubtedly hides the message of an actual parable, for "the artists' pride and desire to live in the circles of power have been sometimes stronger than ethical principles" (Sorescu, Radu, *op. cit.*: 86). The final *Elegy* is a contraposition to "the craters" inside us, through an acceptance of the humane and its limits, "(…) before saying that all this is natural" (*Ibidem*: 242).

Octavian Paler's journey among the wise of the world stops at *Erasmus*, the scholar of Rotterdam, situated at Seneca's antipode, through his refractory attitude toward any social status, through his *home per se* attitude, through criticizing an excessive and arbitrary wisdom: "Nothing too much, that is what some wise men have kept telling us. Nothing too much, so half of everything. Even the suffering but also the victory on it. Even the risks, but also the pride to face them. These wise men have mastered in detail the art of not losing, but maybe they have never entirely known the art of winning. And who praises wisdom after all? The wise men again" (*Ibidem*: 274-274). It seems that Paler meets Erasmus in the same solitude, built almost involuntarily by the two through the fact that they let themselves surrounded by books: "Of course, we will always have the books, no matter what happens. They never leave us and are always ready to compensate for the gaps that ache" (*Ibidem*: 269). But the salvation from loneliness must be discovered in its very denial, cancellation: "If we do nothing about sadness, we should do nothing against it" (*Ibidem*: 275). An still, the stone lips of sadness can remain sealed with a smile, the smile on "my living cheek" (*Ibidem*: 279).

The last letter, the one addressed to Lucian Blaga, has the meaning of a return to the origins, to that simple "at home", where "(…) the heart speaks its own language." (*Ibidem*: 310). In this space of revelation, love, solitude, wisdom redefine themselves, gaining new connotations: "The greatest misery is probably not to be alone, but not to believe in anything anymore" (*Ibidem*: 315). The world of memories is felt in the idyllic picture of the mountain Romanian village, so dear to the writer and that represents that "profound love" that cannot be explained (Paler, Octavian, *op. cit.*: 316). The echoes of melancholy are felt at the end of the essay, as the author has accustomed us so far, in a lyrical poem of profound sincerity and solitude that wants to be an attempt to eternize the time recovered: "(…) and only light is full of remorse / for the youth of nut trees and mine" (*Ibidem*: 322).

Octavian Paler's *Imaginary Letters*, in which one encounters the simultaneous, continuous and living dialogue of the essay with the lyrical and the epical, are an exciting journey among the great themes of the universal culture and at the same time a fascinating confrontation with the self. The three cycles of confessions, symmetrically grouped around three fundamental attitudes as against the world, the absolute and the self, that is love, solitude and wisdom, confer to the text a touch of profound understanding of the human condition. The letters bear the whole melancholic load and confessionary passion of the writer who "(…) uses this literarily and culturally impressive figuration in order to reveal himself as active subjectivity and to involve himself in each letter with the energy and the pleasure of a spiritual liberation" (Iorgulescu, Mircea, 1982: 210). These letters-essay of Octavian Paler do not

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necessarily look for a real recipient, but they are searches and rediscoveries of the self, they are a climb of an inner Golgotha: "to shout out there on the top his (…) brutal love of life" (*Ibidem*: 227). The book on the whole is a vast poem dedicated to love as an attitude in front of life: "I have not tried here – the author notes in the *Foreword* of the book – more than confessing what my heart helped me find out from life. And, probably, for the same reason, I have placed a poem after each letter, decided not to respect the literary rules, but the rules of the melancholies that have pushed me to confessions."

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