IMAGINARY AS A KEY ELEMENT IN OCTAVIAN PALER'S WRITINGS

Cristina-Eugenia BURTEA-CIOROIANU[*]

Abstract: *In the work of Octavian Paler the imaginary plays an important role, being a link between reality and inner life, between the wishes and beliefs of the writer, between what he is and what he seems to be. Interestingly, in his novels, largely confessions, the imaginary blends happily with the elements of the immediate reality, with the living in a tight universe and often difficult to decipher. Paler's reassuring moments in the mysterious areas of long past cultures and civilizations fit perfectly into the assumed imagined category. In his essays we encounter writer's imaginary speeches, imaginary letters to various distinguished historical personalities and not only. His parabolic novels during the political constraint period are under the sign of the imaginary. The imaginary represents the comfort zone Octavian Paler generously offers himself in his writings.*

Keywords: *imaginary, confession, essay*

Introduction

The systematic description of the individual and collective human imaginary has been a topic approached in time, benefitting from a proper theorization merely in the second half of the 20th century. As to the approach of the imaginary from the point of view of some definitions given by good connoisseurs of the field we shall insist upon the most significant of them. Therefore, according to Evelyna Patlagean, "the field of the imaginary is made up of the ensemble of representations which surpass the limit imposed by the ascertainments of the experience and by the deductive concatenations they authorize" (Boia, Lucian, 2000: p.12). The issue of this definition is the impossibility of establishing a clear delimitation between reality and imaginary. The French anthropologist Gilbert Durand gives us an alternative in one of his become classical works. He states the imaginary is "the ensemble of images and relationships among images which constitute the capital thought of the homo sapiens" and that it "appears as the great fundamental denominator to which all the procedures of the human thinking come to rally" (Durand, Gilbert, 1998: p.19).

Jacques Le Goff avoids giving imaginary a direct definition, preferring to underline what the imaginary is not. Thus, according to him, the imaginary should be taken nor for "the representation" of the external reality, nor for "the symbolic", nor for "the ideology". Lucian Boia rejects such a limitation, first because there is no representation identical to the represented object ("the representation" of the external reality), and second because he considers the universe "of symbols" as belonging exclusively to the imaginary, and finally because "ideologies" themselves may be interpreted as secularized mythologies. Lucian Boia suggests the reconciliation of the two types of approach of the imaginary which come from disciplines where this concept was used: on the one hand anthropology, especially

[*] University of Pitesti, cris_mitrica@yahoo.com

BDD-A29975 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:55:29 UTC)

Gilbert Durand's school, which emphasizes certain imaginary-generating atemporal structures (the architypes) , but which deny the historicity of the imaginary; and on the other hand history, which approaches the imaginary in a fragmented way (to historians are owed histories of the imaginary and not a history of the imaginary) (Boia, Lucian, 2000). Mediating between the two epistemological models, Lucian Boia reruns the essential traits of the concept in an attempt to demonstrate that "the imaginary is a product of the spirit" and that "our way of knowing the world, our reason and science feed on the imaginary". Essentially, considers the author, the imaginary "constitutes an independent reality, disposing of its own structures and dynamic…and can be used as an extremely sensitive barometer of the historical evolution" (Boia, Lucian, 2000: pp. 14 - 26). Defined in a large sense, the imaginary "is placed outside the concrete, indisputable reality, of a reality perceived either directly or by logical deduction and scientific expression (Boia, Lucian, 2000: p.12). It is essentially an independent reality that disposes of its own structures and its own dynamic. From a semantic point of view, the imaginary is meant to be particularly fantastic or fabulous (as well as of imagination), even if its meaning is somehow close to them. If the last two terms – somehow synonymous with invention – suppose a free exercise of fantasy, in which the real is a simple pretext, the imaginary rather means "a restrained fantasy", structured by an ensemble of representations referring to a reality about which people know it exists, but they have not or cannot see.

The study of Octavian Paler's work in which the imaginary makes its presence felt sets off another of its structures – the alterity. The very use of the word in the tile of some works or throughout their content (Imaginary Letters) suggests the existence of a relation between identity and alterity. We always define ourselves compared to the others. In a larger sense, alterity refers to a whole ensemble of differences: different societies, different beings, different spaces and lansscapes. This mechanism leads to a very fragmented, fascinating but restless world which constituted Octavian Paler's motivation for writing, for being oneself again in a perfect world belonging to the imaginary.

The Imaginary in Octavian Paler's writings

In the work of Octavian Paler the imaginary plays an important role, being a link between reality and inner life, between the wishes and beliefs of the writer, between what he is and what he seems to be. Interestingly, in his novels, largely confessions, the imaginary blends happily with the elements of the immediate reality, with the living in a tight universe and often difficult to decipher.

The Romanian prose emerging on the background of an epoch of social convulsion is marked, as a real fatum, by politics and is saved by the imaginary plan. Although it did not register any historic victory, the novel of the "haunting decade" gave shape to several writings that are not related to the old dogmatism. The "aesopic" literature turns into the instrument of the symbolic acknowledgement of the writers, of power and, however paradoxical this may seem, of the whole segment of the collectivity that has access to it. At the basis of the agreement made among the writers, the society and the power, there lies a phenomenon of truth dissimulation that generates in the case of the writers, an obsession

BDD-A29975 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:55:29 UTC)

with the recovery and "revelation" of the truth, by the use of "aesopian" techniques, within the fiction:

The fact that the truth represented an obsession (and not only for the writers) in a regime of the generalized lie, was absolutely natural. There was as much propaganda as thirst for truth. (...) This aspiration to reveal the truth (historical, political, social, etc.) resulted, after 1966, in a judiciary literature, concerned with the reconsideration of the fabricated past and the revelation of the «flaws» of the socialist society. (...) The literature published in those times by the writers with such inclinations, [with "civic spirit," n. n.] assumed a part of the qualities specific to a really free press, of a historiography that, under the circumstances, could not go reveal many things, of an almost nonexistent sociology and politology (Ballandier, G., 2000: p. 28).

The political novel dealing with the horrors of the past will pledge itself to recover the truth of history, hidden by the mythography of the party, masking, by means of the allegory, of the symbol, the myth, the subversive allusions in relation to a present of disillusion. Imbued with a mythical memory, the fiction of the "haunting decade" is invested with the role of a more or less distorted mirror of the contemporary world. D. R. Popescu, C. Ţoiu, G. Bălăiţă, S. Titel reveal in their novels the hidden resorts of the active power, assuming, at the same time, the critical exploration of the "sacred history." (Ballandier, G., Idem). The parables on "the evil of the utopia," that latently masks the "artist's" need to exorcise its own demons, bring under discussion, at the level of these "mirror shards" the self-image of the totalitary world. The figures of power within the imaginary aspect specfic to the 60s, will always be related to this function with which the dogma invested the party as the symbolic messenger of the proletariat: that of depositary of the last truth of the universe and history.

In the case of the intellectual elite, the traumas caused by the times are much more conspicuous: it is enough to closely investigate the fictional universes of the novels written during the "haunting decade," that are part of the identitary construction of the "resistant" intellectual. Beyond the heroic background, we discover the vocation of "abjuration." The retreat "in a construction that "justifies," common, according to J.-J. Wunenburger (Wunenburger, J.-J., 2001: pp. 112-221) to the schizo and the creator of utopias, is mediated by a sacrificial rite, a torture by effigy, (burn in effigy) that haunts the imaginary of the dictatorship's novels and that "reveals" / enciphers, according to the symbolic logic, the profound dimension of the "resistance" specific to the intellectuals. The texts' latency brings forward what the utopist tries to hide, shutting himself into his weirdie imprisonment: we deal with the real image of an utopia, and unfortunately, the "fissure" in the wall of the Artist's ideal fortress, that he sometimes contemplates with fear, when he steps into the space of nightmare, more exactly on the stage of real history (as, for example, the double hero from Galileo's Defense).

The invocation of the memory of literature in parables that projects the legitimizing mythology of the "resistance through culture" is one of the structural features of Octavian Paler's novels. Shaped similar to some "sapiential" books, where the exemplary histories comprehending archetypal characters are doubled by revealing comments, these subordinate to the novel of human condition the same "parable of literature." In the symbolic universe imbued with mythical memories from Life on a Station Platform for example, the

BDD-A29975 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:55:29 UTC)

labyrinthic path of the Professor, a hermeneut of the human history and condition, reinforces the great destinies of literature in archetypal configurations that covers the cultural imaginary, from the The Gospels to the Theatre of the Absurd. The confession in Life on a Station Platform is doubled by a pleading; history in its symbolic formula self contemplates in a series of "literary" mirrors that confer it legitimacy.

The parabolic novels, written by D.R. Popescu, C. Ţoiu, G. Bălăiţă, S. Titel, A. Buzura, Al. Ivasiuc, O. Paler, P. Sălcudeanu, etc), the historical parables belonging to E. Uricaru, V. Andru, etc, or those belonging to novelists that had already distinguished themselves during the decades previous to the small cultural "renaissance" from the beginning of the period marked by Ceauşescu's dictatorship, (V. Horia, L. Fulga, E. Barbu), focus on a lesson of history, (whether we deal with past centuries, or with the contemporary history – from the interwar epoch to the "haunting decade"), by the Myth. The fictional pact established by these novels that deal with a hermeneutics of history, emphasizing, by means of symbolic structures, the legitimizing myths, also has the role of self–adjusting the process of receiving the information: the relation between the "real" history, attested by documents and the "imaginary" history, brought about by the plural discourses of the "victims and executioners," the relation between history and memory, between ideology and utopia, between history and myth, are themes that focus on self-assessment at the self reflexive level or at the level of the parable.

The intellectual's responsibility towards the evolution of history, preoccupies the imaginary specific to the 6th decade and it "shines through" in the identitary dramas of the Don Quixotesque, (dualized) heroes of the novels. The novels specific to the 1960s deconstruct (latently) the mythology of resistance, despite the authors, and at the same time, they exalt it. Their heroes are the masters of the torture by effigy: they do not need any external executioners, resorting to a certain mechanism of exorcization, more or less latently, within the imaginary of the novels. We are talking about that mauvaise foi defined by J.-P. Sartre in *The Being and Nothingness*, that apparently has the structure of lie, except that, and this changes everything, in the case of truthlessness, the one I hide the reality from, is precisely myself. Consequently, the duality of both the deceiver and the deceived one is absent here. Truthlessness mainly involves the unity of a consciousness (Sartre, J.-P., 1943: p. 87).

The beautiful lesson of "the History teacher" from Life on a Station Platform by Octavian Paler is dissimulated in all the parables of this generation of writers.

Beyond the transparent, politically correct allegory, of the "haunting decade," the novels written during the 1960s shape, by the recourse to a mythical imaginary, diverted from its originary significations, a symbolic parable dominated by its European or South American models, (the parable of the French or German existentialists – Malraux, Sartre, Camus, Th. Mann, F. Kafka, which is nevertheless tributary to the formula of the magic and mythical realism, the last one being noticed in the case of D. R. Popescu, Fănuş Neagu, Ştefan Bănulescu and, sometimes, of Constantin Ţoiu and Al. Ivasiuc).

In Life on a Station Platform, the author minutely decomposes the mechanism of the despotic domination established by several "cobra charmers," comparable with the Pygmies from the Equinox of the Madmen by A. E. Baconsky. In A Lucky Man, the hero that admits his failure, that he can only elude by means of his imagination. Life on a Station

BDD-A29975 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:55:29 UTC)

Platform is a novel with a complex structure, with parabolic non-essential things, that integrte their trauma into an epic space of indetermination, of the lack of certain landmarks. The central character, a History teacher whose name we do not know, makes a long confession, considering, from the very beginning that life is a sum of failed passions and that he himself had been born "already crucified." Paler's novel describes, under the form of symbols with an accentuated signification, (the cobras, the dogs, the cobras charmers, the dogs trainers, the imperfect mangooses), themes specific to the existentialism, being related to some novels The Process (Franz Kafka), The Plague (Albert Camus) or The desert of the Tartars (Dino Buzzati), novels that deal with the fragility and the absurd of the human condition in a worls subjected to the anonymization. Octavian Paler is powerfully influenced by Kafka. Kafka's characters, similar to the History teacher, the protagonost of the novel mentioned above, are the prisoners of a cold, strange universe, with absurd rules, meant to annihilate their individuality.

The station becomes a de facto, a great confessional where the character – narrator helps his soul heal, he does not confesse himself in the presence of a purifying God, but in the readers' presence, the characters outside the story:

I am convinced that nobody has ever had a confessional similar to the one I confess myself in. Would you like to know what it lokks like? I will describe it and you will admit that I am privileged at least from one point of view. Not even God bothers me here and nevertheless I speak to you, the ones that can hear me and I do not know you. I can make my confession in peace. If I want to interrupt it, I am free to do that. If I want to continue it, I will continue it. I am freer than any other sinner in the world (Paler, Octavian, 1991: pp. 6-7).

An imaginary space takes shape in this deserted station where: "the air cleaved to the walls like as transparent rust" (Paler, Octavian, Ibidem, p. 7), whereas time is abolished. It resembles an atemporal space, suspended between the worlds, reminding us of Mircea Eliade's fantastic prose: "The continuous transition from reality into the dream and from the dream into reality. I was no longer sure of anything." (Paler, Octavian, Ibidem, pp. 266-267).

It should be underlined that, in Life on a Station Platform, as well as in Mythological Slander, the writer's last book, the need to communicate, the need to confess himself is accomplished by the relation to imaginary characters, such as Eleonore, to mythological characters, such as Don Juan, Don Quixote, or to witnesses from the spectrum of the small beings living in deserted spaces: spiders, mosquitoes, moths: "In my confessional, the spiders are my only witnesses and sometimes the mosquitoes that visit me during the night, when the wind transforms anything a Morse indicator" (Paler, Octavian, Ibidem, p. 13).

The whole novel could be discussed as an unsuccessful journey of a man that had remained in the waiting room of a deserted station, and "(...) the awakening of conscience represents the beginning of solitude" (Vighi, Daniel, 2008: p. 96).

According to the literary critic Daniel Cristea-Enache, the novel entitled Life on a Station Platform is subjected to rules concerned with "the epic stratification and symbolic overlap (...) the main narrative techniques being the confession, the story telling and the dialogue

BDD-A29975 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:55:29 UTC)

based on the personal undergoings (...), and (...) the characters become prisms by which we can perceive their existences" (Cristea-Enache, Daniel, 2005: p. 6).

Another novel belonging to the same dark and restrictive period for the process of writing, A Lucky Man: "(...) is, similat to Life on a Station Platform a Romanian essay in a parable with several types of symbols and a succession closings and openings" (Simion, Eugen, 1985: p. 14).

The action takes place in an isolated rest home, by the sea, near a village of fishermen, in the neighbourhood of a swamp and of several marble cliffs. The protagonist, that this time has a name: Daniel Petric, a sculptor that had spent his youth first in a reform school, then in a hospice and finally into prison, receives the strange offer to go the rest home in order to carve in the marble cliffs funerary monuments for those hospitalized there, when they died. The penetration into the atmosphere of the novel is not at all accidental and it is achieved by means of the dream, of the oneiric, as the first word is "I was dreaming...," (Paler, Octavian, 1984: p. 7) but the intersection between the real and the unreal plans, with obvious influences of Eliade's fantastic elements, is immediately noticed, as we no longer know whether "The night before Easter" stands for reality or for a continuation of the dream.

Observing the rule of the last ambiguity that gives satisfaction to the imaginary, Daniel Petric also calls into question, rhetorically, the border between dream and reality: "How do I know that the fact that I write is itself a dream?" (Paler, Octavian, Ibidem, p. 365). The inhabitants of the rest home adopt a new identity, where the real overlaps with the imaginary, their names being actually nicknames inspired from their fundamental traits of character: the Pug, the Midwife, the Dog Catcher, the Monk, etc. The rest home is thus an imago mundi (Cristea – Enache, Daniel, 2008: p. 12) in Octavian Paler's parable, while the world it symbolizes functions according to the rules and indications of the "Old Man," everybody talks about, but that nobody had ever seen. The end of the novel is symbolic: the rest home burns down, being thus purified by fire and we find out that everything was nothing but a dream, a projection into the imaginary carried out by the sculptor, that becomes one with the "Old Man": "Suddenly, I looked fearfully into the mirrors. My face had acquired exactly the features of the Old Man. (...) Yes, I looked like the Old Man. I was him" (Paler, Octavian, Ibidem, p. 378).

In Octavian Paler's novels, we come across a double truth, one objective truth, that corresponds to the daily reality and another subjective truth, projected into an imaginary world, the only possible world. The station and later the rest home become prototypes of atemporality, spaces that save the being from the spiritual annihilation. There is a real tendency to evade from the profane, especially by narration and fiction: "(…) I can no longer distinguish the border beteeen dream and reality. I feel like following a thin and slippery line, sliding from one side to the other, without realizing exactly which side" (Paler, Octavian, Ibidem, p. 365).

The same confessive formula that lies at the basis of the novels Life on a Station Platform and A Lucky Man, where the narration is doubled by the sapiential comments, is also resumed in Galileo's Defense, a parable that deals with the problems of the "autistic refuge" of the intellectual as a solution against the evil embodied by the totalitary power. There are more than 200 pages of dialogue, an imaginary dialogue beween the author and

BDD-A29975 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:55:29 UTC)

Galileo Galilei, a dialogue with history. This time, the parabolic architecture fits this structure of the dialogue, whose "protagonists" are Galilei and his image reflected in the mirror: the first one is the "judger" of the dreams that opens for the second one the gates of the inferno inside himself, revealing him the dark aspect of light, making him discover the fact that the inferno is the other face of the utopia. Also present in the two novels mentioned above, the oneiric elements, that remind us of Eliade, that confer the "dialogue" epic substance, allow for the symbolic projection of the "real" into the empire of darkness. Galileo's Defense focuses on a history – reflected, similar to the one in Life on a Station Platform, in several mirrors –, on the Artist's destiny between compromise and resistance, as well as on the fight between "the saint and the rat," that involves any descent into the hell.

The totalitary distopia that is shaped on the basis of the political allegory, seems to find its opposite in the utopia of art; in actual fact, the latter turns itself, more or less latently, into the object of deconstruction: "the dialogue on prudence and love" takes shape from a vocation of the effigy-related torture, (burn in effigy), common to all the those in search for ideals, from the novels of the 1960s.

The relation between the intellectual and the power (the Italian scholar and the Inquisition) that the writer subjects to meditation by the symbolic parable anchored in the history of Western Catholicism, cannot be debated upon without making reference to the imaginary of the secularized religion, that, resorting to subversion, accentuates the political fiction. Galileo's Defense metaphoriyes de facto, both a general state in a totalitary epoch and the writer's own moral existence: "Galileo's dilemma was certainly the dilemma of Paler himself" (Manolescu, Nicolae, 2008: p. 1177).

Another book, as unusual as Galileo's Defense, professionally written by the refined essayist is the one entitled Imaginary Letters (1979), that includes a series of fictitious epistles, messages addressed to some great spirits of Europe, such as Miguel de Unamuno, Albert Camus, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, etc., where history was differently reflected. The autobiographical insertion, that can be subtly identified in the previous writings, is clearly rendered here for the first time: "(...) the writer's thinking tries to manifest on the strength of this continental consciousness, represented by the splendid constellation of the addressees of certain epistles, that can never be answered" (Vîjeu, Titus, 2004: p. 229).

Octavian Paler's book Cordial Polemics, contains too a series of micro-essays where we can find "(…) imaginary discourses and (...), short essays on Velasquez and Don Quixote's decadence" (Simion, Eugen, 1984: p. 522).

We can notice in Octavian Paler's writings the necessity of the dialogue as an essential form of manifestation in relation to the world, to himself, as an antidote against solitude. The pages overflowing with memories represent a series of pretexts, around which imaginary universes are sewn (Sorescu, Radu, 1996: p. 29).

In the universe of imagination, time cannot be measured because it does not exist. The descent into oneself creates the possibility to experience a historically indefinite time, by the transition into a universe of imagination, where "(...) life was clumping around myself" (Octavian Paler, 1984: p. 47).

BDD-A29975 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:55:29 UTC)

Octavian Paler's mythological incursion (Roads through Memory, A Museum in the Labyrinth, Subjective Mythologies and Mythological Slander) is that of the traveller in the subjective world of myths, as a form of primordial culture, as a discovery of the path followed by the imaginary, of a journey with himself through the peoples' creations. The myth resorts to a certain logic, that of the imaginary, which provides it with the power of evocation, of suggestion. The presence of the myth in Octavian Paler's writings can be correlated with a tendency to evade in an archetypal space, by a reinterpretation of ancient mythology. The learnt man is familiar with the imaginary geography that relies on lectures and studies, the mental images being projected into the concrete background he comments upon, similar to a specialist.

Conclusion

Consequently, confession, dialogue, and imaginary these are the specific forms of Octavian Paler's literature, whose writing has something from the impersonal solemnity of a discourse of classical eloquence, being however imbued with all the anxieties and tribulations of the modern soul and marked by a violent and passionate subjectivity that the author himself speaks about. Octavian Paler turns the confession into an instrument of confrontation, at the ethical level and at the level of ideas. Paler's reassuring moments in the mysterious areas of long past cultures and civilizations fit perfectly into the assumed imagined category. In his essays we encounter writer's imaginary speeches, imaginary letters to various distinguished historical personalities and not only. His parabolic novels during the political constraint period are under the sign of the imaginary. The imaginary represents the comfort zone Octavian Paler generously offers himself in his writings.

Octavian Paler achieves by his works a metanoia of the spirit travelling through myths. His literature is not only varied, (poetry, essays, novels, journals), but also highly reflexive and of a rarely encountered stylistic elegance.

Bibliography

Boia, Lucian, *For A History of the Imaginary*, translation by Tatiana Mochi, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2000.
Ballandier, G., *The Stage of Power*, Aion, Oradea, 2000.
Cristea-Enache, Daniel, *A Railway Station for Two*, "Ramuri," no. 5-6, May-June 2005.
Cristea – Enache, Daniel, *A Rest Home, Ideas in dialogue*," no. 7 (46), July, 2008.
Durand, Gilbert, *The Anthropological Structures Of The Imaginary. Introduction To the General Archetypology*, translation by Marcel Aderca, Bucharest, Univers Enciclopedic, 1998.
Manolescu, Nicolae, *The Critical History of Romanian Literature*, 5 centuries of literature, Paralela 45, Piteşti, 2008.
Paler, Octavian, *A Lucky Man*, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1984.
Paler, Octavian, *Galileo's Defense*, Albatros, Bucharest, 1997.
Paler, Octavian, *Life on a Station Platform*, Albatros, Bucharest, 1991.
Sartre, J.-P., *L'Etre et le Néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*, Gallimard, Paris, 1943.
Simion, Eugen, *The Novel of Ideas*, "Flacăra," Year XXXIV, no. 14 (1555), Friday, 5th of April, 1985.
Simion, Eugen, *Contemporary Romanian Writers*, Vol. III, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1984.
Sorescu, Radu, *Octavian Paler's Work*, Didactica Nova, Craiova, 1996.

BDD-A29975 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:55:29 UTC)

Vighi, Daniel, *Capital Letters. Small Letters.Literary Incursions*, Universitatea de Vest, Timişoara, 2008.
Vîjeu, Titus, *Scripta manent*, Societatea Română de Radiodifuziune, Bucureşti, 2004.
Wunenburger, J.-J., *Utopia or the Crisis of the Imaginary*, Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 2001.

BDD-A29975 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:55:29 UTC)