PERSPECTIVES ON THE IDEA OF MAN UNDER TIMES IN OCTAVIAN PALER'S WORK "DON QUIXOTE IN THE EAST"[1]

Abstract*: This paper reflects Octavian Paler's ideas in the work* "Don Quixote in the East"*, ideas which concentrate the image of a writer caught in a reality he is not satisfied with. Located in the space between two worlds, the occidental and oriental ones or the one here and beyond the Romanian communism, an atemporal space of moral reflection, Octavian Paler tries to understand the questions tormenting all those who let themselves lived by history. In opposition to the totalitarian period, Octavian Paler reveals his deep disappointment as far as the present is concerned, since the freedom much fought for marks not a new beneficial period, but one of confusion, authority crisis, all kinds of excess. Despite the strong subjective aspect, personalization of ideas and wish for non-abusive generalization,* "Don Quixote in the East" *is a very good moral and social radiography of the post-December period. The writer cannot adapt whatever the context of the epoch he lives in, he is in a sort of counter-time, living the events in accordance with his own inner measure and filtering them by his well-known morality.*

Keywords*: society, illusion, Don Quixote.*

Octavian Paler's writings reflect the whole, giving the impression of global continuity. Thus, post 1989 volumes are more and more subjective, composing a growing disappointed meditation on life and the world: "I do not wish to be a writer who from time to time leaves his own solitude in order to say what he thinks" (Paler, 1995: 186). The gloomy, negative attitude from his publications penetrated one of his books: *Don Quixote in the East* (1994), a true mise-en-page of the pamphleteer spirit.

Imagined as an epistolary dialogue between the writer and his friend Andrei B. from the West, "the son of a former bandit, killed by the security in the Fagaras mountains" (Paler, 1994: 265), *Don Quixote in the East* "tends to be an apology of the spirit of Don Quixote which finds itself contemporary correspondences" (Sorescu, R., 1996: 70) in "the morphology of the Romanian dissident" (Ciobanu, 2001: 39). Master of polemics, throughout his book Octavian Paler talks with his friend, refugee in a western country ever since the time of Ceausescu, thus knowing in the west the drama of uprooting, that suspension between two worlds, a desired one (the native country) and one of inadaptability and one of becoming a stranger, in which he knew only hostility and indifference. From the interference of the two voices, representing two different perspectives projected over Romanian realities is born the texture of the book. The narrative layers complete each other, the basic text taking over fragments from Andrei's letters and the vice versa. The author leaves some critical passages of his friend without an immediate reply, giving himself time for preparing the argumentation and for meditating over his own anguishes and the disappointments of transition. Sometimes, the extremely different and apparently irreconcilable points of view of the two, grafted on a common germinative layer, do not stop them from reaching the sharing of some still lively feelings in the memory of those taking refuge in the West and shameful for their post revolutionary conationals [see the theory of the "soya salami" (Paler, 1994: 228)]. The texts gathered in this volume are "[…] written in a more pronounced publicistic color, without making concessions to newspaper tics and orbiting around a major idea, fundamental for the state the writer passes through in the

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recent years: the legitimacy of illusions, their importance on a strictly personal scale and o a social scale" (Turchilă, 1994: 11).

Structured in three parts, each of these being found in a frame of the ideas debated by the author, the book wants to be an answer to the questions that torment him and others that let themselves lived by history. In the first chapter of the book, the writer synthesizes his simplest three-month experience in a hyper-civilized world that does nothing but nourish his skepticism. Setting out with a wish "to find a bit of detachment that I am in great need for" (Paler, *op. cit.*: 17), he only succeeds in convincing himself "of the resistance of some obsessions" (*Ibidem*), for Paler seems to guide himself by "the motto of one of the seven scholars of Ancient Greece, Bias of Priene: "I have everything with me" (*Ibidem*: 21). The distance between the Romanian and the American civilizations becomes more visible with every subjective comment of a "non-modern and convenient" man (*Ibidem*: 15), incompatible with a country that "has an excellent intuition of the value of successes", but "entirely lacks the intuition of failures, for which reason progress is here more at hand than greatness, and Don Quixote, I am almost sure, would not have a chance to be understood" (*Ibidem*: 11-12). The dusty thoughts of the traveler eager to wash away the remains of his own melancholies gather under the shell of the longing for the country, of the famous "*ubi bene, ibi patria"* (*Ibidem*: 19), for "[...] only there my deceptions and solitude make sense. Elsewhere they mean nothing" (*Ibidem*: 18). Between us (Orientals) and them (Occidentals), as the writers notices, there are differences: "Occidentals do not have too much humor. We have too much and, unfortunately, not of the finest quality. [...] there is no tragedy that we cannot banter" (*Ibidem*: 19), but also similarities: "[...] the east-European immigrant discovers that the indifference of the free world can be as cruel as the political police that he hated back home" (*Ibidem*: 20). This apparent detachment tends to become compelling, disturbing for the soul of an "incurable romantic", for whom "despairs [...] only make sense in the world to which he returns" (*Ibidem*: 22) and his mind and soul "do not pass easily a border that would probably lay somewhere between the Caucasus and the Urals" (*Ibidem*: 23).

The parallel West-East deepens as we go further into the text, noticing an obvious attempt to highlight the European East, "[…] even more European than the West" (*Ibidem*: 24), for:

> the West, the individual expresses himself mostly through business, through economical initiatives, through commerce, through the services network, shortly in the fields where he has a chance to succeed, to obtain money, to create a situation, whereas in the East, awakened from a long mortification, he rushes, noisily and randomly, in all directions. A liberty that he does not how to use makes him hysterical, but probably never have so many people spoken at the same time (*Ibidem*: 25).

The motivation of approaching to the culture and the mentality of an East of Europe, even distorted by a still alive communism in un-assumed "liberty", is a structural one: "I cannot convert to the religion of pragmatism, under whose sign America lives, in the same way I cannot get near Buddhism. The East makes you feel like an insect. America made me perceive my sentimentalism as an infirmity" (*Ibidem*: 27). At a communicational level the precipice between civilizations seems to deepen, since, for a newcomer from the East things become more and more complicated, outlining the infirmities left by a regime preoccupied to substitute itself to you: "I was struck here in America by a simple, direct, practical way of communication, without too many nuances and detours, one that I hardly agree with. I find it dry, cold. And I do not think I can blame my taste for digressions, for speculation, that finds itself annoyed. I

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fear that my old habit of speaking with my mouth shut, of using allusions, self-explaining things, in order to get over the vigilance of the censorship, further shows its effect". "At a national level, we have a taste for chatter just like the Americans have a genius for making money out of nothing" (Paler, *op. cit.*: 31-32).

At the same time, his friend Andrei, without agreeing with the little exaggerated idea that Don Quixote moved to the East, also denounces "the inner emptiness" of the West, a subject to which the author himself reflects almost obsessively. In America, says the author, where "history is found at the level of family albums" (*Ibidem*: 11), and where "life is like a conveyer" (*Ibidem*: 17), "(…) everything is possible, except the heroic gratuity" (*Ibidem*: 23). thus: "It is true, even if in front of the technical civilization of the West we sometimes feel like barbarians, I don't find the West spiritually superior. Besides, all the misfortune this part of Europe experienced cannot, in my opinion, give birth to nothing. Christianism is born less from Jesus' preaching and more from Golgotha. But the reasons that make me take seriously Don Quixote's immigration to the East are more complicated" (*Ibidem*: 57-58). The writer's opinion on finding Don Quixote's idealism in the European space is one of disappointment: "[…] the chance Don Quixote offered to Europe was not quite understood" (*Ibidem*: 69). In an era of irremediable pragmatism, the noble knight descended from the windmills seems old fashioned. The world full of "waiting rooms" (*Ibidem*: 7), which rushes more and more, has no more time for allusions. In exchange, for us Romanians, recently emerged from wreckage of the machine named communism, we need illusions to survive, we need a purifying model that we find with Cervantes.

Don Quixote obsessed me, confesses the author, even from high school years, when being a proud and awkward teenager come from the foot of the Fagaras mountains and incapable to adapt to the new society of Bucharest, sought refuge in books, dreaming about reconstituting the Spanish hero's itinerary. This frenzy in which he devoured the books coincided with the troubled period of the war and afterwards with the first years of forced communization of the country: "I had from early years a weak perception of reality and a predisposition to bovarism. […] I was like a mole digging random galleries in the subterranean of its own realities" (*Ibidem*: 111-114).

"The new story of Don Quixote" (*Ibidem*: 102) will begin in the European east and will have three successive episodes. At the beginning, the refuse of accepting the totalitarian order, of "having another opinion", judging otherwise than imposed (*Ibidem*: 102), will bring Don Quixote predictable persecutions, but also isolation in order to "heal him from illusions" (*Ibidem*: 103). Sancho Panza will turn his back on him trying not to endanger his family, his friends will avoid him in order not to be suspected of "antisocialist" sympathies, for he had become a "dissident", a "suspect" (Idem). The reticence of the world also hides another explanation, more natural for those times: "His courage highlighted our fear. As long as nobody had said a word, our excuses and vindications functioned perfectly. We had no reason to be embarrassed because of compromises. They seemed normal, necessary, almost unavoidable. But Don Quixote came to break this silence in which everyone was trying "to get along" to the best of his abilities. He proved us that "it is possible", that it is not compulsory to be a coward, cautious, "wise". From here to malice there was a single step (Paler, *op. cit.*: 104). The consequence of facing the truth in a world contaminated with fear and lies is that of refusing it, of camouflaging it between the thick walls of conscience: "A brave man is an unpleasant mirror in a society haunted by fear" (Idem). The second episode comprised the short euphoria of the revolution, in which Don Quixote suddenly concentrated admiration and collective gratitude emerged to light from the folds of the

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overcome fear: "Don Quixote became then, unfortunately for a little time, idol and role model. We were all happy and confessed our gratitude. This was a moment of maximum and ephemeral glory for Don Quixote, with us […]" (*Ibidem*: 105). But in the end Don Quixote's heroism is condemned by the fiery consciences, is blasphemed and mocked at, shouting to his face "death to intellectuals!", and being "beaten" by the miners sent to clean Piața Universității from "hooligans".

In this volume, Paler identifies himself with Don Quixote representing the symbol of the alienation of the exiled coming from a concentrating system. Don Quixote's destiny is more tragic here than with Cervantes, for: "Don Quixote saw in those windmills some dissimulated monsters. And communism is such a monster – for a long time hidden behind the mask of humanism […]" (Puric, 2008: 16). Octavian Paler approaches "from a critical perspective a series of aspects that aim at the dark side of history of the last decades" (Idem), the background of events that precipitate on the political scene of freed from communism Romania. An able and moderate rhetor, the writer's literary discourse becomes reflexive, sentimental, insinuating to the limit of taking off the masks for, if the communist system, Octavian Paler writes, was a time of masks, post communism is a time of dropping them. But the liberty gained in this way marks a new evil period, that of troubled waters, of authority crisis, of all the excesses. In contradiction with the totalitarian period, Octavian Paler points himself out deeply disappointed by the present: "Before the revolution, I imagined liberty in an almost puerile manner, like a happy relaxation that should end the treading on the wire. I was not suspecting that the confusion of escaping the cage initially leads to hysteria" (Paler, *op. cit.*: 45). Moreover, not even our past is satisfactory, the Romanian's passivity in history, our so called ethnical "moderation" that we find in Grigore Ureche's statements, who appreciated that we were put in front of adversities and Miron Costin's for whom "man is not above times, but, on the contrary, the poor man is under the times" (*Ibidem*: 318). Octavian Paler with a slightly redundant lyrical frenzy, consider that "our fatalism is not quite innocent" (Idem), it served us as a consolation and an excuse for our inactivity transformed into virtue, one of our national shortcomings: "We do not quite have a taste for utopia, nor the feeling of tragic, so it seems. The obsession of utility follows us even in sacrifices" (*Ibidem*: 319-320).

In a world that tends to become uniform, where the individual "means nothing more than a screw in mechanism" (*Ibidem*: 152), "acrobatics" almost became a law (Idem), and truth was "a paste that could take any shape" (*Ibidem*: 155). One after another are exposed to us the resorts of "the acrobatic man" produced by the communist regime, who "[…] is not just a man that treads o a wire, careful to the trainer's whip. Gradually, on the wire, he becomes another man. First he is preoccupied, then obsessed with what "is allowed" and what "is forbidden". He takes care in not exposing himself, not betraying himself. He gets used to shut his mouth, not to reveal his inner life. His main concern is not to communicate to others what he feels, what he believes, but to hide as well as he can. Practically, "the acrobatic man" is an individual who gets so accustomed to hypocrisy, that at a given moment, he misses the fact that he is playing a role, that he wears a mask and that he gets scared if, unwillingly, he carelessly blabs a truth which does not comply with the official lie. The "acrobatic man" is a serious clown, who lives with his makeup on, from morning till evening, and sometimes does not remove it even in intimacy. He comes closer and closer to "the new man", who has no more objections and is prepared to applause anything" (Paler, *op. cit.*: 168-169). This absolutely natural placement of "the new man" both sides of the balance is surprising: "I fear "the new man" was not only created in the East, Andrei. He seems to have been

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was also created in the West, too. […] Here, communism has created an "acrobatic man". There, pragmatism has created a robotized man, a superior and efficient machine for making money" (*Ibidem*: 195).

A man of reveries, of idealisms, Don Quixote was moved to the post-communist east, in a time of total denial, when "[…] nobody has no longer the necessary patience for admiration". Though his friend Andrei, by his noted opinions that counterbalance the pathetical discourse of the essayist, warns him that "justice is not on the side of idealists", Octavian Paler believes that a Don Quixote raised to the rank of role model could help Romanians escape "the moral misery": "As long as we find Don Quixote funny, we understand nothing from the seriousness which he sets out with" (Paler, 2002: 1). If in the West. Don Quixote remains an idealist failed in lucidity through the final acceptance of his own madness, in the East the hero fights the windmills against communist regimes: "Illusions are especially necessary in hell. This is why in the East Don Quixote has faced terror and the madhouse, after in the West he had faced indifference and laughter" (Paler, *op. cit.*: 107). The disappointment caused by the state of the nation in post revolutionary years can only be saved through idealism: "There is so much filth in today's unrest, so much moral and intellectual misery, so much degradation, that, in order to resist, idealism must be either heroic or lived as a helplessness of being different" (Paler, 1995: 1).

Consequently, the modern Romanian society offers the essayist several painful conclusions, for the "new" world we entered courage has lost its sense "because nobody cares what they say"; "those of us having «a different opinion» resemble more and more to the Persians that hit the sea with their rods, after the battle of Salamina" (Paler, 1994: 143). The author's frustrations do not cease to appear in front of the limitative perception of "the new man" on the fact that life before '89 meant in fact to stand "a mediocre nightmare" instead of a tragedy. The reaction of that who lived history and did not let himself lived by it is of defending himself, of escaping the shadow cone of culpability by uttering a purifying discourse:

> I have done nothing dirty, I have consciously caused no harm to anyone, but I fear I have been silent too long, that I have screamed too little, that I have excessively controlled myself, that I have analyzed too much my words, my attitudes, that I have put a bit in my own mouth, that I have put myself on an invisible strait jacket and I forced myself sleeping, walking and living in it, that I have always cut my claws, compelling myself not to cause a great scandal, even when I felt like screaming, that I have too often preferred the insipid taste of a reasonable life, and now, at more than thirty, I have the nostalgia of Don Quixote's «mad» sincerity. «The acrobatic» life that I led unfortunately pushed me to be, if not «wise», something close to it. I have kept myself from committing an irreparable «madness», that is a true «madness». It may be the reason why my Don Quixote attitude remained within some «reasonable» limits and it took me long to discover that the apparently funny Don Quixote is, in fact, a tragic character (*Ibidem*: 172-173).

Caught in the labyrinth of his own darkness, the writer is surrounded by the regrets that torment him, as once Chronos devoured his children: "Nietzsche thought that regrets are like a dog eating stone and my first impulse is to state that, as for me, I would have to feed packs of dogs to whom I would have to provide entire rocks […]. The negative part of my survey is especially the consequence of some desires and aspirations that I never dared consider natural" (Paler, *op. cit.*: 173). The writer uselessly displayed his regrets and remorse, being "the only fool" (*Ibidem*: 341) driven by the frenzy by sincerity. Nowadays are in fashion sophisms like "actually, we are all guilty" (*Ibidem*: 341), in a note of erasing the difference between the victim and the

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executioner rather than reconciliation: "Anyway, my generation probably lost its right to teach lessons of morale. What should we teach to whom? All we could desire is to struggle to make ourselves understood" (*Ibidem*: 235). Starting from Baudelaire's statement: "The true civilization […] does not reside in the steam machine, but in diminishing the original sin" (*Ibidem*: 354), Don Quixote's "madness" is not an exaltation of an inner chimera, it tends to the essential and to holiness. "The ontology" of the great character is very well grasped by N. Steinhardt in *The diary of happiness*: "The world is God's creation, but the world contaminated by sin and made accomplice by the Devil, *this* world (…) is but a secondary image, deformed, deviated – and which is an illusion, that peasants and townsfolk see, consider it a tavern, but Don Quixote knows to be a castle – it is his *world*" (Steinhardt, 1994: 90).

The lesson of the knight wandering through illusions is not one of measure, of moderation, that could follow the recommendation of the seven ancient scholars, written "on the frontispiece of Apollo's temple in Delhi, "nothing too much" (Paler, *op. cit.*: 274), but it is one from which we learn that "[…] an unaccomplished life is a life that lacks any type of excess" (Idem) and that "[…] in order to give your "measure" you have to be "without measure", to make available your whole power to desire, to believe" (*Ibidem*: 282). The following statement of the writer comes to complete the idea that measure is good only for those who do not have the courage to confront their own lives:

> Sometimes failures can be more instructive than successes because they give us a more real, more accurate measure of our aspirations, proving that wanted more than we achieved, that, at the level of desires, we are in fact better […]. After all, it is graver to have mediocre illusions than to live a mediocre life. For a mediocre life there are also explanations that depend only in part on you. In exchange, what justifications you may have for mediocre illusions? (*Ibidem*: 72-73).

Living in a present in which "[…] the past is not dead […]. Many times, it is quite active. It infiltrates, like phreatic water, in what "is", it trickles in what "will be […]" (*Ibidem*: 263), the writer can only see the salvation of some "twisted destinies" (*Ibidem*: 193) through *hope*, swallowed in large quantities and turned into "some kind o f sedative" (*Ibidem*: 264) of transition. For an existentialist by structure, the idea of life can be but frightening and uncontrollable, the author being convinced that "[…] the most natural desperation is in the love of life" (*Ibidem*: 175) and if there were a Mephesto, he would give "all his pride […] for a little art of living" (Idem). The prose writer finally assumes his destiny in a stoic reconciliation with himself and the world "[…] life is still more than a series of "business" between childhood and the grave. […] All I know is that I have to further bear the door on my back" (Paler, *op. cit.*: 379).

Victorious or not when fighting the Minotaur "Octavian Paler shows himself aware of the relativity of any approach and rejects from the beginning, in what he states, the presumption of the hieratic, absolute truth. Still he totally assumes the 379 pages of his journal, whose «public» character guarantees its authenticity. […] And the book deserves, first of all, the qualificative *authentic*, one being able to consider it a health cure of the writer in transitional times, a necessary intellectual prophylaxis. I wonder, how many men of culture had/will have the courage to administer it to themselves with the same sincerity?" (Ciobanu, *op. cit.*: 42).

Octavian Paler's book is a biography masked by different reflexive intentions, by little attempts of compared psychology, as well as by certain prospective thinking:

> In all my books I have been sincere, but none of them has so dramatically raised me the question of sincerity like the fight with myself. I always had to remember that I had taken a bet when starting to write *Don Quixote in the East*: to try not to care about what I think,

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> as Don Quixote does, to whom I am much connected, but, unfortunately, whose useless heroism I have never reached (Diaconescu, 1998: 24).

There is even a resemblance between *Don Quixote in the East* and Emil Cioran's book, *Romania's Transfiguration*, both writers achieving a "discourse for the nation" (G. Călinescu) and emphasizing the political side to the others' detriment.

Despite the pronounced subjective aspect, the personalization of ideas and the desire not to abusively generalize, *Don Quixote in the East* is a very good moral and social radiography of the post December period. Octavian Paler's reflections ruthlessly penetrate the essence of many of the actual social phenomena, his conclusions having more than once aphoristic qualities: "A courageous man is an unpleasant mirror in a society haunted by fear" (Paler, *op. cit.*: 104); "Regrets are sometimes like untreated diseases, that never heal […]" (*Ibidem*: 121); "If you totally lose your faith in others, all that you are left with is your inner hell" (*Ibidem*: 145); "cannot be a medieval castle, with its surrounding bridges raised" (*Ibidem*: 167); "[…] history is not made by idealists" (*Ibidem*: 293); "To the limit, by irony any Golgotha becomes a fair" (*Ibidem*: 330); "All that the East still seem to offer Don Quixote is the glory of shame" (*Ibidem*: 370), etc. However, at least with Octavian Paler the most interesting part in this book is the one having a biographical character, the writer always being more of a dreamer, a solitary than a man of action: "The moral stake of the book is, in fact, the attempt to understand «Romania's tragedy» and, why not, our own tragedies […]" (Vijeu, 2004: 230). We can notice a certain state of neurotic tension that floats over all the pages of *Don Quixote in the East*, which determines the writer to turn to the outside out of a wish for confession, exhortation, nostalgia, sentimentalism. All these give him something of the aspect of "the knight with the sad looks" (Munteanu, 1994: 242).

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