The absurd of modern life – the interface between two different literary identities: Samuel Beckett and Octavian Paler

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Two writers situated, in time, in two different cultural environments, exponents of the modern, protestant spirit they decline the Romantic spirit and thematically approach the essence of the contemporary life from a different perspective. Any breach in the traditional literary approach is often welcomed by historians and exegetes. However striving into this direction doesn't imply a great effort because going beyond the apparent simplicity you may be surprised to find yourself, sometimes tragically, amidst wonderfully presented realities. Sometimes these representations, if judged by the poetry of the text, are commonplace (see the play of Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*). Ab nitio, you may ask yourself if this is the case of an extraordinary creation. Yet, differently will Octavian Paler's novel *Life on a Platform* appear to the reader.

Poet, novelist and playwright, Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), "an Irishman based in France", exponent of the "contemporary nihilism", and of the theatre of the absurd (Nobel Prize in 1969), publishes, in 1952, *En attendant Godot* ('Waiting for Godot'). A play – as Horia Lovinescu points out – meant to conquer "one after the other all the great capitals of the world – which has become a reference work for the theatre of the absurd" (*Preface* to the Romanian edition, Univers, 1970).

Our simple curiosity leads us to investigate its content (a play in two acts, with five characters – Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo, Lucky and the boy), to find its plot and the poetry of the text, in order to establish if a work written for the stage will touch the conscience of the spectators with its content and originality, if a creator will make you feel as being in front of an exceptional piece of writing, due to the emotions created through the plot. And then you are entitled to consider it a "masterpiece". The critical, contemporary spirit is carried away by the outside facets of some mythos disregarding the depths. Exegesis without hermeneutical effort!

The components of Beckett's play are willingly limited – "a country road", a tree, and, at first, two characters: Estragon and Vladimir, both waiting for the enigmatic saviour, Godot. They will be later accompanied by Pozzo, Lucky and the boy (Pozzo becomes "blind"). Difficulties in pulling off a boot, attempts to leave away, boring chats, suicidal intentions:

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> Estragon: What if we hung ourselves? (by the branch of the tree with a rope. They give up as they are waiting for Godot): 'We are waiting for Godot!'.

The obsession of an enigmatic waiting! This is interwoven into the plot of the play.

The revolt against a gloomy existence, that lacks any opportunity, bursts out during the second act:

> Vladimir: Of course! You won't admit! Estragon (becoming angry): To admit! What to admit! I've lived this horrible life amidst the sands! And you want me to see the shades! (He looks around) Look at this trash! I've never moved from it!

Here there is a key to Estragon's tragic existence that goes beyond the stage.

Their waiting for a saviour traces its roots into the ancient memory of many peoples: waiting for a "saviour" (a Messiah) as the liberator of a community, or a divine being, a "soul saviour", that could bring a new world order.

The archetype of a long-awaited saviour can be met in the ancient Iranian and Jewish cultures. (see this motif in Charles Autran's study, *Mitra-Zoroastru. Arian History of Christianity*, Antet, 1995, p. 10162). There are also texts written by Jewish prophets – after the exile – where we meet the saviour in both hypostases. Thus, waiting is a psychic archetype, taken from the 19th century Romantics, as well as from the Neo-Romantics of the following century.

In the Romanian literature, the archetype embodies either a political or a metaphysical ideal. The modern man is tired and disoriented. And yet, he does not fail to wait. There is the "biblical waiting"[1], metaphysical and socio-political, romantic, erotic etc. In the Romantic writings the awaiting is sometimes based on the idea of entitled revolt! People wait for a saviour to accomplish a social and national ideal (see some stanzas from *Cântarea României* by Alecu Russo, Şt. O. Iosif, *Către tinerii poeți* and Octavian Goga's poem, *Clăcaşii*). It should be worth mentioning that the psychic archetype of the waiting, belonging to a community, hinting at a Messiah under various hypostases should be searched for, as stated before, in the Biblical writings (see Charles Autran).

Returning to Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, and Octavian Paler's novel, *Life on a Platform*, published in two different periods but thematically similar they should be analyzed taking into consideration some critical delimitations. There is in Beckett's play an art of short dialogue, seemingly trivial, mostly between Vladimir and Estragon. Superficial dialogues, repetitions that do not change the course of action or the heroes' mobility, who remain in a state of prostrated stillness. The two interlocutors willingly remain in the same obscure setting, coming up with no new ideas:

> Estragon: 'Let's leave'. Vladimir: 'We can't'. Estragon: 'Why?' 'Vladimir: We are waiting for Godot'.

The absurd is shaped here by having the audience face the same plain grey language and the same setting. Their universe is definitely closed; they live in a well-defined old archetypal world, a mediocre and abrupt one that lacks any inner power. The tragic of their existence derives from this human degradation. The

[1] See *Lucas*, 7v9: "John called two of his apostles and sent them to Jesus to ask him: 'Are you the Awaited One or should we wait for another one?'".

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poetry of the text and a closer look over the means of sketching the dialogue make us consider this play a real masterpiece. Still, there are limits that scholars should take into consideration. But the fact that the playwright is able to speak about the tragedy of "human existence" – as noticed by Horia Lovinescu – cannot be ignored.

If in Samuel Beckett's play we find the "anxiety of waiting" for a man without a biography, thus an anonymous, perceived as a saviour, the emotional ruminations found in the philosophical novel of Octavian Paler, *Life on a Platform* are presented differently both in form and concept. The protagonist of this novel is the author, the writer himself, who is in an imaginary self-exile. Where? In an empty train station, on a platform, a waiting room, a swamp, a forest, or in other words a doomed world where the philosophical reflections, expressed in parables, embody the idea of tragic.

The waiting room and the empty platform where nobody comes to or leaves from! A "Decalogue", "written" and "hung on the wall of the waiting room"; "a place where the expectations are useless!". A Neo-Romantic, protestant demon retired from the town, where people live in a "golden lie".

The demon points his finger to: "a cave, a huge prison", imagined as a prison "without walls", without "guardians" and without any wire netting. Here there are the cobra tamers. They can kill or dehumanize you. "There have come in town some strange cobra tamers. At first, people looked at them with sympathy…". "Strange job, they said to themselves. By the time they tamed the cobras, they must have taken the risk of being bitten". "Then… the compassion" mingled with "the disgust", and then with "fear". The tamers often leave the street to knock from door to door asking shamelessly for their "part". Any refusal will be punished by the cobra which knows no forgiveness. Scenes full of tragic! In the empty station, "loneliness overwhelms you", and "emptiness digests you as a boa". Here there is nothing but the awaiting. This is "our journey, our way of traveling".

The art of confession in "parables", with philosophical ruminations, tracing its roots from other cultures is fascinating. It is a first line of demarcation with Samuel Beckett's "logos". Radu Sorescu, in a study on Octavian Paler's work (Sorescu 1996: 26, 27), highlights some ideas related to the concept of the "waiting": there is the anxious awaiting, devoid of imagination that often disappears once it has lost its purpose. There is also a calculated awaiting whose pragmatism is inert, as well as the awaiting that arises from one's conscience regardless any preexistent pattern. All of them are of earthly origins and all end in metaphysics. If the "awaiting" implies an absence – as considered by the same scholar – the illusions created by this state offer one's conscience the certainty of one's existence. "The silence and the emptiness are only two of the facets of loneliness".

In Samuel Beckett's play the "awaiting" and the logos, lost in questions and hurried answers, mostly without depth, does not lead to serious reflections. In Octavian Paler's novel, the Eros, being under the sign of an oppressive regime, openly confronts with the cobra tamers. "In his work, the station, the platform, the waiting room, the swamp, the emptiness, the shore, the asylum, the mirrors hall, the bull fight, all resemble the cells of an infinite prison" (Sorescu 1996: 45).

Samuel Beckett presents his characters using gestures, intentions, and syncopated language. Except Estragon and Vladimir – Pozzo, Lucky and the boy are

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rather decorative figures, meant to maintain the illusion of the tiring dialogue. It may be stated that in *Life on a Platform*, apart from Eleonore, the imaginary partner for "loneliness", the real characters are situated, at times, behind the stage. Their portraits are drawn using parables and confessions. The author's separation from Eleonore is an imaginary one, too. The writer, as a protagonist, is "afraid of", yet he takes the risk to cross "the desert beyond the forest". "Victim or tamer, either do I manage to tame the cobra or let it bite me". "I've dreamt to remain a human being and struggled as much as I could".

The writer willingly uses a figurative discourse, a flowery language full of philosophical metaphors, creating a fluent allegory. Octavian Paler's novel, as mentioned before, impresses with its deep reflections, its wealth of ideas pointing to and anxiously searching for answers.

The struggle, the revolt, the acute anxiety and the awaiting outline the desire to escape from another inferno never imagined in his romantic youth. Re-reading his novel, now and again, we pose the question: shouldn't Octavian Paler have received applause for this novel, a wreath of laurel for his entire work?

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L'absurde de la vie moderne: interface des deux identités culturelles différentes: Samuel Beckett et Octavian Paler

Les deux écrivains, exponents majeurs du modernisme dans la littérature, appartiennent à des époques et à des cultures différentes. Malgré tout, ils explorent un thème commun – l'absurd de l'existence humaine dans la société contemporaine. En attendant Godot ou attendant un train dans la gare est une et la même interface de l'angoisse existentielle.

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