„GALILEO'S DEFENSE" THROUGH THE EYES OF OCTAVIAN PALER

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Abstract: "Galileo's Defense" places writer Octavian Paler in the stance of moralist of his time, stance that will become iconic for his articles. This dialogue is one "about prudence and love", starting from Galileo Galilei's well documented case. Octavian Paler resorts to this classical symbol with a view to metaphorically but obviously express his disagreement towards the political mingling in human creativity, be it scientific or artistic. In this "imaginary" process of defending Galilei is actually concentrated the artist's destiny, placed between compromise and resistance, against a totalitarian dystopia. This historical character, Galileo Galilei, is used by the author as a voice of his own consciousness, and the idea of the inquisitional terror constitutes as an echo of the restrictive and limitative times on all the levels throughout the author's life.

Keywords: dialogue, Galileo Galilei, Inquisition, symbol, totalitarian

Introduction

The Romanian prose emerging on the background of an epoch of social convulsion is marked, as a real *fatum*, by politics.

The novels of the 70s, the prose in general, "has been chosen to do the necessary services and reflect, at the risk of generating a degradation of the aesthetic level, the desires manifestated by the party. The relation, once mentioned by Sartre, between prose and ideology is fully confirmed now."[1] Resistance through culture / writing" represents the resistance of the authentic art and literature in front of the ideological pressure. The destinies of the "executioners," annihilated by the mechanism that they themselves, the self-proclaimed "shapers" of history called into play, are associated with a similary experience of the "victims" fascinated by the game of power. This dream of power that those self-exiled in their personal utopia shape as a space of consolation in front of the terror of history marks the destinies of all the heroes in Octavian Paler's novels: *Life on a Station Platform*, *A Lucky Man*, *Galileo's Defense*.

Galileo's Defense confers the writer the quality of a moralist of his times, hypostatsis that will become emblematic for his articles, too. This dialogue deals with "prudence and love," staring from the case of Galileo Galilei, well-documented by the writer: "At the level of personal psychology, Galileo Galilei embodies the interior drama and endless suffering of the thinker damned to give up his own convictions publicly. It was not an accident tyhe fact that during Ceaușescu's regime, when any intellectual initiative was cancelled, when thinking itself was forced to express itself in ideological terms, when the wooden language destroyed the human personality too early, Octavian Paler resorts to this classical symbol; he manifests metaphorically, but evidently enough, his disagreement with the political interference in the

[1] Eugen Negrici, *The Romanian Literature under Communism*, Fundația Pro, (Pro Foundation), Bucharest, 2003, p. 47.

human creativity, whether scientific or artistic. The allusions are too many and obvious to be considered accidental. (...) By this book, the Romanian intellectuals are indirectly exonerated from the guilt for the tacit agreement and the concessions they made with the power, in the name of the joy to create and live; we deal here with a certain category of intellectuals, those that have resorted to the Galileo Galilei's stratagem in order to survive, and not with the category of the opportunists, ready to make any kind of compromise, to gain access to privileges and power."[2] Octavian Paler focuses on the Renaissance hero, in his work entitled *Galileo's Defense* (1978), a purely Platonist dialogue, that reminds us of *Socrates Defense* or *Criton*."[3]

„*Galileo's Defense*" in the vision of Octavian Paler

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. *Galileo's Defense* was published in 1978 (when Paler was 50 years old) and reedited (with a few modifications), 20 years later. There are more than 200 pages of dialogue, an imaginary dialogue beween the author and *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 dystopia that is based on the political allegory seems to find its opposite in the utopia of art; the latter becomes itself, more or less latently, the object of deconstruction: "the dialogue on prudence and love" takes shape from a calling concerned with the torture by effigy, common to all those in search of ideals, from the novels of the 1960s.

Essayistically contaminated, this novel represents "an overwhelming interrogation (…) and a number of moral justifications, that, all together put to the issue the relation between the truth and the ethics of the man that fights for the truth."[4] The author's appeal to Galileo's process stands for a form of his personal judgment, a confession of the anxieties and anguishes that preoccupy him, as the similaritz between the creative-self and the her's destiny. The idea of the terror instaurated by the Inquisition, in accordance with the times experienced by the writer himself, made Octavian Paler use *Galileo Galilei* as the voice of his own conscience.

In the middle of Octavian Paler's book, there lies the cult of life, rendered by Galileo's voice, the writer's *alter ego*. It is a confession that involves inner turmoil, a monologue of the one that abjured and whose conscience keeps him on the alert, accusing him of having been unable to carry out his destiny, dying for the Idea he did believe in: "You did nothing else but make me face my destiny and help me understand, using the same words, that one is able to hope

[2] Ionel Funeriu, *Romanian Editorialists*, Augusta, Timişoara, 1996, pp. 111-112.
[3] Nicolae Oprea, *Opera şi autorul*, Editura Paralela 45, Piteşti, 2001.
[4] Eugen Simion, *Contemporary Romanian Writers*, vol. III, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1984, p. 519.

and at the same time despair."[5]Galileo discovers life with its real values and meanings, so simple now, but so confusing before, at the end of his life, faced with an extreme situation: to choose "between the pyre and life," between the darkness of nothingness and the sun that lights and warms the hills, between the nothingness from beyond and the cypresses that now, after the impact with his own limits, represent for him the joy of life, its symbol: "(…) I like to see the clear sky early in the morning and the shining dew on the cypresses when the sun rises. There is something extremely beautiful in the way I begin my mornings on these hills and I just could never get tired of rejoicing in everything I would have missed, under other circumstances. Anything that exalts life, helps me grow away from the pyre."[6]

Although he abjured, Galilei could not save himself from the pyre; he continues to live haunted by another pyre, not the one that burns immediately until it turns everything into ashes, but by one equally unmerciful: the pyre within himself. Galilei carries inside himself, in his soul, "an injury that will never be healed"[7] and that transforms his nights into nightmares. The old man that had abjured discovers now that instead of talking about "fear," he should talk about "love," that "death lacks tenderness," that after he had lied at death's door, he can finally what happiness is: "Each second the earth tells us the same thing, that death lacks tenderness. If we manage to understand this language, the pyres are never right."[8]

Galilei actually represents the man reduced to his essence, "(…) a particularized hypostasis of a human general aspect."[9] This return to the originary condition can only be achieved by reaching a subliminal level. The life discovered after having gone through that extreme experience, is less fascinating than the previous one: it is divided now between the sun and the agile cypresses during the day and the terrible nightmares experienced during the night, between light and darkness, paradise and hell, life and death. The man divided between the diurnal peace and the nocturnal turmoil comes to face another limit-situation, that he overcomes due to love for what he has got left: life. Now, "reason gets tired before the heart does" and this brings about the vulnerability of the human being: "When you feel more than you understand, you become extremely vulnerable."[10]

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. Galilei is not actually faced with the dilemma concerned with either supporting or giving up his faith in the truth, he finds himself in front of the discretionary and blind power, in its fanatism: "I have never dared to revolt against the Inquisition. (…) I have always detested the inquisitors, without showing it. I preferred to express my discontentment in silence and there are things that I have never dared to tell anybody. I closed them inside myself, lest I should give myself away. If they had suspected something, they would have crushed me like a grub."[11] The conflict related to the character's will seems to be annihilated by the crushing inequality with the opposite part and also

[5] Octavian Paler, *Galileo's Defense*, Albatros, Bucharest, 1997, p. 230
[6] Octavian Paler, *Galileo's Defense*, Albatros, Bucharest, 1997, p. 26.
[7] *Ibidem*, p. 25.
[8] *Ibidem*, p. 27.
[9] Mircea Tomuş, *The Literary Movement*, Eminescu, Bucharest, 1981, p. 209.
[10] *Ibidem*, p. 67.
[11] *Ibidem*, p. 140.

by the fact that, loving life "hopelessly," he preferred failure to holiness and divinity: "A world without martyrs is a world incapable to defend the truth."[12]

Each line in this book seems to be dedicated to life itself, as the unique escape from the hell of the inquisitorial fear and terror: "Inquisition threatens us precisely because it feels in our love for life a danger for its allmightiness."[13] Galilei does not defend himself, he defends life, by the refusal of a pyre he no longer believed in and by the elimination of glory and martirization: I do not think the world needs martyrs. Why should we need examples about how we can die? (…) the martyrs may have lived a failed life, but they did not fail their death."[14] Thus, a possible gesture of human weakness becomes a real act of conscience. The successive embodiment of such characters as Nero, Oedipus, an inquisitor, suffering in their place, turns Galilei into a communicating vessel of history, an assumption of the entire human condition. The projection of this suffering becomes its inner pyre, also amplified by the obsessive image of teh venomous snakes, as a symbol of the purifyng fear: "The day lays between myself and the inquisitors everything that surrounds me. Neither their intentions, nor their questions can affect me anymore. I am somehow defended by the light, the summer, the fruits. But, during the night, while I am sleeping, I am defendless. Then the snakes start to twist, to make restless movements in my dream."[15]

Meridional structure, similar to the French writers France de Gide, Montherlant, Camus, where the solar indulgence is accompanied by a sceptic reflection, by a virile melancholy, lacking ilusions, Octavian Paler dispenses with transcendence, being powerfully anchored in the immanent, with a certain "panic pathetism:" "I have always considered that I can only rely on the promises made in the life I am living now. Look at the cypresses. When the afternoon light overshadows them, they resemble some monks. However, there is nothing saint in them, or at least they make me imagine a saint with his arms full of fruits and grass smelling like the fragrances of summer."[16]

The religious theme seems to have here a heretical turn, as Octavian Paler adheres to the perspective of a pantheistic thinking and the meaning of the Orthodox faith seems to be diverted: "My god has a simpler name, actually several names. Summer. Light. The beating heart. Life. (…) Some would like to convince us of the fact that the only reason of this world would be to confess and admit our sins, but my sin consists precisely in the fact that I am not ashamed to feel sinful. In the absence of the earth, the sky does not value anything."[17] ; "My world is a world without saints."[18] Paler becomes a poet of the communion with a nature that functions as an emodiment of being: "Now, everything I encounter speaks to me about what I carry inside myself."[19] Galilei seems to be ossified between the cypresses: "I kept still a good while, (…) and I think there was no longer any difference between me and the cypresses that were rustling around, or the pines on the hill in front of me."[20] The natural elements protect the author similar to some divinities that answer his needs: "The trees, the rocks or the sky have never offended

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 133.
[13] *Ibidem*, p. 36.
[14] Octavian Paler, *Galileo's Defense*, Albatros, Bucharest, 1997,p. 22.
[15] *Ibidem*, p. 14.
[16] *Ibidem*, pp. 33 - 34.
[17] *Ibidem*, p. 113.
[18] *Ibidem*, p. 31.
[19] *Ibidem*, p. 96.
[20] *Ibidem*, p. 24.

me. Nobody has threatened me here. Nobody has forced me to believe something different from what I feel. if I am thirsty, I bend down and drink water from a spring, if I am sad, I stop and look at the clouds and birds."[21]

By his meditation on life, the author surpasses himself, taking part in a kind of intellectual transcendence. The philosophical ideas spring from the text as the juices from a ripe fruit, revealing us an artist that becomes one with an earthy Eden, maintaining however his lucidity by the mixture of freedom and suffering that he experiences: "(...) summer awakens inside myself all the wishes and regrets. I am almost similar to Oedipus. Suffering taught me to be free"[22] The perception of guilt by the resort to mythology, outlines a troubling image of this ancient conscience: "Death still seems to me a repulsive, unplesant mystery. In order to better understand certain things, maybe we must first be guilty."[23]

The old age, opposed to the Dyonisiac tumult, is envisaged by Octavian Paler as the end of the road and not as a salvation, as a spiritualization: "Yes, I am grateful that I exist and desperate that there will come a summer when I will no longer be able to notice how the light overshadows the cypresses in the afternoon, isn's this natural at my age? It hurts me everything I love now, because I anticipate the end in each and every beautiful thing, but maybe this is how real love looks like. Enjoy this ephemeral gift, a voice inside me cries, as all the gifts are ephemeral. Where do we come from? Where do we go? We do not go anywhere. Everything is here. (…) It is enough to see the sky, the cypresses, the sunny grass, to feel inside myself a bitter passion. Everything I do not touch now will remain forever lost. The only real paradises are those we wondered through, where we loved and were grateful, here is what I think about each morning when the light flows down the bark of the cypresses."[24]

This existential inability, the old age, reflects, by the fusion with the landscape, a degradation of the moral and physical world, perceived by means of an inevitable loneliness of the biological being. Everything seems to crumble, the sky, the light, the universe, as in a great solidarization with the human elements, under the haunting sign of the cypresses: "After having studied the sky so many years, calculating the movement of the stars, I discovered, only now, that while in the afternoon, the sky is dull, young and indifferent, when it gets dark, he grows old… Sometimes, when I was getting cold, it was enough to stretch my hands to the fire. Soon, the warm blood made me feel good, happy. Now, everything is different, especially in the afternoon, when the cypresses wave gloomily. Maybe it was destined for me, after having lived a spoiled life, to remain alone and not share my loneliness with anybody."[25] The only protection against degradation remain the memories, that somehow become sacred, coming up to the power of the absolute: "We are equal to the gods in front of our memories. Not even gods can change them. What happened does not lie within their power anymore. Neither does it lie within the power of destiny."[26]

However, undermined by the old age in the sphere of the biological, vitality is also threatened by an unnatural enemy, in the sphere of history, emodied by the Inquisition. Symbol of the oppressive structures, this plays the role of spiritual stigmatization, (a theme incomode for the ideology of totalitarism), that opposes the revealing nature. The inquisitors are "the agents of

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 96.
[22] Octavian Paler, *Galileo's Defense*, Albatros, Bucharest, 1997, p. 97.
[23] *Ibidem*, p. 125.
[24] *Ibidem*, pp. 28 – 29.
[25] *Ibidem*, pp. 177 - 178.
[26] *Ibidem*, p. 13.

an aggressive void," illustrating an antipode of life by immobility and torturous silence: "They ere lying in high armchairs, wearing expensive cloths and, after having stopped talking, no sound could be heard in the hall and a heavy silence reigned there. I had never imagined that it is so difficult to bear a silence that constraints you to remain in a place you would like to run away from. I felt like I was going to choke and be sick. What do they care about how the sun and the earth look like? I told myself. What do they have to do with the sun and the earth? I only wanted to share them something, anything and leave as quickly as possible... and never see them again. They were staring at me with empty, cold eyes, heartlessly."[27] Galilei is "always trapped between the burning pyre and the snakes of memory, that could be woken by his own words, the hro seems to be an easy victim, that cannot influence the mechanism of the historical fatality."[28] The oppressors take different forma within the imagination of the one tortured by the anguish caused by abjuration, turning his dreams into nightmares: "I dreamt a monster last night. He had a bird-like head and bulging, frog-like eyes. When it opened its mouth, it was hissing, as snakes do, or it was laughing boldly, similar to an immoral woman. «Abjure the thought that I could be a monster», it was hissing and it kept on laughing. «Abjure and declare that I am beautiful».";[29] "You have more and more strange nightmares. You make yourself responsible for what the Inquisition should do, Galilei, you are trying to do their job."[30]

The fear is terrible, invading the thoughts of man, "seized with loneliness," winding your way into his affections and and suffocating him with its tentacles, as: "The Inquisition understood that, in order to mutilate your soul, it is not always mandatory for them to uproot your nails. It is enough to make you be afraid, in order to force you say something different from what it is appropriate. Later, you will say with complete goodwill what it likes to hear. You will have no other choice."[31] By fear, the human being is pushed to the wall and destroyed from the inside by her own tribulation. "To say the truth, the Inquisition is not just an instituion. Or it is more than an institution. It is a disease, a plague that paralyses sincerity in the people. It inhabits each of us."[32] As Octavian Paler was going to say later in an interview: "I was trying to encourage myself speaking about fear, as I have done in *Life on a Station Platform*, or searching for consolation inside this fear, as I have done in *Galileo's Defense*. (…) There has always existed an imaginary Rubicon that I have never dared to face."[33]

The resistance of those guided by "the love for life" against the modern Inquisition represents a stringent necessity of the human being, of the salavation of her essence, by love: "(…) love is for me something that opposes the fears, that fights against them (…). You are alone with yourself and your moral, exclusively based on your love for life. This world cannot absurd as long as we admit that it was born from love. Everything alive and everything that hums with life was born from love."[34] The malefic institution can be exorcized only by truth, by the unmasking of the universal evil: "(…) there is no perfect Inquisition as long as there is a single man that tells the truth."[35] The real conflict is not exterior, between the heretic and the

[27] Octavian Paler, *Galileo's Defense*, Albatros, Bucharest, 1997, p. 10.
[28] Cornel Moraru, *Text and Reality*, Eminescu, Bucharest, 1984, p. 146.
[29] Octavian Paler, Galileo's Defense, Albatros, Bucharest, 1997, pp. 48 – 49.
[30] *Ibidem*, p. 181.
[31] *Ibidem*, p. 173.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 64.
[33] Daniel-Cristea Enache, *The Drawer of the Romanian Writer*, Polirom, Iaşi, 2005, p. 164.
[34] Octavian Paler, *Galileo's Defense*, Albatros, Bucharest, 1997, p. 48.
[35] *Ibidem*, p. 231.

Inquisition. This absurd insitution stimulates, gives rise to another, primary conflict inside the man: the conflict between reason, with everything that it involves, and affectivity: "The humiliations the Inquisition had made me experience, had left my soul empty. The trust in myself, I have always been proud of, up to arrogance, was about to leave me pier on the edge of the road. Then, lest I should fall down, I decided to listen to my heart, not to my brain. This way, I could allow myself to feel, without having to understand, as there was nothing I could understand anymore."[36] This dichotomy is present in the case of man himself, the man reduced to his essence, the man that finds himself very close to the beginning, to his origin. Galilei contrasts the dogmatic conception of the Inquisition with a purely humanist principle: "they will never accept that in the middle of the universe, there is aman's heart. (…) the only real philosophical issue is life."[37] There is a drama, that is immanent to the human being, a drama discovered scoperit in a liminal situation, capable to make the individual return to oneself, to get him out of the influence manifested by the social mask, that had laid hold of him. The expression of this kind of drama seems to be embodied by Galilei. In Octavian Paler' parable, the authentic existence is the one lived in the empire of nightmares, that allows us to discover the path to ourselves and "the reconciliation" between the executioner and his victim: between Galilei, the one that, abjuring, ranges himself on the side of the Inquisition and the one that saves himself by suffering, similar to the blind Oedipus and Giordano Bruno.

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."[38]

Conclusion

Growing away from the book's essence, in this volume, we find more of Octavian Paler even more than in his autobiographical writings. A proof of this fact is represented by the necessity of a new version of the book. Reaching an older age, the essayist fells the need to amend certain things, in accordance with his new vision, without retracting what he wrote in the initial version: "Meanwhile, I understood that despair is a way of loving, a form of love, and that each great love has something tragical deep inside it. I realized, at the age of 70, that a sunny day can sometimes value more than heroism. Guided by this thought, I adjusted this new version of *Galileo's Defense.*" (Octavian Paler). This book is part of his parabolic novels, abounding in symbols and nuances: *Life On A Station Platform*, *A Lucky Man* and *Galileo's Defense*, dealing with the revelation of truth. 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 experiences of the heroes present in the novels of the 1960s, always end with the painful revelation of the existence of the inner executioner. The one of Octavian Paler's statements, significant for that period may be like a conclusion: "As long as there is one man that tells the truth, there is no perfect Inquisition. Although the nights defeated me, I can no longer separate truth from love. They are right only together. Now I know this."[39]

[36] *Ibidem*, p. 74.
[37] Octavian Paler, *Galileo's Defense*, Albatros, Bucharest, 1997, p. 52.
[38] Nicolae Manolescu, *The Critical History of Romanian Literature*, 5 centuries of literature, Paralela 45, Piteşti, 2008, p. 1177.
[39] Octavian Paler, *Galileo's Defense,* Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1978, pp. 243-244.

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