

## THE PALERIAN ESSAYISTIC IN „PRAY THAT YOU DON'T GROW WINGS”

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*Abstract: The essay is a form of literary prose that becomes fascinating through the opening it proposes and which we find approached by Octavian Paler in his work „Pray that You Don't Grow Wings”. As in his essayistic volumes: „Imaginary Letters”, „Cordial Polemics”, „Solitary Adventures”, „Pray that You Don't Grow Wings”, is underlined the easiness with which their author manifests his free spirit, unconstrained by patterns, by an obvious tendency of his involvement in the text, whose consequence is the gliding of the literary genres. In this sense, in this article we set out to identify in the work „Pray that You Don't Grow Wings” both the formal modalities of the essay, approached by the author, that tend to turn into forms of the literary genre under discussion, and the particularities emphasized by his work..*

*Keywords: confession, essay, memory, memorialistic essay, Octavian Paler*

### INTRODUCTION

The essay is a type of discourse frequently encountered in the contemporary culture, being associated with the mobile borders of literature, that have started to include not only its frontier literary genres, but also the paraliterature. Consequently, the essay is a form of literary prose, fascinating by the openness it deals with, being a chameleonic genre, where the ideas take the shape of the vessel they are put into. Constantly included in the explosive, intense prose, the essay is a genre found at the border between the belletristic and scientific styles, literature being for the essay “ (...) only an adoptive space (...)”<sup>1</sup> It is accepted in the field of literature because the author suggestively describes his vision on the world, but by his tendency to define various issues, he spiritually approaches a scientific paper. Nicolae Balotă calls it “a semi-literary genre,” that he includes “between the imagistic and ideological structures,” whereas Adrian Marino, within an article dedicated to the essay, considered the latter as a “hybrid” frontier genre, situated between literature and philosophy. Thus, the essay situated at the border between philosophy and literature convinces us by the full freedom related to the association of ideas, by the implicit subjectivity manifested by the writer, by the absence of a strict systematization and last but not least by the open ends.

The essay is to be found in the space of Romanian literature, as early as the XIXth century, – being anticipated by Eminescu, then developed as literary genre by Al. Odobescu. During the inter-war period, the genre was promoted by such writers as: Lucian Blaga, Camil Petrescu, Mihail Sebastian, Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Mihail Ralea, George Călinescu, etc. In the contemporaneity, the essay makes its presence felt by the acuity and originality of the reflections, in the works of such writers as: Andrei Pleșu, Alexandru Paleologu, Octavian Paler, Gabriel Liiceanu or Horia-Roman Patapievi.

Octavian Paler approaches the essay with its bivalent forms as: “novel - essay, letter - essay, dialogue - essay, memories - essay, autobiographical essay,”<sup>2</sup> being such associated

<sup>1</sup> Alina Pamfil, *The Essay. A Form of Anxiety*, Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 2000, p. 198.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem.*

with such writers as Marcel Proust, Albert Camus, Thomas Mann, Aldous Huxley, Unamuno, Ortega y Gasset. The magic potion that the writer offers his readers is the one according to which "(...) the essay and the prose are reconciled, conferring on the one hand an epic structure to the ideas and providing the narrative universe with a certain intellectual consistency, on the other hand."<sup>3</sup> Octavian Paler's essays celebrate culture, as a way existing in the world, by an obvious inclination to the intellectual speculation and justice related aspiration, by the meditative solitude and solitary conscience, by memory, lucidity and rigour. Paler seems to assume by means of the essay, the essential myths and problems of the whole world, slipping and turning "himself into ideas,"<sup>4</sup> as Marin Sorescu characterizes him. He projects the myths in his inner world, contaminating them with his existential obsessions, by which he confers them their own value judgments. Paler's qualities as an essay writer, present within all his volumes, *Imaginary Letters*, *Cordial Polemics*, *Solitary Adventures*, *Pray that You Don't Grow Wings*, reveal "(...) a real capacity to theoretize, to discover the problems, to study them thoroughly."<sup>5</sup>

### ESSAY APPROACH IN „PRAY THAT YOU DON'T GROW WINGS” BY OCTAVIAN PALER

*Pray that You Don't Grow Wings*<sup>6</sup> is another book of essays, that includes texts excerpted from the volumes *Cordial Polemics* and *Life as a Bullfight* and a few *Individual Pages*. The pages that contain real memorialistic and introspective essays are remarkable.

We recognize from the very beginning a fragment from *Cordial Polemics*, that carries the title of the book: *Pray that You Don't Grow Wings*. The reflection often starts from the close observation of the "eye that searches through realities."<sup>7</sup> Grand-Place in Bruxelles turns into a "stage" where the whole XXth century marches under the writer's looks resembling those of both a spectator and a philosopher, the contemporary history and the lucid meditation overlapping excellently: "A police car. Then an ambulance. An ambulance? There is no ambulance. The only solution is to be defended, protected. But who defends us? The policeman standing on the sidewalk disappeared. We are alone."<sup>8</sup> ; "A motorcyclist passes with the headlight turned on. It is 17.13. The sun is still burning, it did not climb beyond the tower of the city hall yet, and the motorcyclist had the headlight turned on. This does not help him, but thus, he gets out of the ordinary. He asserts himself. Actually, this is what we may all do"<sup>9</sup>. Octavian Paler has from the very beginning the melancholy of a Don Quixote that pays for his right to dream, in a world indifferent to the "voice of hope:" "Nowdays, we pay for everything, including our illusions."<sup>10</sup> Disparate happenings, traces of the ordinary, agitation of a life that follows its course by "(...) statues carved in relief. A rocky world that no longer prays or laughs."<sup>11</sup>, it just counterbalances a world of art speechless in front of the solitude experienced by "the one that cannot choose"<sup>12</sup>.

*The Fall of Icarus* from Bruegel's painting is the metaphor of that final cry against our fall in the general indifference: "(...) do not forget the century we are living in now. Pray that

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Cristea-Enache, *The Enigmatic Past*, *Adevărul literar și artistic*, no. 720, June 8, 2004, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Marin Sorescu, *Take Care while Bringing the Piano Downstairs*, *Cartea Românească*, Bucharest, 1985, p. 211.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> Octavian Paler, *Pray that You Don't Grow Wings*, Albatros and Universal Dalsi, Bucharest, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Valeriu Cristea, *Modesty and Pride*, *Eminescu*, Bucharest, 1984, p. 147.

<sup>8</sup> Octavian Paler, *Pray that You Don't Grow Wings*, Albatros and Universal Dalsi, Bucharest, 1995, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21.

you don't grow wings"<sup>13</sup>. We encounter in the pages of this book the same infusion with myths belonging to the ancient world, that has never disappointed the writer. Thus, we witness an original interpretation of the Promethean myth in *The Eagle's Revenge*. The executioner-bird becomes by its monologue the real protagonist and mankind's real source of inspiration, as: "I am sorry I have to tell you this, but you did not teach the people anything (Prometheus). They are the ones that learnt from us, from the eagles how to better tear each other to pieces"<sup>14</sup>. Prometheus, the one that brought the light-giving fire, warmth, courage, but also but also ashes, experiences the tragedy of the devouring inner unquietness, learning that the gods died, that people forgot their benefactor and that the only one that kept him company "in this solitude," the eagle, "(...) crushes its head against a rock"<sup>15</sup>. The vision of the retractile intellectual, heavy with the thoughts of abandoning one's own solitude, by the penetration into the labyrinth of culture is quite interesting.

*The Letters from an Unknown Woman*, three in number, are to be found here as well, intact, with the same respite of the imaginary discourse, of the epistle sent from the *self* towards the others, images in the morror. Octavian Paler's need of confession is visceral. He tries by means of the discourse to clarify his existential problems, to convince himself of the thoroughness of his ideas. Paler's talent as a prose writer is put forward together with these pages that are meant to be the remembrance of certain moments from the life of a lonely woman on New Year's Eve, subjected to the same solitude, so dear to the writer, that can either save, or kill you. The philosophical ideas spring from the text, as the drops of water chaotically thrown from an artesian well: "Didn't you notice the people's weaknesses are to be found right in front of them?"<sup>16</sup>; "It is only the gifted ones, the ones that pay a lot of attention to the scale pointer"<sup>17</sup>; "After all, we do not have only the battles we are capable of, but also the defeats we deserve"<sup>18</sup>; "The world evolved, it changed, my dear gentleman, and the earth did not always spin in the proper direction"<sup>19</sup>; "(...) the gods punish you exactly by the most beautiful qualities that they offer you"<sup>20</sup>; "When you have a day, then you can notice who you really are according to the way you are living"<sup>21</sup>; "(...) you can only be really alone among people"<sup>22</sup>; "(...) intelligence and common-sense are the only ones that are limited. Stupidity and hypocrisy are limitless"<sup>23</sup>.

Meditation is like a bullfight initiated by the entrance into a second-hand bookshop and the discovery of "commented rules of bullfight"<sup>24</sup>, makes the writer in love with Spain become part of a *serious game*, that between the toreador and his bull. Apparently, Paler "sides with" the bull, demonstrating one more time his structure of an intransigent moralist, as: "The bull cannot choose, it is not asked whether it agrees with its participation in the bullfight, and maybe "to die"<sup>25</sup>. By a "logical zigzag exercise that does not aim at reaching a conclusion, but to confront the arguments"<sup>26</sup>, the writer brings a real suit against the bullfight.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 223.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 228.

<sup>16</sup> Octavian Paler, *Pray that You Don't Grow Wings*, Albatros and Universal Dalsi, Bucharest, 1995, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 44.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83.

The fight between the two different forces, “the intelligence and the beast”<sup>27</sup>, sends us, by an explanation of the contrasts, light and shadow during the period of the Greek tragedy, where the toreador is nothing more than “an actor in a ritual. (...) a sorcerer, an illusionist, tragedian and priest. A man who creates a spectacle that can end anytime. (...) The bullfighter plays with destiny itself in the arena, trying to cheat death, to offer it only his shadow”<sup>28</sup>. However, the entire esthetics, metaphysics and pedagogy of the bullfight, that includes “Love, Evil and Death”<sup>29</sup> fall apart under the weight of a dead body, that of the beast. If Spirit and Beauty are used for bloodshed, Paler insinuates, then they are valid for such madmen as Nero, but not for the tough-minded people. This dance of the toreador with the bull, represents a serious game with a wonderful philosophy, it is a spectacle unfolding on flamenco music and waves of red colour. It is a philosophy of the fight between discipline and fury, between harmony and chaos. It is essentially a philosophy of courage. Octavian Paler left us Spain and the philosophy of its dance. He left us the fight of the toreador, that of Don Quixote and Don Juan, connected by the same threads that only the writer can notice. A writer’s fight against his own doubts also proves to be a bullfight. The doubts “can be as aggressive as a bull”<sup>30</sup>. The written confession involves the same risk the bullfight involves, because “(...) literature asks you to get used to the shock of passing from one moment to another, from happiness to suffering, from euphoria to despair, to hopelessness”<sup>31</sup>.

Octavian Paler’s essence of “anti-traveller” is revealed to us together with the disappointing visiting of Arcadia, that is actually not a “mountainous desert,” but “a kind dream of memory,” in the sense that “(...) our imagination makes the lost paradises more beautiful”<sup>32</sup>. He is always tempted to resort to memory, descending into his own childhood, into his small universe, that was “ (...) as big as an empire”<sup>33</sup>, called Lisa. The only clearly outlined figure, that Paler’s plunges into memory reveal, is the one of the child that he once used to be: with “the round, black hat, with a small brim, specific to the vestment of Făgăraș, the white, fitted trusers, the cotton shirt worn over the trousers and a belt around the waist,” always en guard,” like a “a savage animal that kept itself invisible, but that did not give up paying attention to what the others were doing”<sup>34</sup>. The other ages are disguised or simple pretexts to describe places, states, attitudes, abandonments of time and space. Even this regression to the troubled paradise of childhood, is a form of “withdrawal,” precisely because of a kind of timidity, of retractability, of a decency specific to a mountaineer, that prevent him from carrying out his confessions.

These pages relying on the memorialistic-confessive elements, that follow a characterological-moralist direction, meet the commentary generated by an idea, that of *Rehabilitation of the Middle Ages*. We may not be convinced of the idea’s originality, (George Călinescu has also dealt with the glorification of the dark Middle ages in *The Chronicle of the Misanthrope*, *The Chronicle of Optimism* (1964), but we let ourselves captivated by the arguments. Consequently, we learn that in the humanist Renaissance, it was “discovered the fact that man does not lie in the center of the solar system,” that it was “(...) the darkest and most odious period of the Inquisition,” and also that “(...) Renaissance was an important spiritual moment and that a rehabilitation of the Middle Ages could never rely on a

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 84.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 85.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 91.

<sup>31</sup> Octavian Paler, *Pray that You Don’t Grow Wings*, Albatros and Universal Dalsi, Bucharest, 1995, p. 92.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 111.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 105.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 113-114.

denigration of Renaissance”<sup>35</sup>. The scientific discoveries of the Middle Ages should not be ignored or minimalized, as finally “(...) if Renaissance had Leonardo and Galilei, the Middle Ages had Dante and Avicenna. It is then that the Gothic appeared, probably the only triumph in the area of architecture that can rival with the Greek temple (...)”<sup>36</sup>.

By each of its essays, the book does not only synthesizes a way of proclaiming life by means of words, but it also has a good grip on us, the readers, when it comes to the mirage of the art galleries, by the incursions into the universe of such artists as Rembrandt, Leonardo, Velásquez. The observations of the writer fascinated by art, are captivating, meaningful and dominated by a subtle sadness: “A myth in the XXth century is no longer, as it once used to be, a way of understanding the world. Most often, it represents a way of ignoring it.”<sup>37</sup>. The verses grouped into poems that fill the space of the scattered *Pages*, do not seem to define Paler, these poetic experiments are not at all convenient for him. The writer’s essence is to be found much easier in the solemn lyrism, specific to Camus, in his meditative prose. However, we must underline the fact that, some poems, such as the one entitled *Perplexity*, have a certain consistency, that lies of the basis of the hope and truth of “being:” “You say, calmly: «truth» / They look at you, keeping silent, / without understanding what it is that you want, / but because they are educated people, they ask: «How much is it?» / You show them your empty hands, / but they do not understand your gesture / and, puzzled, they turn as if to go. / You run after them and you tell them: «hope». / Polite as they are, they stop and ask you / once again: «How much is it?» / And you do not know the value of hope. And you just keep silent”<sup>38</sup>. The writer’s strong point is not represented by narration, fiction, invention, the trauma, the “characters” that manifest a lack of concreteness, of divagation, of abstractization and recurrence to the parable, but precisely that decomposition of the idea, of attaching moral significance to the words. Fundamentally, Paler is not a novelist, he does not create characters and conflicts, he is a cogitator that narrates, “a kind of Romanian La Rochefoucauld,” as George Pruteanu used to say, that confers its maxims the dimensions of an organ concert, that, in various spaces – sees thoughts and feelings, passing everything through the sieve of soul.

## CONCLUSION

The essay, “(...) a very complex type of text,”<sup>39</sup> acquires in Octavian Paler’s writings a special musicality, associated with Vivaldi’s seasons, the arena of the debates existing only at the level of ideas. The lecture of the essays outlines the image of a fascinating, reflexive and interrogative type of text, by the ambiguity that defines the attitude of both the essayist and his discourse. The conclusion on the essay is included within the statement made by Alina Pamfil: “The essay’s essence does not reside – in our vision – in multiple images and perspectives, but in their sequence. It does not reside in the layovers, but in the path that makes the connection between them, not in the already found truths, but in their discovery. The essence of this literary genre consists in the narration of the reflection process (...) in the history of the pursuit of truths.”<sup>40</sup>

The essays overflow with memories, filling the pages whose existence and development the writer imagined somewhere in his memory or dreams. Furthermore, the

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 236-237.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 237-238.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 260.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 310.

<sup>39</sup> Alina Pamfil, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 168-174.

essays allowed the author in love with words and himself: "I cannot write unless I describe myself,"<sup>41</sup> to wander along the insufficiently explored lands of the *self*, by relating himself to the others and debating with them. *Imaginary Letters, Cordial Polemics, Solitary Adventures, Pray that You Don't Grow Wings* are part of the personal adventure full of the substance generated by the quotes and references to the famous thinkers of the universal culture.

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<sup>41</sup> Daniel Cristea-Enache, *Conversations with Octavian Paler*, Corint, Bucharest, 2007, p. 20.