

## Octavian Paler's *Caminante* – The Journey as Intercultural Dialogue and Self-definition of Identity

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### Abstract

*Identity is a polymorphous concept, defined in the current theoretical approaches as an ongoing process and as an always dynamic report between the ipse and idem poles - according to Paul Ricoeur's terminology in *Soi-même comme un autre*. From this point of view, the self pluri-identity stances are closely related to otherness, because self-affirmation requires a constant reference to the other. A careful observer, penetrating to the essence of things, Octavian Paler performs in his travel journals a series of reflections, reviews and cultural considerations, comparisons between cultures and civilizations. One such text is *Caminante*, which is not just a travel book, as it may look at the first glance. Assuming that the work is a confession of the writer's experiences in the distant lands of Mexico, an analysis of the contradictions, of civilizations clashes, of different cultures, or of differences in mentality, this paper aims to follow how is the other perceived in relation to his own identity and cultural formation.*

**Keywords:** identity, self-definition, otherness, journey, intercultural dialogue

Identity is a polymorphous concept traceable at the level of scientific approaches, but also in general knowledge. It is difficult to grasp, partly because of its multidisciplinary, and partly because of the dialectic rapports that ground the conceptual relations it may be associated with. Regardless of the approach, there is always a constant: "the 'paradoxical' character of identity. From Heraclitus, according to whom, one cannot swim twice in the same river, to Rimbaud's aphorism, "I is another", there are numerous phrases that emphasise the fact that identity is built through the confrontation between one and another, between similitude and alterity (Ferréol 2005: 328).

Identity is regarded as an ongoing process and as an always dynamic relation between the *idem* and *ipse* poles - according to Ricoeur's terminology in *Soi-même comme un autre*. The *idem* pole is characterised by mutability on the time axis, whilst *ipse* opens us to

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change and difference. From this perspective, the pluri-identitary stances of the self are closely connected with alterity, as self-affirmation requires a constant reference to the other. "This structuring through otherness is, naturally, at the core of verbal interaction, where *I* brings about *you* and the other way round; when I say *you*, I infer that you are capable to nominate yourself as I" (Ricoeur 1993: 92). A similar idea was laid out by Emile Benveniste, to whom "subjectivity in language is what creates the category of persona" (Ferréol 2005: 328). The mutuality of this relationship is but one of the forms necessary to acknowledge otherness in constructing one's identity. In more general terms, alterity is, in the same time, a requirement and an instrument of identity dynamics.

The dialectical relationship between self and other interferes with the similar one between the individual and the collective. Thus, identity is based on self-affirmation, on that individuality which makes one "unique" and different from the others.

For Octavian Paler travelling represents only a pretext for a profound meditation on the self. Regardless of the genre or the literary formula, be they travelogues (*Drumuri prin memorie, Caminante*), debates, polemics, letters, memoirs (*Mitologii subiective, Scrisori imaginare, Viața ca o coridă*), his writings share a common trait – that of emphasising the search for the self in "inner memoirs", confessions and meditations. Marin Sorescu asserts that Octavian Paler proves in his writings "*o reală capacitate de a teoretiza, de a depista problemele, de a le despica.*" / [a real capacity to theorize, identify and analyse problems] (1985: 24).

*Caminante. Jurnal (și contrajurnal) mexican* [Caminante. A Mexican Diary and Counter-Diary] is a book written on a journey to Mexico. It is not a typical travelogue in which chronology or concrete facts during the journey are jotted down. It lasted for thirteen days, which, in the Aztec calendar, represented a week, as the author states, an observation further justified in September: "*Acești arbori toropiți de căldură, aceste păsări care zboară pe cerul limpede de septembrie, intimidă scepticul din mine.*" [These torpid trees, these birds flying on the blue September sky are intimidating for the skeptic that I am] (Paler 2010: 166). As Radu Pavel Gheo remarks in the preface to the volume, Paler is not content to list days and places, times of arrival or departure, or explicit routes. His journey is atypical in that it is a constant toing and froing between the past and the present, not only in space, but especially in culture and history, under the sign of the serpent, and that of hazard ("*Zarurile au*

hotărât să facem drumul poate cel mai încărcat de legendă din Mexic.” (101)[The dice decided that we take the road that is, probably, the most legendary in Mexico.]. Neither is he the typical traveller, the tourist who abides by the suggestions in travel guides.

*Străinii caută în general într-o țară, cu predilecție, ceea ce e celebru, dispensându-se de rest. Plătim și noi azi tribut acestei mode. Au trecut timpurile călătoriilor romantice, acum agențiile de voiaj te asigură că poți cunoaște Veneția sau Parisul într-o singură zi, sau chiar în câteva ore dacă ești grăbit, ghizii s-au specializat, spun numai banalitățile de rigoare, pentru a privi Gioconda sunt necesare trei minute, iar pentru Tizian ajunge durata unei canțonete... (70)*

[Foreigners generally look for what is famous in a country, leaving the rest aside. Today, we also pay tribute to this fashion. The time of the romantic journeys has passed: now, travel agencies reassure their clients that they may get to know Venice or Paris in one day, perhaps even in a few hours, if you are really in a hurry. The guides have specialized to present the tritest aspects, it takes only three minutes to take a look at the Mona Lisa, and the time span of a canzonet to understand Titian.]

He is rather an anti-traveller in his own definition, provided somewhere in the middle of the book: “*M-am obișnuit cu psihologia mea incomodă și sucită, dar prefer să pronunț cât mai rar cuvântul «anticălător» ca să nu fiu înțeles greșit.*” (126) [I’ve gotten used to my uncomfortable, twisted psychology, but I’d rather say the word “anti-traveller” as little as possible, so that I’m not misunderstood.]. Moreover, he defines himself as a dilettante, not a globetrotter: “*Uneori dilettantismul te ajută să observi ceea ce unui specialist îi scapă (...) Trebuie, probabil, să existe pe lume și diletanți a căror singură specialitate e melancolia. Si, evident, eu fac parte dintre ei.*” (129-130). [Sometimes, dilettantism helps one notice what the expert may overlook. [...] There should be, probably, dilettantes whose sole specialty is melancholy. And, obviously, I am one of them.]. He is a peregrine who does not travel just in space, but also in culture and history, taking a road to the centre, his centre. An eternal dilettante among the travel professionals. He rejects and denies the designation *travel book*, as he considers the term utterly inappropriate:

*De fapt, ce este o „carte de călătorie”? nu numai ca nu-mi place această formulă, dar nici n-o cred potrivită. Nu cred într-o literatură slujnică a lui Hermes. Există cărți care pot fi generate de o călătorie, ca de orice altă experiență dar asta*

*e cu totul altceva. Ele nu au nimic în comun cu proza pliantelor turistice, care trebuie să satisfacă alte rigori.* (126)

[What is a travel book, after all? Not only do I hate this phrase, but I also consider it inappropriate. I don't believe in a literature that is in the service of Hermes. There are writings that may be the result of a journey, as of any other experience, but that is a whole different story. They have nothing to do with the text on touristic leaflets, which must meet other ends.]

On this occasion, he also explains the journey in broad terms:

*În fond, nu e nevoie să colindăm lumea pentru a rătăci (...) Unii își închipuie că e destul să țină în mână un bilet de Jumbo-jet ca să aiba ceva de comunicat. Uită că autorii tragediilor clasice nu s-au ostenit niciodată să ne dea indicații amănunțite despre decorul în care se petreceau întâmplările povestite de ei.* (125)

[After all, one doesn't need to travel the world for the sake of it [...]. Some people think that having a Jumbo-jet ticket means that they have something to say. They keep forgetting that the authors of classical tragedies never bothered to provide details about the background against which their stories took place.],

defining the modern traveller, and the aims of his journey: "*Nu sunt specialist în civilizația maya și n-am venit în Mexic ca să aflu ce scrie prin pliante. Mă interesează, mai degrabă, să banui ceea ce nu-mi poate garanta nimeni că e real sau fals.*" (157). [I am not an expert in Mayan culture and I did not come to Mexico to read the leaflets. I am sooner interested in assuming what no one is able to guarantee as true or false.]

The atypical nature of this travelogue is also given by the title, *Caminante, Jurnal (și contrajurnal) Mexican* (*Caminante, A Mexican Diary or Counter-Diary*), the text being constructed on two parts displayed in parallel: one, in regular typeset, presents his instantaneous impressions along the journey; the other, in italics, is the continuation of the initial idea. The explanation comes towards the end of the volume, taken from a folk song: "*Caminante,/ Caminante,/ Care mergi pe drumurile noastre...*" (223) [*Caminante,/ Caminante,/ Walking on our paths...*]

This way, the author makes his reader both spectator and witness to his Mexican journey, in which " *timpurile istorice comunică, prezentul se întrepătrunde cu trecutul, iar Mexicul contemporan trăiește din seva imperiilor mărețe de odinioară.*" (7) [The historical times communicate to one another, the present is tied to the past, and contemporary Mexico lives off the sap of the great empires of old.]

Although he tries to understand this world from within, he is only able to perceive it from the perspective of a European erudite, the product of a Hellenistic-Roman culture and civilisation, who draws constant parallels between the two schools of thought: the ancient Hellenistic and Roman world, on the one hand, and the Aztec and Mayan ones, on the other. From this perspective, his voyage may be considered a series of initiatory rites of passage. When speaking of the journey, Paler refers to Homer's *Odyssey*, while he also notes that his personal journey takes place at the age of 52, a sacred cycle which corresponds to the Aztec 'century', and that it lasts for 13 days, precisely how long the ritual awaiting for the new cycle of the universe lasts.

*Pe vechiul platou al Tenochtitlânului, timpul curgea ciclic. La fiecare 52 de ani, care formau un secol aztec, focurile erau stinse și urmau douăsprezece zile de așteptări anxioase. O imensă procesiune pornea în cea de-a douăsprezecea zi spre piramide unde mulțimea urmărea înficoșată stelele.*

*Mai privesc o dată calendarul aztec. Eu însumi mă apropiu de granița celor 52 de ani și trebuie să-mi fac un bilanț. (36)*

[On the ancient plateau of Tenochtitlan, time used to pass in cycles. Once in 52 years, which made up an Aztec century, the fires were blown-out and twelve days of anxious waiting followed. A huge procession started on the twelfth day, leading to the pyramids, where the frightened crowd was watching the stars.

I take another look at the Aztec calendar. I myself am almost 52 and I must review my life up to this point.]

Although the disclaimer of the book explains the two parts – the diary and the counter-diary – from the very beginning, they only seem to be different in point of typeset, as the counter-diary, written upon his return, when he reads the diary, is an even more intense experience of his adventures. The reader is introduced into the mythical world, where he will travel through the traditional Aztec poem about life and death.

From the very first pages, the connection to the origin is mentioned by making reference to a painting by Mondrian, the one in which the trees are upside down, towards the essence of life. The following pages, dedicated to the flight, are an essay on the historical ages, a contradiction between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but also a reflection on today's traveller and his superficiality: *“noaptea Evului mediu constituie, mi se pare, una dintre cele mai încăpățânate platitudini didactice (...) Săgeata gotică e semnul unui spirit pe care a ținut direct cerul, în timp ce, mai înțeleaptă, mai practică, Renașterea a preferat să*

*descoperire pământul.*" (18-19) [the darkness of the Middle Ages is, in my opinion, one of the most enduring didactic platitudes (...) The gothic arrow is the sign of a spirit aiming at the sky, whereas the wiser and more practical Renaissance chose to discover the Earth.]

He considers the association of Amsterdam with Venice completely inappropriate:

*Mă întrerup. Cineva din spate, vorbind despre Amsterdam, îl compară cu Veneția. «Veneția nordului». Ca și Stockholmul. Din moment ce un oraș e străbătut de canale, el e în mod automat comparat cu Veneția. Și sunt atâtea «Veneții», încât m-am plictisit să aud această comparație, a cărei justificare e, în realitate, pur scenografică. Oare ce legătură poate exista între un oraș romantic, bolnav de trecut, cum e Veneția, și unul solid, corect și întreprinzător? (19)*

[I stop for a second. Someone behind me, speaking of Amsterdam, compares it to Venice. "The Venice of the North". The same as Stockholm. Any city with canals is, unavoidably, compared to Venice. And there are so many 'Venices' that I got sick and tired of this comparison, whose justification is, in fact, purely related to scenery. What connection can there exist between a romantic town living in the past, like Venice, and a solid, correct and enterprising one?]

Furthermore, he maintains that every age has its *mal du siècle*, and that ours "*ne împinge să nu avem răbdare (...) cine mai are timp să citească Odiseea? (...) nu mai e timp nici măcar să alergăm în prima librărie, să citim cartea pe drum*" (21) [pushes us towards impatience (...) who has, nowadays, the time to read *The Odyssey*? (...) we don't even take the time to run into the first bookstore and read the book on our way.]. His plea for *festina lente* ends with a conclusion: "*Dar mă întreb dacă nu cumva tocmai cei care vântură lumea în toate părțile o cunosc cel mai puțin. Când să reflecteze la ce-au văzut?*" (23). [But I wonder whether those who travel the world are not, actually, the ones who least know it. When would they have the time to think about what they've seen?]

Just before landing, he introduces the topic of the separation between Spain and Mexico, but also of that within the latter, which he calls *another Spain*, a break in the Mexicans' hearts, since they are both Spanish and Amerindians,, at the same time, a separation that he keeps underlining till the end of the book.

*La drept vorbind, există două Spanii. Una care i-a dat lui Columb, dintr-un tezaur secătuit sume imortante pentru a achita cu ele costul expediției. Alta*

*care i-a dat lui Don Quijote doar un cal, un scutier și o iluzie. Una care a amestecat crima cu rugăcinea și n-a cunoscut mila. Alta care nu a cunoscut consolare. Una căreia Columb și Cortés i-au adus mii de tone de aur. Alta căreia blândul, uscățivul și încapățânatul Don Quijote i-a dat ceva care nu se poate cântări. (25)*

*Acum, mexicanul se întreabă care este adevărata sa identitate. E spaniol? E indian? Cândva lui Moctezuma i s-a adus un copil cu două capete. Împăratul a cerut prezicătorilor să interpreteze acest semn. Ei i-au spus că imperiul său, asemenea acestui copil, nu-și va găsi niciodată unitatea. Dar nu e simplu să trăiești cu un suflet scindat ?(...) Pentru că el nu mai poate fi nici spaniol, nici indian. (50)*

[In truth, there are two Spains. One that gave Columbus large sums of money from a drained treasury to pay for the expedition; the other, that gave Don Quixote only a horse, a squire and an illusion. The former mixed murder with prayer and never knew mercy; the latter, that never knew relief. One to which Columbus and Cortés brought tons of gold; the other, to which the meek, lean and stubborn Don Quixote gave something that could not be weighed.

Now, the Mexican wonders which his true identity is. Is he Spanish? Is he Indian? Once, Montezuma was shown a child with two heads. The emperor asked his farseers to find a meaning to this sign. They said that, like that child, his empire would never find its unity. But living with a split soul is not easy (...) since it cannot be fully Spanish, or fully Indian.]

His first contact with Mexico is a fiesta, described in reference to El Prado Museum, to paintings by Goya, and to Camus, in a formula specific to his erudition and vast cultural experience:

*În vârtejul fiestei, unii au uitat, parcă, sau nu au aflat încă de ce suflă în tiribombe, de ce poartă măști ciudate, ca vechiul zeu al vântului, sau de ce și-au pus coifuri caraghioase, care mă fac o clipă să tresar, căci asemenea coifuri am văzut la Goya, așezate de Inchiziție pe capul muribunzilor. (30)*

[In the whirlwind of the fiesta, some seem to have forgotten, or have never found out, why they blow the trumpets, why they wear odd masks, like the ancient god of the wind, or why they wear funny helmets, which make me quiver for a second, as I have seen such helmets before, in Goya's paintings, placed by the Inquisition on the heads of the dying people.]

He feels an urge to explain this fiesta by referring to Octavio Paz's assertion that "Solitude is the engine of this burst of joy", bringing the cultural element into discussion and drawing his own conclusions:

*Altfel spus, mexicanul are nevoie de sărbători pentru a-și combate tristețea, pentru a ieși din sine însuși. Fără ele, fără zgomotul și strălucirea lor, nu s-ar putea elibera periodic, de materiile inflamabile pe care le poartă în sine(...) În ea, mexicanul se descarcă de toate tăcerile de până atunci și se răzbuună pentru toate frustrările lui. (32)*

[In other words, Mexicans need fiestas to get over sadness. Without fiestas, without their noise and glitter, they could not discharge, every once in a while, the anger they carry within (...). During fiestas, Mexicans give up their silence and retaliate for every frustration.]

Once having entered this world, he tries to remember everything that he has known before: *“încerc să-mi amintesc tot ce știu despre vechea civilizație a acestor locuri”* (35) [I’m trying to recollect everything I know about the ancient civilisation of these lands] and he thinks of the Aztec calendar and the Tenochtitlan, in which the passing of time was cyclical, of the bloody sacrifices required for a new age, a new beginning, a better life: *“Omul n-a creat lumea, dar de el depinde ca ea să dureze sau nu. Ea exista câtă vreme oamenii erau în stare să urce piatra sacrificiilor, căci totul se obținea prin durere, prin suferință. Și numai moartea putea ține dreaptă balanța vieții și a lumii.”* (39) [Humans did not create the world, but it is up to them if it lasts or not. The world lasted for as long as people were able to climb the sacrificial stone, as everything came through pain and suffering. And only death could keep just the balance between life and the world.]. The comparison with Christianity is unavoidable, giving way to a meditation on his own destiny and on the coincidence of the numbers 13 and 52, as this journey is, to him, a new beginning.

*Dar înainte de a-i condamna pe azteci, s-ar cuveni să ne întrebăm dacă noi suntem judecătorii potriviți. Cel puțin, aztecii își săvârșeau crimele pe față și nu le negau. Dimpotriv le dădeau un înțeles tragic. Preoții lor dansau îmbrăcați în pieile celor sacrificați, nu-și arătau mâinile curate ca Pilat din Pont.*

*Mai privesc o dată calendarul aztec. Eu însumi mă apropii de granița celor 52 de ani și trebuie să-mi fac un bilanț. (40-41)*

[However, before condemning the Aztecs, one ought to ask themselves whether we are the righteous judges or not. At least, the Aztecs committed their murders without denial. On the contrary, they ascribed a tragic meaning to these acts. Their priests danced wearing the skins of the sacrificed; they did not present their washed hands, like Pontius Pilate.

I take another look at the Aztec calendar. I myself am almost 52 and must review my life up to this point.]

Having got to the core of Mexican mythology, he cannot break the logical thread, which is why he goes on with the presentation of the gods that marked the existence of this people, but he also comments on the Spanish Conquest led by Cortez, which ended in the massacre and burial of the Aztec civilisation, and, implicitly, of the Tenochtitlan, whose being is still present in Ciudad de Mexico, where “*străzile atârnă ca niște brațe inerte, golite de sânge*” [the streets hang like some inert arms, depleted of blood], a city “withered by a secret history” that may be felt “in the thin air”, at more than 2,000 meters altitude.

Again, he cannot avoid the comparison with our side of the Atlantic – as Elsinore is the “vassal of a legend” in which the traveller seeks for “the unfortunate and melancholic prince of Denmark”, “*deși la Ciudad de Mexico nu există, aparent, nimic, [...] fantoma existenței trecute dăinuie*” (47) [although there is nothing, apparently, in Ciudad de Mexico [...], the ghost of the past existence still dwells]

A crucial event of this journey is the play *Quetzalcoatl – An Anthropocosmic Tragedy*, introducing the legends of the feathered serpent, whose heart flew to the skies and became the morning star, a symbol of his entire journey. The significance of this play is acknowledged in a footnote: “*Mexicul a însemnat pentru mine mai mult decât o țară, seara aceea a avut cu siguranță un rol decisiv*” (52) [Mexico means more to me than just a country, and that night has played, undoubtedly, a crucial role], for “*în mituri regăsim înțeleșuri pe care cuvintele noastre nu le pot exprima(...) că ne rămâne totdeauna o soluție împotriva defectelor de care nu putem scăpa; să le transformăm în virtuți*” (52-53) [In myths, one recoups the meanings that our words are unable to express [...] we are always left with a solution against the defects we cannot overcome: turning them into virtues.]. Although he wishes he comprehended these mysteries with his entire being, willing to let himself carried away by their uncanny fascination, full of paradoxes and cruelty, he still ends up discovering and analysing it as a European:

*Poate că mintea mea de european, învătăată cu alt gen de mituri, cu zei care petrec în Olimp și nu se dau înapoi de la adultere, nu era pregătită să înțeleagă un zeu care s-a târât în țărână printre tufele de nopal până și-a luat zborul spre cer după ce a fost rege respectat și înțelept vestit la Tula. (Ibid)*

[Maybe my European mind, accustomed to a different kind of myths, with gods who party on Mount Olympus and never refrain from adultery, was not prepared to understand a god crawling through mud, among the Creeping Thistle bushes until he flew to the skies, after having been the famous wise and respected king of Tula.]

This mixture of contraries startles and attracts him at the same time, as it makes him meditate on his multiply-determined intellectual condition:

*Totul pare să se aple în Mexic sub semnul dualității șarpelui înaripat. Zăpezile acoperă focul vulcanilor, stelele ard peste urletele șacalilor din junglă, iar pădurile torențiale ale tropicelor se întâlnesc cu stepe pline de cactuși (...) La rândul său, sufletul mexican e un amestec de pasiune și reticențe. Pasiunea îl târâște în afara sa, iar reticențele îl fac să se replieze. (56)*

[Everything in Mexico seems to be under the sign of the duality of the winged serpent. Snows cover the volcano fires, the stars burn over the howls of the jackals in the jungle, and the tropical forests meet with the steppes full of cacti (...) The Mexican soul is also a mix of passion and restraints. Passion draws it out, while restraints make it withdraw.]

*Mexicul m-a facut să reflectez la condiția mea de intelectual născut într-un sat din care am plecat în plină copilărie. Atâtor rupturi care există înlăuntrul meu li s-a adăugat una care le lămurește, poate, și le rezumă pe toate. Din ce în ce în ce mai limpede am înțeles că tot ce e conservator în mine mi-a complicat melancoliile și greșelile. (58)*

[Mexico made me reflect on my condition as an intellectual born in a village that I left behind while I was still a child. The breaks inside me are completed with one which perhaps sums up and explains all the others. It has become clearer and clearer to me that everything that is conservative in me complicated my melancholia and mistakes even more.]

Even Diego Rivéra's painting in the hall reminds him of the entire history of Mexico. Although the references to the present-day Mexico are scarce, what startles him the most is the dead-skull-shaped cake, and the opposition between the Indians sitting on the sidewalk, cooking tortillas as if "*ar fi singuri, undeva pe câmp, lângă un foc de cactuși uscați, pregătindu-și cina*" [they were alone somewhere in the field, near a fire of dried cacti, cooking their dinner], the lottery ticket sellers and the highly modern edifices behind them.

Death, celebrated in Mexico, elicits a new meditation and determines him to introduce some death rituals: "*Obișnuit să mă tem de moarte, m-am mirat s-o văd, în Mexic, sărbătorită. Sigur, mi-am dat seama destul de repede că e vorba de o încercare de a exorciza frica*" (62) [Accustomed to being afraid of death, I was surprised to see it celebrated in Mexico. Of course, I realized soon enough that it was an attempt to exorcise fear.]

He reasserts his European origins when, astounded by the terrifying look of the god Xochipilli, "*tânărul zeu al Frumuseții, al Tinereții,*

*Prințul Florilor era reprezentat cu un cap de mort crispat într-o grimasă înfricoșătoare*" (66) [the young god of Beauty and Youth, the Prince of flowers was depicted as a dead skull wry with a frightening rictus], he states that "*în vechiul Mexic, chipeșul Paris ar fi rămas un simplu cioban anonim. Nicio zeiță nu l-ar fi căutat să-l facă atributul frumuseții, întrucât frumuețea nu-i interesa pe zei*" (67) [In old Mexico, handsome Paris would have remained a mere and anonymous shepherd. No goddess would have looked for him, to make him the attribute of beauty, as beauty was of no interest to gods.]

His journey through space and culture continues with the journey to Teotihuacán, where the pyramid of a bank is in stark contrast with the Sun and the Moon Pyramids, which, unlike the Egyptian necropolises, were spaces of sacrifice, not guarded by the Sphinx, but by volcanoes possibly representing a symbol of the mythical world suffocated by the Spanish civilisation threatening to surface at any moment. It is the first time when he mentions the writing of the diary within the diary, introducing the idea of progressive learning: "*Vântul biciuie paginile caietului pe care scriu, pe ultima treaptă a Piramidei Soarelui. Și mă gandesc, poate nu întâmplător, că învățăm doar ceea ce eram pregătiți să învățăm*" (75) [The wind whips the pages of my notebook on the last step of the Sun Pyramid. And I think, perhaps not without reason, that we learn only what we are ready to learn.]

The purchase of souvenirs is an opportunity for fine irony targeted at the Americans, who prove superficial in their appreciation for appreciation's sake: "*Există chiar un stil à l'américaine de a privi o amuletă de serie ca pe un obiect de la muzeul național de antropologie, dacă vânzătorul știe cum să-și laude cum trebuie marfa.*" (76) [There is actually a style à l'américaine, looking at a commercial amulet like it were an object from the National Museum of Anthropology if the salesperson knows their job.]

Another god in the Teotihuacán area is the god of rain, Tlaloc, who "*poartă o mască de jad și are în păr o pasăre quetzal cu pene verzi somptuos revărsate. Trupul îi e acoperit de coliere și bijuterii, iar din mâini cad pe pământ picături de ploaie*" (77) [wears a jade mask and has a quetzal bird with sumptuous green wings in his hair. His body is covered in necklaces and jewellery, and raindrops fall from his hand.]. The access in this god's paradise is not granted by merit, but by hazard, and is not a reward, but retaliation. However, his presentation is not hazardous, as most of his journey takes place under the sign of heavy rain, in contrast with the dryness of the land thirsty for water in its latter part.

*Dacă paradisul omului din Teotihuacán arată astfel, înseamnă că viața lui arăta exact invers. Apa lipsea, probabil, cronic, cerul era uscat, pământul pârjolit și imnurile care invocau ploaia ardeau buzele. (78)*

[If the paradise of the man in Teotihuacán looks like this, it means that his life was just the opposite. There was, most likely, a chronic want of water, the sky was dry, the land was burnt, and the hymns calling the rain burnt people's lips.]

The first aquatic excess is the *trajinera* rafting in Xochimilco, whose canals seem to him, at first, a parody of Venice, "at the edge of farce, for the benefit of those in search for the picturesque", but which gives him an uncertainty that breaks him from the present and throws him in the past. The night visit of the house of Dolores Olmedo, for admiring the paintings of Diego Rivera, brings three sculptures to his attention: the idle dancer, the dance of the earth and the dance of the sun, once again emphasising the importance the Mexicans grant to dance. Somewhere else, he wrote: "*Dansul se transformă-n sens. Sufletul se eliberează de zgură. Se limpezește*" (33) [Dance becomes meaning. The soul discharges its cinders. It cleanses.]

His Mexican experience continues with a *charros* contest, "*ceva, după câte înțeleg, între coridă și turnir medieval și serbare de cowboy*" (83) [something, from what I gather, between the corrido and mediaeval jousts and cowboy feasts], because, as every country is known for a particular prejudice, Mexico is known for sombreros, fiesta and passion, and the best way to introduce them all is this contest, one of the few representations of present-day life in Mexico in Paler's diary. The manifestation is described in detail, from the *charro* wearing trousers and a vest embroidered with golden and silver threads and – of course – a sumptuous sombrero, to the euphoric crowd in which the writer is unable to find his place: "*e prea veselă toată lumea din jur ca să nu fiu stingherit că nu pot intra în atmosferă. Fără îndoială sunt un rău spectator*" (85) [the crowd around me is way too joyous, which makes me feel embarrassed that I can't join them. Surely I am a bad spectator.]. This account allows him to recollect Cortez's era and the importance of the horse, both then and now, both at war and in parades, but also the evolution of this manifestation, which seems inspired from a religious ritual hosted by a priest.

Another aspect he insists on is the traditional Mexican food, *tortilla*, and the beverage *pulque*. Arriving at the ruins of Chichén Itzá, he will later describe in great detail the *pelota* game, a sacred ritual in which

the losers had to be sacrificed to re-enact the fight between Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. The bas-reliefs depict the blood of the beheaded metamorphosing into snakes, the ultimate symbol that obsesses him. In this case, starting from André Breton's statement, he makes a distinction between seeing and recognizing: "*A vedea sau a auzi nu înseamnă nimic. A recunoaște sau a nu recunoaște e totul.*" (209) [Seeing and hearing means nothing. Recognizing or not is everything.]. Once again, he discovers the festivity of death, which he still cannot comprehend: "*Nu suntem pentru totdeauna pe pământ: doar puțintel aici», zice un cântec vechi, dar acest «puțintel aici» este singura bogăție de care dispunem* (212) [We are not forever on earth, we are here just for a little while, says an old song, but this 'little while here' is our only fortune.].

It seems difficult to him to discover the city, both as a host and a guest. He reaches the conclusion that there are cities to live in, and others to be temporarily hosted by, the latter of which you get to know only on the streets. The need for silence and the fear of the crowded areas are underlined again when, whilst visiting the town, he chooses to avoid the aggression of the heavy traffic by walking through Alameda Park, which makes him consider the differences between France, Spain and Mexico, starting from Unamuno's comparison between France and Spain: "France is joyful and sensual, Spain is sad and harsh. One has nothing better to do in Spain than think of death, whereas in France, everything suggests superficiality". Mexico is a mixture of the two, in his opinion: "*Bănuiesc că dincolo de superficialitate regăsești mereu pasiune care ezită între tristețe și nevoia de spectacol*" (92) [I assume that, beyond superficiality, one always finds passion hesitating between sadness and the need for spectacle.]

At the volcanoes, he becomes aware of the feeling of solitude, which he associates with the Mexicans, but which comes from his inner fire, thus justifying his newly-discovered passion for the Mexican civilisation.

*Singurătatea lor seamănă cu singurătatea țăranilor care-și curăță pământul năpădit cu tufe de nopal. Violența cu care, oricând, se pot trezi nu e străină de caracterul mexicanilor.*" (97)

[Their loneliness is like the loneliness of the peasants who clean their land of Creeping Thistle bushes. Violence, which may erupt at any time, is not unknown to Mexicans.]

*Liniștea unui vulcan îmi inspiră o teamă confuză și am impresia că în ea există ceva perfid. Și totuși, nu mă știu a fi fricos (... ) Imaginea vulcanilor deșteaptă*

*în instinctele mele, poate, o frică specială, primară, pe care nu mă simt în stare nici s-o explic. Poate și fiindcă impresiile se amestecă.* (96-97)

[The silence of a volcano suggests a confusing fear, and I feel there is something perfidious about it. And yet, I have never been a coward (...)  
The image of the volcanoes awakes a peculiar, primary fear in my instincts, something I cannot even explain. Maybe this is also because I have mixed impressions.]

Once in the land of rain, at Veracruz, he experiences a flutter never felt before: *“Plouă, sunt surescitat, de vină sunt, probabil, fulgerele din acest miez de noapte, tunetele, tensiunea din aer, din mine, oboseala, toate la un loc și ploaia aceasta care, în loc să mă elibereze, îmi biciuie nervii...”* (102) [It is raining, I am nervous, the flashes at midnight, the thunders, the pressure in the air and in me, exhaustion, all combined with this rain which, instead of releasing me, is whipping my nerves...], which brings back recollections from his student years: *“La întoarcere, clădirile Universității din Xalapa, risipite prin parcuri, au facut să renască în mine anii de studenție, cu frustrările lor. Dar oare nu datorez lucrurilor care mi-au lipsit, tot atât cât și celor pe care le-am avut?”* (104) [Upon return, the buildings of Xalapa University, spread all over the park, brought back recollections of my student years, with their frustrations. Don't I owe to the things that I've missed just as much as I do to those that I've had?]. His imagination acts up: *“O fantezie a imaginației mă face să aud statuia lui Tlaloc lovind caldarâmul ud cu picioarele sale enorme de piatră, în vreme ce lacrimile zeului se varsă în puhoiul de afară.”* (107) [A fantasy of my imagination makes me hear the statue of Tlaloc hitting the wet pavement with its huge stone legs, whilst his tears are spilt in the flood outside.]

The visit at the San Juan de Ulúa prison is memorable, as he is met by a destructive rain, *“E una din acele ploi care înverzesc zidurile, macină piatra și o putrezesc...”* (111) [It is one of those rains that greens the walls, and grinds and decompose the walls...], but also by the cruelty of Spain, which *“a crezut aici că istoria este un os ce poate fi zdrobit, o gură căreia i se poate pune căluș, o minte care, aiurind, nu va mai protesta”* (112) [thought here that history was a bone that could be crushed, a mouth that could be gagged, a raving mind that would stop protesting.], an encounter that he wants to forget.

The solitude in front of the volcanoes is relived when he reaches the ocean, where he experiences a new sprinkling kind of rain making him daydream, inhibiting him and getting him to feel like a tiny detail in front of an unfriendly immensity, but also when he meets a Romanian living there, who wants to speak Romanian to him.

Thus, before his entrance in the jungle, where he discovers lonely pyramids covered in lianas, altars of sacrifice in the name of the gods, and where he defines himself as *“prea comod pentru o aventură. Prea prudent pentru a mă expune să fiu mușcat de un șarpe veninos. Jungla m-a atras prin ceea ce o apropie de un labirint(...) Dar lumea în care trăim nu este, oare, și ea o junglă?”* (148-149) [too comfortable for an adventure. Too cautious to expose myself to the bite of a venomous snake. The jungle attracted me because it resembles a maze (...). But isn't the world we live in also a jungle itself?], he makes the acquaintance of the “rain jungle”, the privacy of hotels and the essence of knowledge: *“vom descoperi că taina nu e sub coaja unui fruct. Tezaurul e însuși fructul.”* (135) [we shall find out that mystery is not hidden under the peel of a fruit. The fruit itself is the treasure]. That is to say, the treasure is man himself, and knowledge is pursued at the level necessary to each of us: *“Dar orașele sunt așa cum le-am simțit și, dincolo de adevărul lor, există, poate, un adevăr al nostru de care am avut nevoie în ele...”* (137) [But the cities are just the way I felt them and, beyond their truth, there might be our truth, one which we needed when in them.]

Upon entering the maze of the spatial jungle, he realizes that he also entered the maze of the inner, intellectual and spiritual jungle. All the literary myths he knows reactivate and blend together: *“o întreagă literatură m-a pregătit, de altfel, să n-o pot vădea cu ochi normali”* [a whole literature has otherwise prepared me to be unable to watch it with normal eyes]. He mentions Saint-Exupery, the Minotaur, the motif of the labyrinth, etc. He comes back to reality describing the Mexican family, where the macho man is in charge, both imposing and unabashed.

Escaping from the oppression of rain, he steps into the empire of drought, which has similar effects on him:

*Nepregătit să mă opun acestor arme, sunt din ce în ce mai aproape de o stare de insolație interioară lipsită de orice logică. Nimic, aici, nu e de natură să exalte un instinct vital (...) Mă suspectez că am transformat speranța într-un mod de a combate ceea ce îmi lipsește pentru a fi un om de acțiune. Mi-am cultivat o lașitate cu pretenții de filosofie...și nu sunt eu primul care iubește viața cu disperare”* (187-188)

[Unprepared to fight these weapons, I am closer and closer to an illogical inner sun-stroke. Nothing here is able to exalt a vital instinct in me (...) I suspect myself of having turned hope in a way of refuting what I lack to be a man of action. I have cultivated my cowardice under the pretences of philosophy... and I am not the first to be madly in love with life.]

He is getting more and more aware of his own solitude and self, and jotting down in the diary becomes an even more pleasant occupation:

*Scriu în autobuz. Și mă străduiesc să nu pun caietul deoparte. Îmi place infinit mai mult să mă las în voia gândurilor decât să devin secretarul lor, notându-le.” (191)*

[I am writing on the bus. And I struggle not to leave the notebook aside. I'd rather abandon myself to thoughts than become their secretary and jot them down.]

*Nici acum nu-mi explic starea în care m-am aflat în sudul Mexicului. Rar mi s-a întâmplat să fiu cu nervii atât de surescitați și, totuși, să mă simt fericit (...) În sudul Mexicului am trăit-o ca pe o febră (...) Nu pentru că aș fi suferit de sete, ci pentru că uscăciunea, în loc să mă deprime, mă limpeztea. (198)*

[I still cannot explain my state while I was in the south of Mexico. Rarely have I been this nervous and yet happy, at the same time. I experienced the south of Mexico like a fever. (...). Not that I was thirsty, but the drought, instead of depressing me, made me feel cleansed.]

Towards the end of his journey, he listens to a song in a restaurant in Mérida: “*Caminante,/ Caminante,/ Care mergi pe drumurile noastre...*”, and this song partially justifies his search:

*Înțelepții hinduși pretind că există patru anotimpuri în viață. Unul pentru a studia și a descoperi lumea. Al doilea pentru a întemeia un cămin. Al treilea pentru a reflecta. Și, în sfârșit, al patrulea, în care eliberat de inhibiții și de obsesii devii un fel de călător fără bagaje. Probabil, nu voi fi niciodată un călător fără bagaje. (223-224)*

[The Hindi pundits claim that there are four seasons in one's life. One is to study and discover the world. The second is to start a family. The third is to reflect. And, lastly, the fourth, in which, freed from inhibitions, one becomes something of a traveller without luggage. I think I will never be a traveller without luggage.]

*În această seară la Mérida înțeleg, cred, mai bine de ce întreba Baudelaire la treizeci de ani: „Dacă am trăit trei minute într-unul... nu am nouăzeci de ani?”. După aceeași logică, mi se pare neverosimil când număr zilele de când mă aflu în Mexic. În alte țări am stat mai mult și totuși... (227)*

[Tonight, in Mérida, I think I better understand why Baudelaire asked when he was thirty years old: If I lived three minutes in one, does it make me ninety? Along the same lines, I find it implausible when counting the days since I've been in Mexico. I spent much more time in other countries, and yet...]

He is tormented by regrets and feels an urge to explain himself:

*Strângând nisipul în pumn, mă gândesc câte încap într-o clipă în care nu vrei să mai spui nimic (...) Aici pot spune: nu regret decât greșelile pe care nu le-am săvârșit încă. Și le pot spune celor care mi-ar reproșa că am vorbit prea mult despre mine, în loc să vorbesc, ca în enciclopedii, despre Mexic: nu n-ați priceput eu n-am fost în Mexic, ci într-o țară cu acest nume. (242)*

[Clenching my fist around the sand, I am thinking of how many mistakes are in a moment in which one doesn't want to say anything else (...). Now, I can tell: I only regret the mistakes that I haven't done yet. I can tell those who might reproach me that I have spoken too much about me instead of speaking of Mexico, like an encyclopaedia: you understood nothing, I wasn't in Mexico, but in a country with this name.]

The journey made him understand what brings him close to Mexico and what impressed him so much: *"Poate că Mexicul nu e așa și l-am văzut astfel numai pentru că eu sunt un personaj scindat. Sau este și m-am apropiat de el tocmai pentru că îmi seamănă atât de mult"* (228) [Maybe Mexico is not like that and I only saw it like that because I am a split character. Or, maybe it is, and I only got so close because it is so much like me]. Nonetheless, he had already drawn the conclusions in the middle of his journey: *"Dar, probabil, nu descoperim nimic cu adevărat important într-o călătorie, dacă nu descoperim nimic în noi înșine."* (128) [But we probably do not discover anything truly important on a journey lest we discover something in us].

\*The paper has been translated from Romanian by Oana Gheorghiu and Steluța Stan

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