

# BEAUTY AS A PORTAL TO HISTORY IN THE NOVELS OF CĂTĂLIN PAVEL

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*Abstract: Why contemplate beauty in your interrelatedness with another human being, why, indeed, be open to it? This question seems to be a central theme of Cătălin Pavel's prose-writing. A significant encounter with a fellow being can shed new light on the past and on our relationship with our ancestors. Cătălin Pavel's novels so far: Aproape a șaptea parte din lume; Nicio clipă Portasar; Trecerea; Chihlimbar deal with the question of intersubjective beauty (beauty at the interface of a shared experience between people) as a time essence, as an exercise of completeness, and as a way to enrich life with new meanings in the context of a major spiritual crisis. For Pavel, underneath all its strata, history has the elusive fascination of a woman, the incarnation of a mysterious principle. The author makes us wonder if history reveals real strata or there are more underneath them, since the layers of a palimpsest reading are akin to reading femininity with its spinning alternation between presence and absence. You can be open to your forerunners in new ways through finding beauty in your interrelatedness with your fellow beings in your present. Beauty and history connect in a book in their most harmonious communion. As long as it is captured in a book, the individualized history is saved as memory, redeemed from being tossed into the unknown.*

Key words: history, spiritual crisis, time perception, alterity, beauty, ambiguity, Romanian contemporary literature, paradox, Pavel, archaeology in literature, couple life, contemporary quest for love

Beauty, an essence that circumvents those focused on beauty ersatz, is connected to history in Cătălin Pavel's novels in most unexpected ways. A significant encounter with a fellow being can shed new light on the past and on our relationship with our

ancestors.<sup>1</sup> Beauty as a philosophical subject from Plato to modern aesthetics theory need not concern us here, and I do not intend to delve in such an all-embracing theme in the present article. For Pavel (born in 1976), art theory has been a significant dimension of his everyday work, especially classical art (which he taught at universities in Bucharest and Atlanta), the other dimension being archaeology (since he happens to be one of the most accomplished researchers representing Romania in international teams of extensive archaeological projects).

Why contemplate beauty in your interrelatedness with another human being, why, indeed, be open to it? This question seems to be a central theme of Cătălin Pavel's prose-writing. What can be preserved from this beauty, since it can never have a material shape, an objective basis?<sup>2</sup> Words are [still] essential in this encounter ("Cîndva, peste o mie de ani, se va dovedi că vorbele au fost o mică găselniță complet eronată[...]" *Trecerea*: 242). At the same time, beauty demands that you take a greater risk – the risk of it not being there to meet you after all. Or of it turning into its very opposite in a second. Both these aspects are however not relevant in the case of beauty as an aesthetic experience.

Cătălin Pavel's novels so far deal with the question of intersubjective beauty (beauty at the interface of a shared experience between people rather than beauty *per se*) as a time essence, as an exercise of completeness, and as a way to enrich life with new meanings in the context of a major spiritual crisis. Philosophical and aesthetical issues are present on a subjacent level. Intersubjective beauty resides, for Pavel, in what is ultimately impossible to nullify in the other, in what one cannot invalidate in one's fellow beings. ("Oamenii erau plămădiți din multe lucruri care fermentau laolaltă" – *Trecerea*: 86).

Pavel's novels are: *Aproape a șaptea parte din lume*, Humanitas Publishing House, 2010; *Nicio clipă Portasar (Portasar Not for an Instant)*, Cartea Românească, 2015; *Trecerea (The*

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<sup>1</sup>See Cătălin Pavel, *Aproape a șaptea parte din lume (The Seventh Part of the World or Thereabouts)* București, Humanitas, 2010, pp. 11-12: "Vocea Zuleikăi. [...] Aleg voci din urmă. Am găsit un loc extraordinar, unde sunt liniștit. Vocea Milenei vine mai de departe și nu pot s-o compar decât cu muzica pe care am ascultat-o mai târziu. Și pe care n-am mai ascultat-o acum de ani de zile."

<sup>2</sup> It can become a source of inspiration and thus it can evolve into a form of art with a material basis; however, it flows into memory and, consequently, it shapes things from inside-out.

*Passage*), Cartea Românească, 2016. *Chihlimbar (Amber)*, not discussed here, is a new novel by Cătălin Pavel, set in Dobruja, with another novel being due for publication in spring 2020. His first novel, *Aproape a șaptea parte din lume (The Seventh Part of the World or Thereabouts)* has been translated into French by Florica Ciodaru-Courriol and has been published by a prestigious publishing house in Paris. Pavel, poet and novelist, has a PhD in archaeology (see his volume *Describing and Interpreting the Past*, 2010). He has also written a fascinating book entitled *The Archaeology of Love*, published by Humanitas in 2019, and dedicated to science communication. Gliding through a multitude of narrative techniques, this volume is unique in keeping the monumentality of the theme while alternating story-telling, suspense, dialogue, monologue, parody, ekphrasis, updating, and litotes. The mystery of archaeological discovery keeps the reader in a delightful uncertainty celebrated by the author in a witty and sassy tone. The educational purpose of disseminating information about ancient art and archeology is achieved by Pavel the novelist, who designs, with fictional tools (metaphorically speaking), an artesian well of stories and potential mini-novels about the beginnings of art in connection to anthropology.

In the sphere of reflexivity, beauty and time have been codified and fixed in abstract terms, in their relationship to eternity or to *hic et nunc* occurrences. The experience of beauty can be grasped by a person only in so far as it is time-related. At the level of history perceived individually, with possible or impossible influences on larger social contexts, it is beauty that draws one person to another. Intersubjective beauty can thus be replenished by virtue of human interaction, its very existence fostered by how alive one dares to be<sup>1</sup>. One could think that the ethos of Pavel's novels is isolated from the contemporary postmodern world which has exhausted its grand narratives (postmodern art being notoriously deprived of beauty and prone to form experiments). Yet nothing could be further from the truth regarding the settings of Catalin Pavel's novels. Though art objects and art works as encapsulations of beauty are present therein, they are not the main focus. The illusion of possessing beauty continues to be one of the grand illusions of humanity. Beauty cannot be grasped and cannot

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'alive' is here in opposition to 'passionless' in terms of a spiritual outlook on life.

be constricted. Ambiguity can dwell in intersubjective beauty. Surrogates of beauty claim to conquer nothingness, covering it with a glossy surface, but in reality this is only a claim, not a genuine advancing towards nothingness. Intersubjective beauty cannot be reduced to a deceiving appearance. It is through this beauty that nothingness opens the gates of terror, as Rilke wrote in *The First Elegy*:

"For beauty is nothing/but the beginning of terror, which we can just barely endure,/and we stand in awe of it as it coolly disdains/to destroy us. Every angel is terrifying". (Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, transl. by Edward Snow:5)

In Pavel's novels, characters are willing to take a higher existential risk when they meet and interconnect. The risk is existential abolishment, the invalidation of one's being due to the encounter with another being. But out of this risk on the margins of terror, beauty emerges. It is the chance to know your own abyss, to gaze into it, as never before. The main dichotomy of the novel *Trecerea (The Passage)* is that between what is alive and what is not, within a space designated to a spiritual existence (the monastery Respetea). No transmutation brings man closer to God. A scene close to the end of the book is that of a TV apocalypse in direct broadcast: "Paradisul și infernul separate de o apăsare pe buton și urmate de un lung deșert de publicitate" (*Trecerea*: 251). Advertisements, discoveries, culinary demonstrations, Japanese manga and anime, allowing you to escape from your own life "in a non-suicidal way" (*Ibidem*). The Jizo episode shows how free will can be cast off forever from the lives of its protagonists: magical thinking meets cumulative hazard. Syntax is born out of the juxtaposition of life-less, alienating elements which have superseded real existence. Beauty can still be found in interconnectedness with somebody whose aliveness is genuinely unadulterated.

An example of intersubjective beauty taken from the life of a couple in the novel *Trecerea* (2016) is the moment when Constantin Artiom Coman wishes he could protect Ina Coman from all misery, psychosis and trauma witnessed in the films seen together:

"În prezența Inei, Artiom nu se putea bucura de film, era prea conștient de sine.(...) Sigur că era mai bine decât în alte familii, unde seara fiecare vedea propriul lui film, în camera lui." (Pavel, *Trecerea*: 189).

But Ina, on the other hand, as a generous being who perceives the silver lining in any clouded sky, places all things within a natural