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**PhD THESIS**  
**EXPERIENCES OF BEAUTY IN ROMANIAN MEMOIRS OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup>**  
**CENTURY. SHATTERED HISTORIES, AESTHETICIZED TRAUMAS,**  
**INNER SURVIVALS**

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## **Abstract**

The research aims to explore the Romanian memoirs of the 20th century, focusing on a precise thematic cut: the way in which the experiences of beauty, in their various forms, are recorded in retrospective discourses that interweave personal and collective history. The analytical and hermeneutic approach also reveals an evolution of these experiences over the past century. While the authors who describe the period at the beginning of the century emphasize the predominantly external manifestations of beauty (contemplation of nature, extremely detailed portraits, the objects of domestic universe, etc.), the memoirs of the post-war period and of the detention reveal more interior "beauties" (moral heroism, artistic creation, divine revelation). Throughout the history of the twentieth century, recovered in the memoirs, experiences of beauty are ways of inner survival and sometimes even of authentic fulfillment.

The theoretical section of the paper comprises three chapters. The first of these (*The Thematic Cut: A Method of Philological Research*) deals with the notions of literary theory and criticism applied in the study, in particular the semiotic cut, explained by Leo Spitzer and converted, in our research, into a thematic cut. The second chapter (*A Method of Interpretation: Philosophical Concepts of the Experience of Beauty*) proposes a philosophical approach to the theme of beauty. To this end, we have chosen relatively recent studies of philosophers Roger Scruton and Dietrich von Hildebrand, both concerned with the experience of beauty and its forms - concepts clarified in the sub-chapters of our work and subsequently applied to the memoirs analyzed (*Beauty of Ordinary Life: A Universal Feature; Metaphysical Beauty: Admiration of the Human; Beauty of Nature and Art: Revelation of the Sacred*). A necessary completion, the relationship between beauty and divinity is also discussed from C.S. Lewis's perspective, whose autobiography offers relevant clues regarding this theme. The last theoretical chapter (*Memoirs: Between History and Ego-document*) brings together critical perspectives on the literary and documentary value of memoir discourses: differences and similarities between memoirs and autobiographies, memoirs as a species of confessional literature, memoirs as a form of alternative history. Among the authors cited in this chapter are Philippe Lejeune, Georges Gusdorf, Paul Ricoeur, Eugen Simion, Silviu Iosifescu and others.

The literary analysis and hermeneutics section comprises four chapters.

***On the Threshold Between Centuries. Memoirs as an Attempt to Recreate the Paradise of Childhood*** brings together the portraits of two authors: Regina Maria and Zoe Cămărășescu. In their narratives, experiences of visible beauty are recorded. The subtitles consequently focus on *Sights*, *Portraits*, and *Décors*, as well as on the aestheticization of trauma, a tendency specific to difficult historical periods (in this case, the years of the First World War).

***Beauty as a Way of Existence: Memoirs about the Romanian Inter-War Epoch*** is the title of the chapter concerning the memoirs of Cella Delavrancea and Amelia Pavel. In these writings, the experience of beauty takes the form of high aesthetic values; it is an intellectualized beauty that is grouped, in analysis, according to another triptych: *Artists*, *Artworks* and *Profound meanings*.

***Memoirs-Histories About a Post-War World*** is the chapter in which we propose a reflection on the discursive forms through which Annie and Pascal Benteoiu revisit a difficult epoch in the personal, family and national history. Thematically, the experiences of beauty are described as miraculous, and the ways in which they are manifested evolve, more and more clearly, towards areas of interiority: *The country*, *The family*, *The (Moral) Heroism*.

***Memoirs on Detention or the Paradoxes of Beauty*** illustrates a culmination of this evolution, towards forms of beauty that are almost exclusively interior. The two authors who form, in this chapter, models for living the concentration camp experience and narrating its realities are Lena Constante (*Detention as a Space of Creation*, with the subtitles *The Poetry*, *The Story*, *The Escape*) and Fr. Tertulian Langa (*Detention as a Space of Revelation*, with the subtitles *The Suffering*, *The Prayer*, *The Fulfillment*).

The conclusions of the research include an overview of this unique "portrait gallery", a phrase taken from the volumes of memoirs studied, which defines a recurring theme, especially in the writings of former prisoners, concerned to redeem, through their testimony, the many faces and life stories encountered in prisons. The chronological itinerary makes it possible to mirror the most important historical moments of the last century in stylistically very different subjective discourses. The same chronological approach, however, also reveals that, thematically, the experiences of beauty are a universal-human constancy, an essential dimension of life, but also of writing. Precisely because they bring history and literature together, Romanian memoirs of the twentieth century are the space in which the passage from *celebrated beauty* (in the Belle-Époque

years) and *cultivated beauty* (in the inter-war years) to *forbidden beauty* (post-war period) and *undefeated beauty* (the prison experience, in the years of the communist regime) becomes visible.

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