

## D. P. PERPESSICIUS – A DESTINY MARKED BY WAR

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**Key words:** Perpessicius, war, destiny, poetry.

*If you desire to support the defeated body,  
Soul, look for shelter in the sky ...  
(Brancardier, D. P. Perpessicius)*

The historical document, considered the quickest way to uncover the past, can be accompanied by various creations of literary nature. What recommends this double take is the ability to unlock the attitudes, impressions, emotions and feelings, to unveil the human within, without which it is impossible to comprehend any historical event or fact, if we are considering the history of human communities. Each individual experience, once shared, adds to the collective experience and, together or individually, creates the profiles of the subjects of these experiences. When these are connected to a conflictive event, these experiences are traumatic. Deep wounds, carried inside, or just as deep, carried outside, on the body, a mortal organism in the endlessness of time. Such is the case of Dumitru Panaitescu Perpessicius, the critic, the literary historian, the interpreter, but also the creator of a lyrical poem related to the short life experience as soldier during the First World War. The experience of the war, benefitting creation, reveals, in Perpessicius, maybe more deeply than in other participants, the pain, present forever in bodily wounds resulting in the permanent invalidity of the right arm. Was it the impact of a stray bullet, or the cynical precision with which it hit, that causes a double invalidity to Perpessicius, the man destined to writing?

This is a dramatic entry into history, accompanied by a certain aura of heroism, which the young Perpessicius had discovered and cultivated inside during his school years.

At this point, we cannot ignore the fact that Perpessicius encountered, in his youth, important figures which induced his interest for history.

He had a cult for Nicolae Iorga, enhanced also by the cultural and political situation during those years – the visits of the great historian to Braila were numerous, and almost always accompanied by conferences, which were absorbed by the high school student Perpessicius and the entire future generation of great men of culture from Braila, such as Vasile Bancila and Basil Munteanu.

Of interest is also the absolutely novel high school paper on Iorga, paper which put into difficulty professor Drugescu. Overwhelmed by this essay, the professor labeled it as “a schoolboy’s involvement into high problems of state” – being also afraid of being suspected of partisanship. Later on, referring to this, Perpessicius noted, with humor: “Was, for me, the first disaster ... politically speaking, and the first disappointment”<sup>1</sup>.

It should also be noted here the revelation produced by the novel *Șoimii*, written by Mihail Sadoveanu - “the first book which captivated me and gave me the first thrills of fiction-reading, which none of the later revelations in matters of literary history ... could dethrone...”<sup>2</sup>

Or the experience of teaching the poem *Peneș Curcanul* by Vasile Alecsandri, in 1919, during an exam for becoming a teacher of Romanian language and literature. He remembers this episode

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\* «Casa Perpessicius» of Brăila.

\*\* the translator of this text.

<sup>1</sup> *Alte mențiuni de istoriografie literară și folclor*, III, 1963-1967, Bucharest, EPL, p. 260-261.

<sup>2</sup> *Schiță de excurs autobiografic* in „Alte mențiuni de istoriografie literară și folclor”, III, 1963-1967, Bucharest, Editura pentru literatură, 1967, p. 361.

with a fine irony in *Lecturi intermitente*<sup>3</sup>: “Freshly returned from the battlefield, and still bearing the visible marks (I was still wearing my right arm in a sling) I had the innocence to believe that I will find, in my young pupils, a more agreeable audience, for me and Peneş Curcanul, of whose psychological atmosphere, authentically Romanian, I am, just like Vladimir Streinu, more convinced than ever. But all my efforts to extract from the class the slightest positive opinion on Alecsandri’s poem were met with stern faces. It was as if, once the peace concluded, the war literature ... had no more success and all the schoolbooks were in dire need of a shake-up.”

Not by accident, in this succession has to be included the adoption of the pen-name *Perpessicius*<sup>4</sup> - shortly speaking, “the one who is toughened by suffering”. Chance or premonition – sign of the coming war ...

Also, during the same year, he became sub-Lieutenant at the School for Officers in Bucharest, Dealul Spirii, and had been deployed to the 38th infantry Regiment in Brăila. He went to war on the Southern front, in Dobrogea, taking active part in battle. Like in the story of the soldier from Muselim Selo, on the Muratan hill, a bullet “who had no space in all that place” hits him in the right arm ... From here on, the intertwining of Dumitru P. Panaitescu with his pen-name begins.

Just a few days from that moment, on a hospital bed, with an inert right arm, “the one toughened by suffering” tries to write, with his left, a postcard to his family. Surprisingly enough, his writing is clear: is his ability to coordinate his left hand writing unusual? Example of strong will? Sign that he will be able to fulfill his destiny, or all of the above?

This experience has resulted in literary verses, initially published in various magazines, one of these being the “Letopiseţi”<sup>5</sup>, (aprox. “scrolls”, the title represents another link to history). All these poems form the volume *Scut şi targă*<sup>6</sup> (Shield and Gurney).

This volume can be analyzed from the perspective of a war diary – a special one, for, instead of personal notes and stories, Perpessicius wrote verses, rhyme, impressions and attitudes. And, just as in a real diary, it starts with the beginning – the voyage towards the experience, the historical event, the most dramatic happening for its subject: *Caron signaled the undoing of the ropes;/But all the barges, unleashed from the pontoon, Still hesitant along the shore, in gentle rocking,/Just as the coffin over which – before the burial,/A mother or sister hurl themselves in despair*<sup>7</sup>.

Images, feelings, tricks of the senses, all these are inducing the atmosphere of war and its consequences: ... *As we stood lost on the deck,/In the cool breeze caressing our forehead,/We feel a premature night’s shadow*<sup>8</sup>.

The end of his involvement in the war comes quickly for the young sub-Lieutenant; he receives the news without a trace of tragedy, like a fulfillment of the destiny of “the one who is toughened by suffering”: *And one day they came/carrying a stretcher for me;/in the agony flowering miraculously around me/I saw again the entire valley,/The ruins of the village, smoke still coming out,/The comrades from the battles...*<sup>9</sup>

On the hospital bed where he wrote his verses, he remembers his love, with a pious nostalgia, (*It’s Sunday, Mădy!/Do you remember/In times of peace/My kiss so passionate?*<sup>10</sup>), goes from dreamy images (*The moon floated on the water, trembled by the waves,/Spreading on the surface its undone*

<sup>3</sup> Editura Dacia, Cluj, 1971, p 189-190.

<sup>4</sup> In December 1915 when publishing the poem *Ad provinciales, meum in Gretchen amoreus, sperentes* in *Cronica* by Tudor Arghezi and Gala Galaction.

<sup>5</sup> 10 November 1918 - 1 March 1919, edited together with Dragoş Protopopescu and Scarlat Struţeanu.

<sup>6</sup> Published in 1926, at Casa Şcoalelor.

<sup>7</sup> *Pe Styx*, Pe Dunare, 1916.

<sup>8</sup> Idem.

<sup>9</sup> *Gravura de pe calendar*, Mulciova, 1916.

<sup>10</sup> *Duminică*, Mulciova, 1916.

crown<sup>11</sup>) to somber places (*On the right, on a ridge of grey land,/Like the rags of the purple flags,/Big poppies fill with blood.*<sup>12</sup>) to the dramatic (*Here comes the storm, raging from the sky,/Turning everything upside down, Strangled dies the flower in its way,/A hive of shard, dust and smoke*<sup>13</sup>), while the battlefield, with its horrors, becomes a place of returning (*Guns chopping down the meadow's flowers/Their flowing juices washing deadly wounds/Of heroes fallen to the ground,/Who sleep forever on a flower, buried in petals*<sup>14</sup>); naturally, the image of the city from which Perpessicius's literary adventure has started could not be missing from this imaginary universe, (*Braila had unfolded a fan-like plan,/With sweet smells and sad smells,.../... From the valley, the port howls – a hell of masts - /porters in rag carry the gold- full sacks of grain .../*<sup>15</sup> and, just as naturally, the image of the mother, trembling with premonitions, in the well-known background of the “mute ghetto” (*A candle... but what hidden genie fogs the light,/On your eyes, and the shadows that slips again its mask /and what is the premonition that trembles in your soul?.../You think you see, in the ray that lights your house,/O! Grieving mother, guardian angel!*<sup>16</sup>); and here, light verses, ironical and fun, to balance the weight of the war (*You used to cry and all the bed's planks/Accompanied you:/My fractures kept coming undone/From their calm prescribed by doctors*<sup>17</sup>); different images, associated with emotions of different intensity and tone, all in one original mixture defining of the poet Perpessicius.

Starting with Camil Petrescu's note, according to which Perpessicius has brought an “aspect of the war without its heroic side”, habitual in the Romanian poetry, (to name just two of his predecessors, Vasile Alecsandri and George Cosbuc – poets of bravery, military manliness, who recreated dramatic moments of the war), it is only natural to go to the source, to the one who is the subject of these statements, Perpessicius himself, the closest to the essence of his lyrics.

*“Biographical by excellence, as it is, anyway, the lyrical poetry, it has remembered, from my existence, and the international ambiance, those details and echoes destined for the same point of convergence. Lacking in fantasy – although some historians have placed us, which we enjoyed, among the “fictional”, - it has accompanied us in the valleys and hills of Dobrogea, to Mulciova and Muratan, it has stood still beside our hospital beds, where we have spent more hours than on the war front, or it has reminded us the image of the Danube stemming from childhood and adolescence, our poetry has grown from the strict reality, which it did not dramatize and over which it has poured a little bit of that Horatian indifference, at peace with the destiny and blooming with a smile or a mythological memory.”*<sup>18</sup>

Armed with these statement, we can claim that his lyrics of war are those of a poet which perceives the horrors of the war or the suffering on the hospital bed with detachment, with the desire to overcome the tragedy implied by taking part, effectively and traumatizing, to the war. He applies the Romanian therapy of “laughing with tears” to overcome the drama of the moment.

These pieces of “scribbling” reveal, deep down, a profound emotion, and the air of false superficiality, that armor which has accompanied him his whole life. He has been accused by some colleagues of being not tough enough in his critics, but he chose to rather reveal the qualities of a creation than the faults. These are a sign of an elevated, tolerant and refined spirit, and, at the same time, the attitude of a man who has suffered his whole life the horrors of war, who has learned to live with them; and from this deep understanding of human suffering, he derived the deep understanding and protection of people's sensibilities, by the man destined, in more ways than one, to suffering.

<sup>11</sup> Călăuza, Pe Dunăre, 1916.

<sup>12</sup> Popas la Muratan, Mutaran, 1916.

<sup>13</sup> Brancardier, Muratan, 1916.

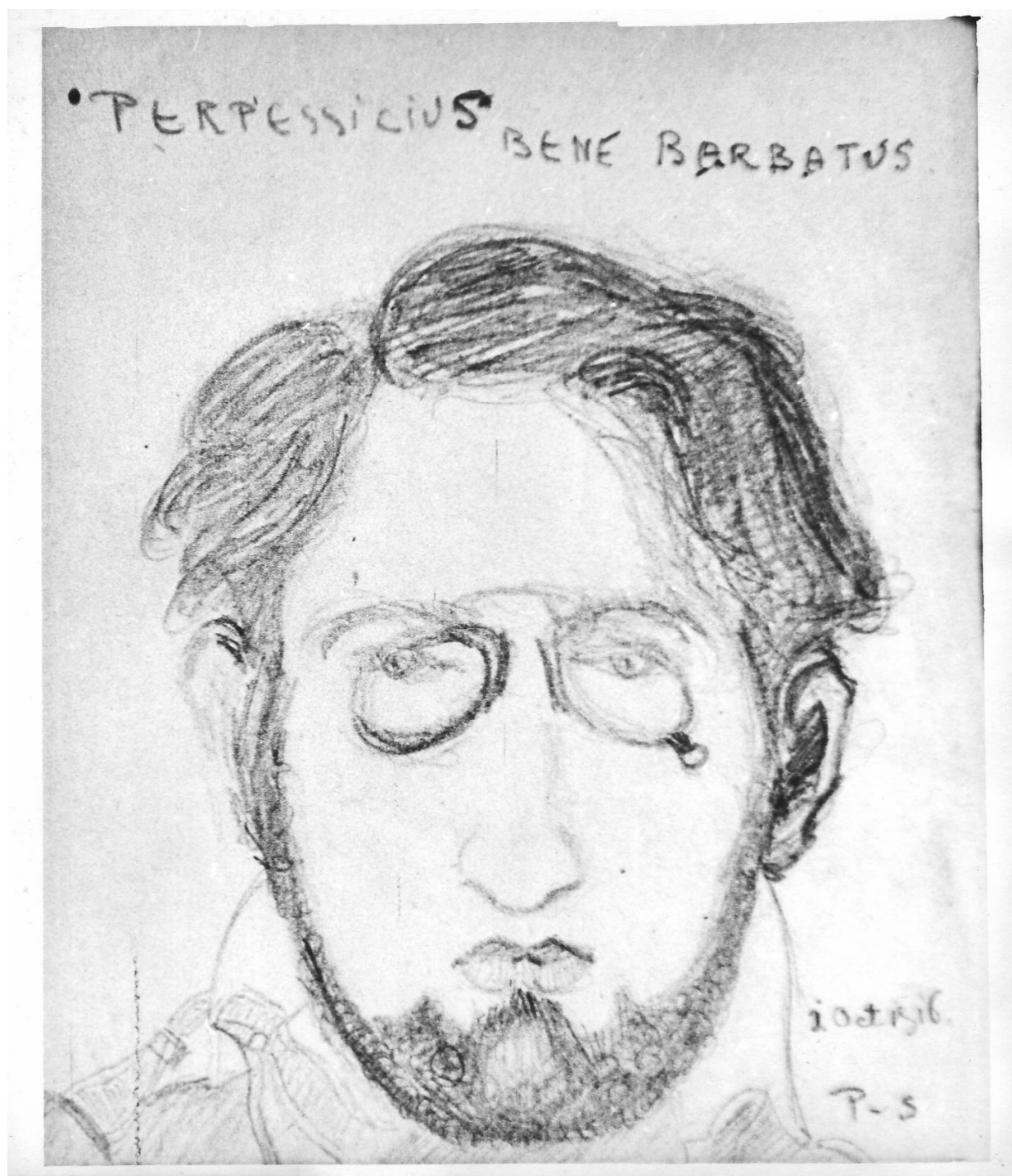
<sup>14</sup> Flora stelelor polare, Ivinez, 1916.

<sup>15</sup> Mirajul planului oraşului Brăila, Iaşi, 1917.

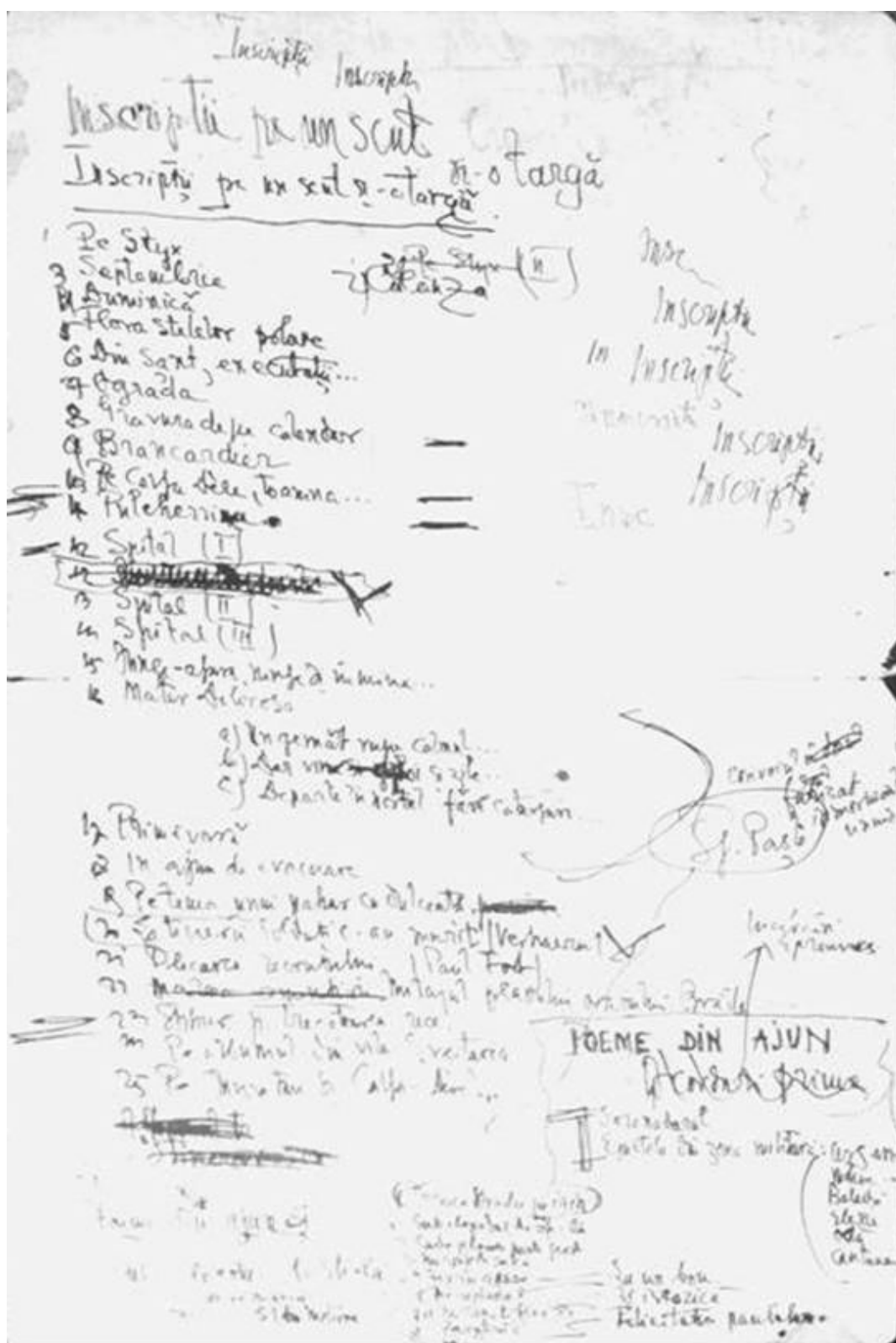
<sup>16</sup> Mater dolorosa, Botoşani, 1917.

<sup>17</sup> Spital I, Galaţi 1916.

<sup>18</sup> Cuvânt înainte, Opere, Editura pentru literatura, Bucureşti, 1966, vol. 1, p. 7.



Perpessicius self-portrait – 10 october 1916; signed P. S.  
D. P. Perpessicius contents, collection of Memorials Section, Brăila Museum.



M.S. sheet, summary of tom „Inscriptions on a shield and a stretcher”  
D. P. Perpersicius contents, collection of Memorials Section, Museum of Brăila.