THE CLAUSTRUM AND ESCAPING ONE'S OWN REALITY²¹

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Motto: “In the time that « has not yet run out » lay all events, all feelings, every thought, every dream that did not come to be yet and from which generations and generations of people will extract their necessary part of reality, dream and madness.”
(Max Blecher, *The Lighted Den*)

“I was extremely happy with my first book. I never felt that way again”, writer Mircea Cărtărescu confessed in an interview published in *Adevărul*, October 2017. He could not have known then, having just finished his first book of poems, *Faruri, vitrine, fotografii* [*Headlights, shop windows, photographs*, 1980], that masterpieces such as the novels *Levantul* [*The Levant*, 1990], *Orbitor* [*Blinding*, 3 volumes, 1996, 2002, 2007] and *Solenoid* [2015], to name just a few, would follow. If that *never* confessed by Cărtărescu were still true today, we could say that the *unhappiness, the despair of being, the fright and unrest* are, as Didier Anzieu and André Green often remarked in their writings on psychoanalysis and literature, frontiers that the Creative Ego crosses

²¹ a dialogue with Guillermo Montero on the novel *Solenoid* by Mircea Cărtărescu;

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endlessly, and sublimation will never be sufficient, will not be a substitute for life.

“*The work of writing implies a detachment and a loss, a wound and a mourning, and the work will be the transformation meant to recover them through the positivization of the fictional*”, wrote A. Green in his article “Le double et l’absent” [The double and the absent, t.n.]. And the writings of Mircea Cărtărescu are the authentic proof for this continuous transformation, a perspective also underlined by Guillermo Montero in his essay, when he approaches *the world from within existential hell* and *the metaphor of the prisoner* in the novel *Solenoid*, and which we will refer to in particular in this psychoanalytic dialogue on the *Solenoid*.

An auto-fictional, kaleidoscopic, multifaceted *Bildungsroman*, combining funambulism with multiple personal, confessional realities, but also to urban and social realities, written in labyrinth-like layers as a journey through the depths of the human mind, the dimensions of existence, at the border between the novelistic, poetic, oneiric and fantasy discourse, *Solenoid* is the masterpiece of a writer who has reached the maturity of his creation and life. We encounter also in this novel the problematic of *maturity and aging*, along with their vicissitudes, is also picked up on by psychoanalyst G. Montero in his essay²³: “Aging is an important theme and the novel, and Cărtărescu expresses it through the words of several characters, not only those of the main character where we can also find a shadow of the fear of losing one’s sexual drive (*aphanasis*)”.

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A few Cărtărescian illustrations from *Solenoid* on malady, on the distressing process of aging and the disgusting, terrifying death are revealing for his *in essentia* melancholy discourse: “We grow old, we wait quietly on death row. We are executed one after the other in the most sinister extermination camp. We are first stripped of beauty, youth and hope. We are wrapped in the penitent’s cloth of disease, tiredness and decay” (p. 189). Or “Billions of people died just because they coupled. This is punishable by death. (...) When we spoke of death we would be even more disturbed. People died, we knew that, but couldn’t understand it. (...) However, the old died, the young sometimes died too, of terrible diseases such as cancer, children also died. (...) When you talked of death, everything was absolute: everyone died, without exception. And you would die forever. At the thought we would no longer be an animal fear would take over us” (pp. 485-486).

In his essay, “Maturescence: Doorways towards New Insights for a Never-ending Debate”²⁴, G. Montero, also interested in the enigma of death, stated: “Psychoanalysis don’t need to have and do not intend to give an answer to the painful riddle of death. Psychoanalysts are only expected to listen to internal voices and wishes in order to know what old age or «death» or whatever other content means for that individual - if possible, without any preconception - in the same way we deal with other different psychic products - fantasies, acting-outs, dreams, and so. If we can work open to these tensions – which are the same as those which worried our ancestors from the first human being to ourselves - we’d feel a kind of freedom different to any idea of «resolution»”. Guillermo Montero finds these dimensions in the writings of Mircea Cărtărescu and

²⁴ Essay presented during the CAPSA seminars, under the auspices of the Romanian Society of Psychoanalysis, February 2018.

thus opens up psychoanalytical perspectives on the micro or macro-world and realities from which the writer, through his characters, wishes to escape.

Introspectively, in a permanent search for the truths of the world and of being, of an “Authentic Self” beyond the marking falsehoods and deformations, familiar with the borders of his Ego, of barely-perceivable worlds, of the dark depths of the unconscious, of the life-death tangency, Mircea Cărtărescu gives voice in the novel *to his nightmares* (“... and suddenly I thought I was dreaming, that I was having a nightmare, so I threw myself onto the concrete covered in swarf, oakum and black grease, tossing and turning and slapping myself to wake up...” – p.139); *to his fears* (“I should go mad with fear, as someone else, in my own mind, is commanding this so evidently qualified, desperate to be decrypted...” – p. 25; “I was always afraid, pure fear that came not from thinking of a danger, but from life itself” – p. 70), *to his frights* (“I continuously lived the frights of the blind, the unrest of the deaf. At night I could never truly sleep because as soon as my eyes closed I knew there was someone in the room watching, slowly drawing near my sleeping face...” – p. 70), *to the agonies and to the lucid madness* (“What is it with this labyrinth I’ve found myself in? Is it not the labyrinth itself, with its symmetries, its morsel of cheese at the end of the most distant hall, sign of a superior world, of an intelligence to which my own mind is but a bumbling in darkness?” – p. 95; “It seemed to be an image from the centre of your mind, as clear as in a *camera lucida* and just as enigmatic” – p. 87).

And all of these states of mind are happening in the hallucinating-delirious fabric of visions, visitors, shadows and spectres: “*The vision of the being that watched me, sing a few months ago, repeated last night.*

*I'd fallen asleep when something made me open my eyes. I only saw his figure for three-four seconds, then it vanished. The dark bedroom remained, and in me a strange warm, painless fear. He was sitting next to the bed, facing my gaze, watching me. This time it was a man with a long face, greyed and thinned hair stuck to his temples. He wore a white, undefined garment” (p. 409).*²⁵

Reality – or, better said, the world – described by Cărtărescu is a fragmented, shattered kaleidoscope, a multidimensional puzzle, a metaphysical prison limited by the five senses and between the three dimensions: ”Following the footsteps of Gall, Lombroso and Freud, I also attempt to understand the colossal, winding, imperial and, in the end, inextricable Gordian knot that fills the forbidden chamber of our cranium, braided with metal threads and hemp, spider silk and strands of saliva, from the obscene lace of garters and fine scales of gold necklaces, from the flexible duct of the maelstrom and the anthracite-black whip of stag beetle antennae” (pp. 99-100).

In his struggle through internal life, through external realities and through the colourful world of Bucharest neighbourhoods, looking for escape, ascension, illumination, the “professor” is livened and driven by a sense of predestination, trying to solve an equation in which, in fact, all the world’s unsolvable enigmas are tied up. Nothing is insignificant to him, because nothing is what it seems in a far-away, inaccessible, parallel dimension, hence the obsession with finding the meaning/cypher of escape into the world within every marking, at the same time code, guide and proof: characters places, objects, numbers and strange quotes,

²⁵ All the English quotations from *Solenoid* are our translation and the pages corresponds to the Romanian first edition of the novel, Ed. Humanitas, 2015 (author’s note).

manuscripts in unknown languages, impossible objects, Escherian drawings, Rubik's cubes, Mobius strips, tattoos, tesseracts and polytopias, theories of mathematics and physics, anatomical and oneirical experiments. These mental spaces and these elements of internal reality, as representative correspondents of external reality, remind us of the manner in which W.R. Bion described the material and psychic elements in *Attention and Interpretation* (Chapter "Medicine as a model"), with their game of projective projections/identifications:

"The restrictive character of reality and the dependence of projective identification on recognition of objects preclude projection of parts of the personality because there is no conception of containers into which the projection could take place. The explosive projection is therefore felt to take place in what is, to the analyst, the *realization* of mental space: a mental space that has no visual images to fulfil the functions of a co-ordinate system, either the 'faceted solid' or the multi-dimensional, multi-linear figure of lines intersecting at a point. The mental realization of space is therefore felt as an immensity so great that it cannot be represented even by astronomical space because it cannot be represented at all." (W.R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, cap. 9, "Ultimate reality"; p.12).

The obsessive metaphor of the entire novel is the cloistering, the captivity of Man and the desperate attempt at escaping from one's body, from one's own mind, from the world, in the end: *Atonement*. Inevitably, these Cărtărescian themes in *Solenoid*— and we could easily apply them to the entirety of his works — refer us in psychoanalysis to the Bionian theories on Atonement, no matter its situation along the artistic, religious, scientific or psychoanalytical vortex:

"The realities with which psycho-analysis deals, for example fear, panic, love, anxiety, passion, have no sensuous background, though there is a sensuous background (respiratory rate, pain, touch, etc.) that is often identified with them and then treated, supposedly scientifically. (...) There can be no geometry of 'similar', 'identical', 'equal'; only of analogy.

The Platonic theory of Forms and the Christian dogma of the Incarnation imply absolute essence which I wish to postulate as a universal quality of phenomena such as 'panic', 'anxiety', 'fear', 'love'. In brief, I use O to represent this central feature of every situation that the psycho-analyst has to meet. (W.R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, chap. 9, "Ultimate reality"; p.89).

Mircea Cărtărescu describes an immense *Claustrum*, which could be approached from the perspective psychoanalyst Donald Meltzer used to conceive psychic life. As we know, Meltzer identifies six areas through which the subject maintains relationships with the world, thanks to projective identifications: the external world, the maternal womb, the interior of external objects, the interior of internal objects, "the internal model" and the delirious system – *the land of nowhere*.

The subject's exchanges with the external, material world aim for adaptation and have little impact on the development and transformation of the psychic apparatus, with the exception of experiences where the external world possesses the qualities of the internal world (living external objects) – this is the place where intrigues, lies and group mentalities function, as W.R. Bion described in *Experiences in groups*. Exchanges with external objects allow the subject's emotions to be expressed, while the projective identification of the subject with objects

has an impact on several levels of the subject's internal world. The fantastic exchanges with the maternal womb especially can carry the capacity to think, but can also be, in the negativity of processes, bearers of the *folie à deux*. Anyway, the world of delirium, the *land of nowhere*, built from fragments of objects, of impulses in their negative state, the most destructive, alters psychic functioning and contact with reality.

For Cărtărescu, the professor's manuscript, "a failed writer", is a reflection of such a Meltzerian space, but the manuscript holds more than the meaning of its container, respectively it does more than contain its agony, anomaly and collapse, also being a way for the author to ensure exit solutions, the signs of a possible overcoming of madness, unhappiness and despair of being, and, page after page, the signs of a possible opening of a micro-world towards a macro-world are scattered.

The writer's house and neighbourhood are like territories of an unconscious architecture, representations of the psychic house, full of ruins, hidden rooms and secret doors, basements and all sorts of passages; while his life, with the nocturnal "visits", apparitions-disappearances, kidnappings of persons, clues, signs, markings, messages, formulas and codes found in books or revealed to him in "visions", dreams, even in tattoos – all these are manifestations of another dimension, glimpses of a "parallel world", transcendent, spiritually-superior, sacred, which the narrator fore-sees and feels, a world that "shows itself" to him and which he aspires to with every fibre of his being, with each neuron of his brain.

However is the professor himself insane, part of the series of characters that includes the inventor, the protestor, the doorman and the

librarian? Or is this matrix of madness only a version of what the mental apparatus, no matter how much it expands into further knowledge, other worlds, that remains limited and closed within itself? Here we credit W.R. Bion and his theory on Knowledge – No-Knowledge (K, -K) once again and of that Truth never cognizable, never accessible to the human mind.

Was *the professor's manuscript* – as a symbolized internal discourse, as a matrix of the mind, a self-description of psychic existence – his real literary failure or is it traversed by an endless fear of failure, of the failure of he who writes? Has his poem, “Căderea” (The Fall), long surpassed the horizon of understanding of those who were preoccupied with and good “only” at literature? We leave the answers unsaturated, but it is remarkable how Mircea Cărtărescu builds his novel simultaneously and in balance on all the three apexes Bion named – religious, artistic, scientific. The narrator of this desperate manuscript refuses however to be another false literary prophet: “You only have to really write Bibles, only gospels”.

This is why his manuscript, both sublime and grotesque, lucid and hallucinatory, elegiac and desolate, spectacular and terrifying, full of compassion as well as misanthropy, oneiric and paranoid, cryptic and cartographic, visionary and agnostic, whose only possible destiny is the *autodafé*, incineration. The manuscript, conceived like a scripture, is another gospel, tragic and infernal, which contains an Apocalypse without Genesis, the gospel of a Messiah who, sent “with a message of Atonement”, fails at the salvation of his kind, as Jesus once had ascended to the Heavens leaving behind the same *ignorance, despair, three-dimensional condition*.

As Bion also wrote, referring to the necessity, for humanity, of the existence of a saving Messiah, in the same tome: “The fate of Jesus himself has been crucifixion as a criminal on the one hand, and deification on the other. Both Isaac Luria and Jesus were alike in being followed by a proliferation of hagiographical biography; much of it, in the instance of Jesus, not being included in the canon. The common features are: containment of the messianic idea in the individual; containment of the messianic individual in the group; the problem for the Establishment that is concerned with the group on the one hand and the messianic idea and individual on the other. It is now necessary to return to the word” (Bion, W.R. - *Attention and Interpretation*, chap. 12, p. 115).

The Cărtărescian subject-character lives in the midst of a world much too limited, restricted (like in a prison cell: “For four or five nights I couldn’t shut my eyes, as if I were sharing a cell with a killer or were forced to sleep in a tiger’s cage” – p. 624) to have the perspective of the Universal plan, of his own limited and limiting dimension, of finality in infinity. Is this the description of Atonement, of Ascension? For what is Ascension if not the final Exit, the definitive escape from micro-spaces into a macro-space, from a subjective reality to a first/last Reality – “O”, as it is conceived in Bionian thinking.

In his essay, Guillermo Montero returns to the captivity, cloistering and their multiple meanings, underling the paradox of the prisoner and the absence of the object as a condition for the state of captivity - *captive within one’s self*: ”It’s a paradox, but the prisoner could have also found a paranoid resolution of his situation, because the text states that «he is watched so carefully», that we could easily think

that he could have «chosen» it, to get a dissolution of his personality... and here is where internal psychic resources and psychic work-through are needed. Of course, I can't leave without stressing that prison is also the absence of an object".

And the Cărtărescian confession: "And when I was ready, when my small, illusionist writing filled my body with the most beautiful story in the world, told by a million mouths all together, I did not fall into melancholy again, as I suddenly knew that, just as the unfathomable world around me, just as my body that reflects it like a dewdrop, the art of tattooing is endless. I approached the frontier between body and soul, I passed it, with my instrument of torture in hand, and I began tattooing, knowing I would never finish, even if I would injure it for a lifetime, the infinite and infinitely stratified and infinitely glorious, and infinitely demented citadel of my mind" (p. 220).

And from here, the impossible exit yet again, as this spiral in which the subject-author is (self-)locked in perpetually brings him back, sometimes line after line, in a somewhat *in-between* psychic space, an *entre-deux mondes*, found and constantly oscillating between the *call of the void* and *rejection of the void*. Here not writing, nor uprising or praying out "of horror" are life forces, but instead are forces of death, disintegrating, de-structuring, annihilating forces of the Ego. The one who writes here is submerged into the one who (does not) live himself. The Ego-author or Ego-flesh, the name no longer matters, as the living-object or the living-Self no longer have borders, no longer differentiated, the identity confusion, the rupture of limits, their abolishment, diffusion, the annulment of being: object/subject-void. And then, we ask, somewhat along Michel de M'Uzan's line of thought, *from art to death what micro-*

movements are there, what possible difference, what “minuscule insanities” (Jacques André) or what deadly madness?

Beyond its first meanings, the *Solenoid* (a technical term for something which produces an electromagnetic field that modifies the properties of its surrounding environment and, implicitly, human perception; a mathematic term used for a mathematical figure related to topology, geometry; a mathematical attractor that organizes that which is disorderly and orders all that is diffused) it is *internal environment*, an agent of escape to another dimension. The main protagonist and main female character, Irina, are not alone, as all Cărtărescian characters in *Solenoid* are constructed as *attractors, as internal objects are and the fixing points in psychic space*. From this perspective, the significance and meaning of the Solenoid resides in unifying elements, meanings and experiences from all spheres of knowledge. At the same time, the novel *Solenoid* is structured along an essential axis, as G. Montero has remarkably underlined: *the paradox of identity and freedom*: “Now, we could also think of a rare paradox: prison under an authentic identity and freedom under a false identity!” And the paradox – as Mircea Cărtărescu is undoubtedly already aware of – is to be accepted, not resolved.

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