

VIRTUALITY AND HYPERTEXT IN MIRCEA CARTARESCU'S *LEVANTUL*

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Abstract

The paper initiates the exploration of Mircea Cartarescu's epic poem *Levantul* from a technical perspective, noticing the high number of textual strategies employed in the discourse and trying to reveal the effects they have on the themes, characters and concepts developed by the parabolic narrative. *Levantul's* Postmodernist nature is linked to its ability of creating virtual, fictional worlds between which the hypertext works as a means of communication, expansion and illusion. A sort of Poetics of simulation, undermined by a post-Romantic obsession of totality, may be identified in the dynamics of the text.

Keywords: Virtual Reality, Postmodernism, Hypertext, Simulation, Fiction.

Among other aspects, Postmodernism means, in the field of writing, a revenge of minor registers against the high, elitist one. 'The end of the great narratives', like the entire boost of anti-canon dialectics which defines Postmodernist literature, has been used by writers in such a way that they eventually became simple cliches. However, beyond common things, confusions and exaggeration, the avant-gardistic heritage that Postmodernism employed has engaged into the demolition of a sort of mythology of literature, preserved throughout the entire modernity. With the rise of Romanian Postmodernism during the 80s, Nicolae Manolescu noticed the change of perspective brought by this new sensibility: „*Postmodernismul*, writes the critic, *e oligarhic și tolerant. Menține ca esențială orientarea lirică, expresia intuitivă și fantezistă, dar n-are cultul purității sângelui poetic, ca modernismul. Nu e, de aceea, atât de elitist și de dificil.*” One may thus understand that the oligarchy and tolerance have gone in all the directions and almost everything has changed in the esthetical order. All that was lasting in great literature has lost its credibility. Since the bet between art and transcendence was lost, the cultural discourse of Postmodernism has lost its prerogative that made it a modern one. Postmodernity has based its Metaphysics on a Rhetoric of the end. Francis Fukuyama, who wrote about one of the most spectacular theses regarding the entrance of humanity in Postmodernism, was particularly appreciated by Postmodernist writers. Mircea Cărtărescu's *Postmodernismul românesc* seemed to be written to create controversy and to confirm the antidoctrinarian features of Postmodernism, while at the same time rejecting the non-Postmodernist features of other poetic schools besides that of the generation of the 1980s.

The theoretical elements of literary Postmodernism are determined by the dialectical features of the deconstructive instinct which makes the relationship between

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text and tradition more dynamic. When the originality and ambition for novelty are diminished to zero, Postmodernism appears, as Eco defined it, as a simple question of quotation. Obviously, this `soft` type of Postmodernism works through an assumption of the tradition, its cultural discourse being related to the previous ones. But this abolishment of the singularity of a work of art makes it function in a continuing dialogue with the texts written before, and thus the soft Postmodernist literary texts ritually return into the historicity of a preexisting discourse.

For the soft Postmodernist, the cultural history is a deposit of props, an unexhaustable list of masks that satisfies the literature's histrionic gene in a sort of creative game only meant to display virtuosity and virtuality of all techniques and effects. The world becomes multi-identitary, like the succession of discursive displays it is seen through, its fragmentarity being perpetually complicated.

In all its concepts, tradition benefits of this soft side of Postmodernism. The implicit relativity does not affect the consistency of great themes which are reused, not even the credibility of the great discourses, but it reactivates them, integrated with today's culture. Rewriting is not an disrespectful gesture, however ironical or playful, but on the contrary it represents a recovering attempt, a means of re-mythologizing the world.

Levantul was read, from beginning, through such an angle. Ovid. S. Crohmălniceanu thinks, in the postface of the first edition, that the poem is about a reactivation of the entire Romanian poetry. In his famous review published in *Romania Literara*, Manolescu also reads it in an ludic manner, impressed by the erudition and by the technical virtuosity in Cartarescu's writing. „Chiar dacă nu se reduce la atât, writes Manolescu, *postmodernismul nu poate fi înțeles fără această modă retro, fără dorința de a scoate din muzeu genuri, specii și procedee literare uitate. E drept a preciza că Mircea Cărtărescu era cel mai indicat s-o facă. De la prima carte (Levantul este a patra), el s-a arătat atras de farmecul vechiturilor acestora, i-a plăcut să rescrie, să transforme, cu un cuvânt să recupereze. A avut un simț suplimentar pentru tehnicile poetice ieșite din uz. Și, desigur, disponibilitate pentru stilurile ori registrele de expresie cele mai diverse. Pe acest fond ludic și sentimental, el era meșterul pe care epopeea românească îl aștepta ca s-o repună în funcțiune*”.²

Gheorge Perian's view is not very different itself. He observes the dissociation of the reading between the level of fiction and that of writing, in a way which „*reînviind o specie moartă, cum părea epopeea, poetul concentrează, practic, întreaga istorie a poeziei românești într-o carte al cărei caracter sofisticat, în ciuda aparențelor de accesibilitate constă tocmai în această perspectivă anamorfotică. [...] Levantul, spune Perian, este nu numai o epopee fantezistă a luptei pentru libertate, ci și epopeea comică a formulelor poetice mai importante înregistrate în istoria literaturii române*”.

Levantul is by no means a paradise of coherence and harmony, as Mircea A. Diaconu remarks. The excesses of interpretation are those corrected by the critic, trying to set a fantastic principle of the text, a deeply symbolic and visionary mechanism of visionary surrealism that intervenes at most unexpected times into the poem. Rather a phrase of the chimeric and dionysiac fall into fantasy, `Levantul` cannot be seen simply as

² Nicolae Manolescu, „Comedia literaturii”, in *România Literară*, nr. 47-48/1990, p.3

an elaborate role play. On the contrary, Mircea A. Diaconu finds in it what he calls „esența burlescă și iluzorie a lumii, [...] reveria postmodernistă și substanța fantasiei, manifestate, interferent, atât în planul anecdoticii istorice cât și în cel al instanțelor narațiunii”.³

The permanence of an absurd dimension is also put in balance. This type of absurd does not refer especially to the text, but expresses the absurd and at the same time grotesque dimension of the employed cultural artefacts, from which the poet assembles a puzzle of fictional realities. This inner dynamics of Cartarescu's poetry was diagnosed by Iulian Boldea, who writes: *Își face loc în volumele din urmă ale lui Cărtărescu, în Levantul, dar și în Dragostea, o tot mai accentuată tendință spre joc, spre exercițiul barochizant împins ușor spre absurd, prin alăturarea unor elemente ale realului din cale afară de disparate, și care, astfel, fac translația spre lumea imaginarului, un imaginar buf, burlesc chiar, cu iz fantastic, dar și cu ecouri din întrupările meconomorfe ale lui Urmuz*.⁴

In fact, in *Levantul* a sort of game with the great literature takes place, as the historical themes of Romanian poetry are being called to life. Without seeing the entire constitution of Cartarescu's literary work, everything would be an unsuccessful experiment, without any kind of finality, an evanescent piece of literature.

Each time we refer to his work, Cartarescu himself insists on the singularity of this book and he often declares himself unsatisfied with how the book was perceived. There has been a lot of reactions. For instance, in an interview taken by Mircea Mihaies, he said that „singura carte care-mi place din tot ce-am scris, singura din care recitesc [...] Singurul text complet izolat”, which „nu-l consider ca făcând parte din latura mea poetică, nici din cea prozastică. Este cu totul și cu totul altceva”.

One of the most pregnant ideas that Mircea Cartarescu's words generate on this book is that it represents a revelation of the apocalypse of a certain way of writing. It seems that there is something far different from the ludical, tolerant and condescending recovery, performed with naivety, like a farce, being developed deep in the text. There is a profound finality of the text, not at all a positive for the tradition being reassessed by the poem. To great literature, to great poetic history, Cartarescu seems to give their last word, the farewell word. *Levantul* is not an Eden where the main themes are saved, but it appears to be the hall where their requiem is being sung.

The process of virtualization may be regarded as a feature of 'hard' Postmodernism. The crisis of the new hard Postmodernism lies in its impossibility to believe in hierarchy, canons, rules, and this generates its specific difference from any other of its versions. Hard Postmodernism is no longer controlled by a tolerant and recovering consciousness, but by a deconstructing and destructive instinct that unmystifies everything and eventually deconstructs the lasting forms of tradition, thus satisfying a new sensibility that claims virtuality and simulation. There is no longer room for any Metaphysics and the weight of great literary narratives turns into a general

³ Mircea A. Diaconu, „Mircea Cărtărescu”, in *Poezia postmodernă*, Brașov, Editura Aula, 2002, p.35-36

⁴ Iulian Boldea, „Mircea Cărtărescu” in *Scriitori români contemporani*, Tg. Mureș, Editura Ardealul, 2002, p.75-76

impoderability, placed under the sign of utopia, of illusion. The fundamental crisis of the new hard Postmodernist spirit determines a new type of ontology, a virtual ontology that substitutes the reliability of the existence or consciousness with the infinite multiplicity of relative alternatives. The human being itself is emptied of identity, just like the discourse of literature and the reality of the existence.

The idea of the end of history was first formulated by Gianni Vattimo when he wrote about the concept of 'weak thinking' (*pensiero debole*). „Gândirea slabă, states Vattimo, *acceptă elementele postmodernității: sfârșitul metafizicii, sfârșitul viziunii unitare. Aceste sfârșituri nu sunt niște decese după care să ții doliu, ci sunt eliberări, chances*”⁵. The same thing happens to all literary elements, once they enter the poetics of 'hard' Postmodernism – each time their rigidity breaks, there is a chance of new breath, of a new conquered freedom of thinking, when new remodelations, rewritings, become possible, based on discourses that essentially virtual. The text seen from an literary angle, can consist in texts integrated in texts and in texts...and so on and so forth. A new Methaphysics, a sort of virtual and weak Methaphysics is born.

Derrida explores the relationship between repetition and iteration, revealing at the same time the mechanism by which the literary work gains virtuality and autonomy. „Dacă scriitura e inaugurală, thinks Derrida, *nu este pentru că ea creează, ci pentru că, grație unei anumite libertăți absolute de rostire, ea face să răsară, în semnul său, ceea ce este deja prezent (le déjà-la) tălmăcindu-i, astfel, augurii*”.⁶

What happens to major literary themes in *Levantul* is probably the first didactic Postmodernist writing experience in Romanian literature, anyway the most explicit case. Cartarescu speaks here about all the great literary themes of Romanian poetry, from adventure, love, time, history, to poetry, freedom, creation, dictatorship, etc. Cartarescu wrote on purpose a labyrinthic text filled with coherent yet asymmetric symbols. *Levantul* is itself a virtual writing that operates in virtual reality, in a random way although apparently logically, autonomous from exterior reality. There is a circularity of this epic poem, which is in fact stated by the author in the *Cantul al Patrulea*, in one of his interventions that Nicolae Manolescu used to like so much. It is a moment when the author speaks to his female Reader, in accordance to all the principles of interactive virtual literature:

„Fii, gingașo, răbdurea,
Că nemica nu rămâne în final neexplicat.
E rotundă epopeea-mi ca și globul fermecat
Care poartă-n mijloc. Dară iar anticîp, ce nărav!”⁷

⁵ Gianni Vattimo, *Sfârșitul modernității. Nihilism și hermeneutică în cultura postmodernă*, Constanța, Editura Pontica, 1993, p.23

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Scriitura și diferența*, București, Editura Univers, 1998, p. 211

⁷ Mircea Cărtărescu, *Levantul*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2004, p. 72

However, in the subtext, the thematic matrix lacks the apparent clarity and stability of the poem. At the beginning of the epic poem is a very relevant combination of two great themes on which the text would be built at least on its political fable level. The first part of the discourse, written with the verve and pathetic spirit of the great antique writers, like a hymn to *Levantul* itself, the work of art and the world, the reality dictating itself, showing itself to its Creator is, in fact, Manoil's string of thoughts, Cartarescu's alter-ego and favorite character, the young adventurous hero embarked on a journey to free Valachia from the tyranic dictatorship of Vodă. The already famous first lines:

*„Floare-a lumilor, val verde cu lucori de petre rare,
Mări pe care vase d-aur port pișer și scortîșoare,
Părând piepteni trecuți molcom printr-un păr împarfumat,
Stop de ronă-n cari zefirul umfle-ai sei obraji de seu,
Cu simțiri aprinse umpli neguros sufletul meu!
O, Levant, Levant ferice, cum nu simți a mea turbare,
Cum nu vede al tău ochiu cu văpăi de chiblimbare
Noaptea turbure din peptu-mi, zbuciumul ce am în sân,
De când sunt deștept pe lume, de cât știu că sunt român!
Cum n-am ochii mii, ca Argus, ca cu mii de lăcrimioare
Să jelesc ticăloșita a poporului meu stare,
Preste care lupi și pardoși s-au făcut stăpâni deplin
Zgârîind cu gheare lunge al Valahiei drag sân?”*

fail to install the obvious theme of liberty, the *quest* for regaining the lost, original, Ithaca and then the theme of love comes from beyond, a theme which is told by Manoil's sister, Zenaida, portreyed as a `femme fatale` and modeled with refinement but also with subtle caricatural lines. Let us see how this second theme is built over the first one, with the declared contribution of the omniscient Author who represents himself struggling not to say more than he should, not to fall into the `diegesis`:

*„Tu te duci la Zante, unde în barcaș, la felinari
Te așteaptă a ta soră cu treizeci de palicari.
A ta soră, Zenaida! Cine-o vede se uimește,
Cine buzele de rujă, cine ochii i-i zărește
I se pare cum că Hero vie s-au împielit
Să-l aștepte pe Leandros lâng-al mărilor palat.”*

From this point forward starts the enumeration of Zenaida's elements, in which Cartarescu uses everything that is best in old-school poetry - analogies, paradoxes, methonimies and so on and so forth, aware that Zenaida is beyond any of art' mimetic abilities:

„Machedoana, nu am coarde l-a mea arfă îndestule
 Să îi cânt zulufulii negrii, sînurile nesătule
 Și sprîncenele-mbibate, parcă-i arcul lui Amor:
 E trufașă dar e dulce și-are ciucuri la botfor?”

What we witness at the beginning of *Levantul* is not at all arbitrary, but it is actually difficult to say if it is a result of the aware construction of the text or of its intimate reality. The great themes are activated with their entry in the text and there is a reaction and an inner-reaction between them. This principle has been described by Roland Barthes: „Chiar și atunci când rămâne fără putere, chiar și-atunci când puterea îi stă împotriva, rivalitatea renaște, jargoanele se despart și se luptă între ele. Un topos nemilos stăpânește peste viața limbajelor; limbajul vine întotdeauna dintr-un anumit loc, el este un **topos războinic**.”⁸ What is obvious at the level of language is also perfectly valid at the level of the topos. The great themes of literature are in Cartarescu's *Levantul* in a sort of war, in which every theme competes to be the First and all themes are provoking each other. All this made possible by a Creator who himself is a warrior, a symbolic predator. In this 'hard' version of Postmodernism, Creation is replaced with disintegration. Cartarescu becomes a sort of collector of themes with not that much nostalgia for their irrecoverable history (since this nostalgia is consistently simulated, the true nostalgia being that of integrality, of the power to see, experience and express Everything – a Romantic nostalgia, as it has been noticed). He performs all this scenario only to provoke old themes to dematerialize themselves, to relativize them in such an extent that they would turn into virtual entities, populating the unreality that is more and more impossible to distinguish from concrete reality. It is not only the characters of *Levantul* that are 'beings of paper', chimeras, holograms controlled skilfully to create Illusion (the supreme principle of virtuality), but also the great themes of literature activated by the epic poem.

It is the first time in Romanian literature when a text asserts its virtuality and its practical lack of meaning. Cartarescu does not use themes and characters, ideas, words or images, but simulations of these. Roland Barthes describes the relationship between the author and his text, the low power that the author has over it. *Textul*, writes Barthes, *este un țesut de întrebări crescute din nenumăratele centre de cultură [...] Autorul poate doar să imite un gest care e întotdeauna anterior, niciodată original. Singura lui putere este de a mixa scriiturile, de a le opune pe unele celorlalte, într-un asemenea mod încât să nu stăruie niciodată asupra unuia dintre ele*.⁹ The observation fits best to *Levantul* due to the dynamic feature of the text generated by the crossing from one theme to another. The universe from *Levantul* is highly dynamic: everything changes, the text has the ability to control and to adjust itself so that it assures

⁸ Roland Barthes, „*The Pleasure of the Text*”, Richard Miller (trans.), Hill and Wang, New York, 1975, trad. aut., p. 174

⁹ Roland Barthes, op. cit., p. 49

its perpetual update. The fact is also assumed in the amused self-explanatory discourse of the Author who states, at some point:

*„Cetitor, cu fantasia-ți tu vezi scene ce vitralii-s
Tot cetind la epopee.”*

In another part of the text, he speaks about the improvisation through which he achieves the ilusion, unaware yet (before descending in the text) that fiction works as an analogon of the real world. To be better understood, he draws an analogy with a method from an Antonioni film. The fragment is full of irony and memorable:

*„Tu, care cetești „Levantul” tolănită pe sofa,
La bulgari văzuși ieri filmul „E la nave va”?
Cătră fine îți arată studioul dă filmare,
Schela urieșă unde mișcă marile vapoare,
De tu crezi că e aieva un tangaj mehanicesc.
Postmodern e procedul, deci și eu îl folosesc.
Află dar că bătălia ce-i găsi în aste pagini
Prin efecte speciale, suprapuneri dă imagini,
Decupaje, animare, totul pe calculator
E minuțios filmată, ca-n „Războiul Stelelor”.”*

The themes are, in *Levantul* linked to a discourse of their own. The poetic thesis of Cartarescu could be this, that there is a discourse, a unique one which is able to move a theme in the world of the text. Every time he speaks about a battle, in *Levantul* follows a metamorphosis from Eminescu's `Scrisoarea III`, even if the battle is one between angels and demons. Consequently, when he speaks about philosophical meditation he uses a discourse close to the one used in `Memento mori`.

*„Cine sîntem? Nu se știe. Ce am fost? E doar părere,
Viața ni se trece ca prin crengi de măr o adiere
-Scintilație stărnită pe-un ecran de un atom –
Slujbe și canalizare, receptoare și mixere
Și din când în când în brațe o uitată de muiere
Iar apoi un Vierme lacom – iată datul unui om”.*

The excess of hyperreality is obtained from virtuality, through insertion in fiction, from details of the author's own biography. The virtual reality has a maxim coefficient of analogy, because the space and time are filled with the identity of the author-reader. In a fragment it becomes clear that the author speaks about a real book, *„Poeme de amor”*, which he has previously published:

*„Am crezut și eu o dată în amor. Am scris o carte
Ce-o găsești în fișierul galben de la B.C.U.”*

The mythology also suffers a metamorphosis and famous characters from Romanian literature are upturned. This kind of process is observed by Jean Baudrillard¹⁰, who talks about *„relativitate totală, comutare generală, combinați și simulare [...] în sensul că, de acum înainte, semnele se schimbă unele cu altele mai degrabă decât cu realul (și nu doar că se întâmplă să se schimbe între ele, ci fac astfel tocmai pentru a nu mai fi schimbate cu realul)”*.

Another mutation the themes and symbols go through is achieved by the distortion of their inner-relations. The distortion is made between themes and subthemes, literary motifs, symbols but also between themes themselves and their relationships in the text. If before *Levantul* intertextuality was the basic Postmodernist creative principle, a much more complex principle – hypertextuality – is now fully employed.

For instance, the hypertext is understood by Ion Manolescu as a process in which a substitution of a discursive element with another that is wider takes place. The hypertext is an expression of the dynamic part inside the world of the text but also a symptom of the competing topos. *Levantul* is fully built on the laws of hypertextuality. In a part of the text there is a hypertextual intervention, made in order to avoid the defeat of the heroes: the author turns some pages and even the numbering on them, seen by the characters, is used as a hypertextual element. The same happens with the typing machine, which is understood in a hypertextual sense (it eventually draws the author and the characters in and out of the textual world, working as a portal between the two realities).

But there is, also, a distorted mechanics of the hypertext, visible in the way it generates an inversion of logic, or a substitution by another one, a nonrational logic, if we might put it this way. For example, the scene described by Cartarescu after his fall in the text, when he realises that the characters act in his presence as in a religious canon, the way they should act in the presence of the Creator. The church they enter is used as a Christian symbol, but the elements of hypertext are diminished here:

*„Am intrat pă sub arcade. Pe păreți, icoane strâmbe,
Parcă de Soutine văpsite cu vâpselele scâlâmb,
Zugrăvind nu pă Maria cu pruncuțul ei dă poală
Ci-un bărbat purtând în brațe pruncă dodoloață, goală
Iar pă crucifixul mare care strejuie altarul
Nu Isus, ci o fâmeie răstignită e, ce harul
Îi și șiroaie ca și părul ce să-ncreață pân pe șale
Picurând pe sânuri limpezi în cărcei și rotocoale.
În triumghiul plin dă umbră dântre coapse și pântec*

¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *„Symbolic Exchange and Death”*, (1976) in Rivkin R., Ryan M., *„Literary theory. An Anthology”*, Blackwell, 1998, p. 125

Își dășchide-un ochiu pleoapa licărând ca un întântec,
Ochi ce-au cunoscut vitejii zăvergii: același este
Ce în cântul cinci ivise dântre nouri, fără veste.”

A self-visionary structure of the epic poem, which works intertextually, is easily detectable here. Almost every part has a self-speculative key that directs the interpretation to the ultimate structure and condition of *Levantul*. Everything turns into the them of the abyssal poem, which feeds with the body and soul of its creator, a super-poem conceived from the chimeras and inconsistencies, from the discordant humanity of the author.

The theme of death also has its virtual avatars. At some point, Death cuts off the heads of three mythical monks, in a symbolic key of poem that diminishes the poem’s virtuality, but remains resistant with every read-through. Stopping the dynamic version at the last (eleventh) song of the poem, the Author walks through the paralyzed characters and utters one of the most memorable fragments of the text:

„Nimic, nimic nu există. M-am născut și voi muri. Lumea s-a născut și va muri. Nimic nu e concret și etern. Suferim, luptăm, râdem, gândim în mijlocul unor vârteje de aburi colorați. Ce rămâne din dragoste, din tinerețe, din tortură, din imaginea scâlpitoare a unui scoruș de munte, plin de boabe roșii, din labirintele primei copilării? Rouă colorată pe pereții minții. Nici măcar moartea nu există. [...] Am fost un om, am avut ochii negri, fața subțire, am fost întâi copil, apoi adolescent, am scris cărți, m-am căsătorit și am o fetiță. Îmi amintesc milioane de lucruri. M-am agitat, am plâns, am iubit, am gândit, am avut toate viciile și toate virtuțile. Am încercat să înțeleg totul. Dar viața mi se va stinge și va urma o noapte nesfârșită. Nu voi mai fi. De-aceea spun acum tot ce am înțeles trăind: Nimic, nimic nu există.”

We can find here one of the most shocking dramas of a the Postmodern spirit. With the virtuality of the entire existence comes the awareness that it is impossible to live completely. It is impossible for human mind to achieve the type of vision which able to perceive the totality of the universe. This is what generates nostalgia and thus the virtuality of the real can become a torture.

Acknowledgement: This paper is a result of the project "Transnational Network for Integrated Management of Postdoctoral Research in Communicating Sciences. Institutional building (postdoctoral school) and fellowships program (CommScie)" - POSDRU/89/1.5/S/63663, financed under the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013.