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 demolishment 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 şi tolerant. Menţine ca esenţială orientarea lirică, expresia intuitivă şi fantezistă, dar n-are cultul purităţii sângelui poetic, ca modernismul. Nu e, de aceea, atât de elitist şi 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. Sithe bete between art and transcedence was lost, the cultural discourse of Postmodernism has lost its prerogative that made it a modern one. Postmodernity has based its Metaphysics on a Rethorics of the end. Francis Fukuyama, who wrote about one of the most spectacular thesis regarding the entrance of humanity in Postmodernism, was particularly apreciated 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 apears, 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 abolishion 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 histrionical 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 succesion of discoursive 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 unrespectful gesture, however irronical or playful, but on the contrary it represents a recovering attempt, a meansof re-mythisize 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 tehnic virtuosity in Cartarescu's writing. „*Chiar dacă nu se reduce la atât,* writes Manolescu, *postmodernismul nu poate fi înţeles fără această modă retro, fără dorinţa de a scoate din muzeu genuri, specii şi 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 simţ suplimentar pentru tehnicile poetice ieşite din uz. Şi, desigur, disponibilitate pentru stilurile ori registrele de expresie cele mai diverse. Pe acest fond ludic şi sentimental, el era meşterul pe care epopeea românească îl aştepta ca s-o repună în funcţiune*".[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 româneşti într-o carte al cărei caracter sofisticat, în ciuda aparenţelor de accesibilitate constă tocmai în această perspectivă anamorfotică. […] Levantul,* spune Perian, *este nu numai o epopee fantezistă a luptei pentru libertate, ci şi epopeea comică a formulelor poetice mai importante înregistrate în istoria literaturii române*".

Levantul is by no means a paradise of coherence and armony, 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 simbolic and visionary mechanism of visionary surrealism that intervenes at most unexpected times into the poem. Rather a prase of the chimeric and dyonisiac fall into fantasy, `Levantul` cannot be seen simply as

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

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an ellaborate 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 reffer 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. Whithout seeing the entire constitution of Cartarescu's literary work, everything would be an unsuccessful experiment, whithout any kind of finality, an evanescent piece of literature.

Each time we refers 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 condescendent recovery, performed with naivity, 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 Posmodernism is no longer controled by a tolerant and recovering consciousness, but by a deconstructing and destructive instinct that unmystifies everything and eventuallly destructures 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*, Braşov, Editura *Aula*, 2002, p.35-36
[4] Iulian Boldea, „*Mircea Cărtărescu*" in *Scriitori români contemporani,* Tg. Mureş, Editura *Ardealul,* 2002, p.75-76

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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 postmodernităţii: sfârşitul metafizicii, sfârşitul viziunii unitare. Aceste sfârşituri nu sunt nişte decese după care să ţii doliu, ci sunt eliberări,* ***chances***"[5]. The same thing happens to all literary elements, once they enter the poetics of `hard` Postmodenism – 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 essentialy 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, graţie unei anumite libertăţi absolute de rostire, ea face să răsară, în semnul său, ceea ce este deja prezent (***le deja-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 asymetric symbols. *Levantul* is itself a virtual writing that operates in virtual reality, in a random way although apparentaly 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, gingaşo, răbdurea,*
Că nemica nu rămâne în final neesplicat.
E rotundă epopeea-mi ca şi globul fermecat
Care poartă-n mijloc. Dară iar anticip, ce năravˮ"[7]

[5] Gianni Vattimo, *Sfârşitul modernităţii. Nihilism şi hermeneutică în cultura postmodernă*, Constanța, Editura *Pontica*, 1993, p.23
[6] Jacques Derrida, *Scriitura şi diferența,* Bucureşti, Editura *Univers,* 1998, p. 211
[7] Mircea Cărtărescu, *Levantul,* Bucureşti, Editura Humanitas, 2004, p. 72

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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 adventourous 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 piper şi scorţişoare,
Părând piepţeni trecuţi molcom printr-un păr împarfumat,
Stop de rouă-n cari zefirul umfle-ai sei obraji de seu,
Cu simţiri aprinse umpli neguros sufletul meu!
O, Levant, Levant ferice, cum nu simţi a mea turbare,
Cum nu vede al tău ochiu cu văpăi de chihlimbare
Noaptea turbure din peptu-mi, zbuciumul ce am în sân,
De când sunt deştept pe lume, de cânt ştiu că sunt român!
Cum n-am ochii mii, ca Argus, ca cu mii de lăcrimioare
Să jelesc ticăloşita a poporului meu stare,
Preste care lupi şi pardoşi s-au făcut stăpâni deplin
Zgâriind 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 barcaz, la felinari*
Te aşteaptă a ta soră cu treizeci de palicari.
A ta soră, Zenaida! Cine-o vede se uimeşte,
Cine buzele de rujă, cine ochii i-i zăreşte
I se pare cum că Hero vie s-au împieliţat
Să-l aştepte 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:

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„Machedoana, nu am coarde l-a mea arfă îndestule
Să îi cânt zulufii negrii, sînurile nesătule
Şi sprîncenele-mbibate, parcă-i arcul lui Amor:
E trufaşă dar e dulce şi-are ciucuri la botfor"

What we witness at the beninning 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 it intimate reality. The great themes are activated with their entry in the text and there is a reaction and a inner-reaction between them. This principle has been described by Roland Barthes: „*Chiar şi atunci când rămâne fără putere, chiar şi-atunci când puterea îi stă împotrivă, rivalitatea renaşte, jargoanele se despart şi se luptă între ele. Un topos nemilos stăpâneşte peste viaţa limbajelor; limbajul vine întotdeauna dintr-un anume 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 irecoverable 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 extend that they would turn into virtual entitites, 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 ţesut 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

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its perpetual update. The fact is also assumed in the amuzed self-explanatory discourse of the Author who states, at some point:
„*Cetitor, cu fantasia-ţi 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 and analogy with a method from an Antonioni film. The frangment is full of irony and memorable:

„*Tu, care ceteşti „Levantul" tolănită pe sofa,*
La bulgari văzuşi ieri filmul „E la nave va"?
Către fine îţi arată studioul dă filmare,
Schela uriesă unde mişcă marile vapoare,
De tu crezi că e aievea un tangaj mehanicesc.
Postmodern e procedeul, deci şi 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 minuţios 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 ştie. Ce am fost? E doar părere,*
Viaţa ni se trece ca prin cregi de măr o adiere
-Scintilaţie stârnită pe-un ecran de un atom –
Slujbe şi canalizare, receptoare şi mixere
Şi din când în când în braţe 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, beacuse 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:

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„Am crezut şi eu o dată în amor. Am scris o carte
Ce-o găseşti în fişierul 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 Baudrillard[10], who talks about *„relativitate totală, comutare generală, combinaţi şi simulare […] în sensul că, de acum înainte, semnele se schimbă unele cu altele mai degrabă decât cu realul (şi 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 discoursive element with another that is wider takes place. The hypertext is an expression of the dynamic part inside the world of thtext 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 disorted 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 păreţi, icoane strâmbe,
Parcă de Soutine văpsite cu văpselele scălâmbe,
Zugrăvind nu pă Maria cu pruncuţul ei dă poală
Ci-un bărbat purtând în braţe pruncă dodoloaţă, goală
Iar pă crucifixul mare care strejuie altarul
Nu Isus, ci o fămeie răstignită e, ce harul
Îi şiroaie ca şi părul ce să-ncreaţă pân pe şale
Picurând pe sânuri limpezi în cârcei şi rotocoale.
În triunghiul plin dă umbră dântre coapse şi pântec

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

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Îşi dăşchide-un ochiu pleoapa licărând ca un întântec,
Ochi ce-au cunoscut vitejii zavergii: acelaşi este
Ce în cântul cinci ivise dântre nouri, fără veste."

A self-visionary structure of the epic poem, which works intertextually, is easilly 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 whith 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 şi voi muri. Lumea s-a născut şi va muri. Nimic nu e concret şi etern. Suferim, luptăm, râdem, gândim în mijlocul unor vârteje de aburi coloraţi. Ce rămâne din dragoste, din tinereţe, din tortură, din imaginea sclipitoare a unui scoruş de munte, plin de boabe roşii, din labirintele primei copilării? Rouă colorată pe pereţii minţii. Nici măcar moartea nu există. […] Am fost un om, am avut ochii negri, faţa subţire, am fost întâi copil, apoi adolescent, am scris cărţi, m-am căsătorit şi am o fetiţă. Îmi amintesc milioane de lucruri. M-am agitat, am plâns, am iubit, am gândit, am avut toate viciile şi toate virtuţile. Am încercat să înţeleg totul. Dar viaţa mi se va stinge şi va urma o noapte nesfârşită. Nu voi mai fi. De-aceea spun acum tot ce am înţeles 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.

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