Max Blecher: from the livid worlds to the illuminated super-worlds

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Following Jung's footsteps, the patient in Max Blecher's novels accesses the basis of the „collective unconscious" making the „archetype" a crucible of the self, and in the slipstream of Durand's theories, the narrators juggle with the anthropological structures of the imaginary, gracefully taking advantage of the „fantastic function". The writing mediates now between reality and dream, causing the osmosis and highlighting in depth the similarities, for the disease has released into the world a creature with the consistency of spectres. The text, thus, becomes the liaison area, „neutral" at wartime (during disease), it is the womb-like „burrow" which hides in its aestheticizing and purifying trenches the sometimes baroque volutes of the sentence, only to reveal the ideal identity of the narrator.

Keywords: unreality, thanatophoria, dynamited self, aestheticized pain, narrative identity, ipseity

Since his first novel, the Romanian writer, Max Blecher traces the later significations of the disease, be it physical or psychologically mediated. *Adventures in the Immediate Unreality* brings forth, when Edda falls ill, the Bacovian state of the world – engulfed in endless rain that cleanses the being of residue to the transparent gold of the light (*It was raining in the sunlight, the rain was golden and it smelled of washed laundry*) – as well as malaria from which the narrator suffered as a child. A somewhat exotic disease, it seems to have a rather imaginary origin, as if the crippled image of the universe carried the melancholic young man to heat stricken lands of spectra that infiltrate directly into the lymph. Quinine – the perfect match for visceral disgust – brings a bitterness that compels the taste buds so much so as to liberate the owner of the Sartrean bitterness and nausea of the spirit. A remedy that is as useless, as it is richly symbolic.

Accustomed to identify himself with the trigger of encroaching states of mind, the teenager, hyper-permeable on the outside, struggles with the „unrealities" of immanence through shiver, which is initially physical, and then resumed and organized in writing. Hence „unreality" – which is, in fact, the perceiver's subjective perspective, technically unknown to others, taken on his own by the narrator and subjectified, without losing, in any way, its previous subjectivity – engorges reality, replacing it. Thus, among other kinds of coalescence, the lover can no longer distinguish himself from his beloved: *I can't distinguish my own self in anything that Edda sees, anything that did not use to be her*. Paul Weber's wife would represent the *You* in the relationship described by Martin Buber in *I-You*: „The union and merger of the whole being cannot be accomplished through me, cannot be accomplished without me. I become whole through You; having become I, You is uttered [...]. True life lies in the meeting [...]. And only there where the medium is gone can the meeting happen".[1] But, imbued with the imminence of death, Edda becomes the barometer for the narrator's subsequent experience of how the disease sets in and festers: *It is an explosion in the kidneys; quite an explosion*. It is an unexpected burst which attacks mostly the organs – Edda's kidneys,

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the author's retina – which are designed to filter out the dirt of human despair in any way it might present itself. As the purifier of inner sludge, Edda reflects the canonized image of death spreading its pallor on faces and landscapes in an expanded waiting room where things happen upside down on the road to unrealization, because Belcher's characters will only come out of this waiting room into death.

The same thing goes for Pott's Morbus, of which Emanuel, the author's alter-ego in *Scarred Hearts*, suddenly learns it exists and, most of all, that had settled deep inside him and would never leave, making him see the outside in a perpetual decline: *The world had shrunk strangely while he had been shut off in the doctor's office[...]. It would have been enough for someone to take away the thin line on the edge of things[...] for them to liquefy, having lost their outline, in a uniformly turbid and gray matter*. For the fragile young man, hosts, along with the disease, the core of a gangrenous identity and, no matter how hard he would try to demolish its meaning as definition that cannot come together without the reference to suffering, flesh, decay, pain and death; he cannot annihilate them without wiping himself out of the picture (see the suicide attempt in *Adventures*). From now on, the disease embodies Blecher's *You*, and that of all of his narrators and one constantly tries, quite fiercely, to isolate it in the sphere of *The Other.*

Therefore, we are witnessing a change in the intimate hierarchies with regard to the definition and the shaping of *I*. If physical suffering is unmediated by any critical assessment, measurement or clarification when it is felt, on paper, the objectified patient falls within the area of influence of *The Other* („The word I-The Other can never be uttered with the whole being, says Buber, adding that The world as experience belongs to the fundamental word I-The Other One, but He who experiences does not take part in the world in any way"[2]) and is treated as otherness ready to be dissected and, thus, estranged from oneself: *[...] that which is extremely conscious is amorphous, and does not make you experience any pain or joy. Sensations lose sharpness and colour when they are under close scrutiny [...]*. Splitting always involves studying the other, as located on the threshold of finitude, thus, giving the Blecherian narrator the possibility to film from afar his agony.

Not incidentally, throughout *The Lit-Up Burrow* the suffering man records with details of surgical precision, like filigree work, the suffering and the death of the other sanatorium patients: *There is a curious sense of selfishness, security [...] of moral perfidy of looking at a patient, knowing that he is going to die [...], to be aware while the condemned patient ignores everything [...] "Thank God it's not me"*. In this way he detaches himself rationally from his condition – and, thus, remains aloof from the „dizziness and unconsciousness" of those pathetic and ridiculous characters, which are „interesting" only because of the disease. Aware that he will take their place at some point, he cannot afford to feel pity for himself and that is why he doesn't pity the others much either, and only throws them the occasional sympathetic remark „poor people" – which he then quickly drains of any pity classifying it as „somewhat perfidious". This, however, keeps him in a necessary and comforting state of moral healthfulness and gives him the air of damned aristocrats, utterly perfidious and aestheticizing in their ruthless and self-ironic reactivity towards the demonic, flawed character, the air of the degradation they embody only by a whim of fate.

Hence tragedy occurs, in Blecher's work, „in the fall itself, there is a kind of transcendence: towards the being [...] that experiences itself in the fall when meeting a finite and conscious being which perceives its finitude as a limit", as Liiceanu adds, for „having been reasoned, tragedy would become a theory at the edge of death and limit [...] defying biology"[3] – which is what happens in this case. The scenario of the „agony" is transformed into a creative act and is overcome through the work of art. As a result, the utterly Dionysian substance of the Blecherian world appears intensified through the organizing lens of (Apollonian) writing.

Only in this way can one descend into the „burrow", cutting loose the „skin bag" of the body, and closing one's eyes towards the wholesome being beyond death: *I often think about my own death and try very patiently, with accuracy [...] and somewhat thoroughly to determine its exact colour, the exact way in which it will "take place"*. Breaking away from oneself, from the burden of the morbid corporality and thanatophoria, the dream, the insatiable longing for the final disappearance gives the narrator the impression that he already possesses it and is experiencing it as the supreme liberation when: „Nature is determined through counter–nature, in man and through man [...]. A matter of destruction has crept into every thing. Flesh is now a flaw in its very being. Flesh is already an inferno of matter, a scattered substance, continuously troubled by quarrels."[4]

Here, in the weightlessness of images of „the intimate discord", he is no longer „taken over" by anything demanding, but is melting away into something that resembles Nirvāna: *[...] denser than darkness and any absence of sensations [...] something final, opaque and irreparable*. This state „engulfs him entirely, fundamentally, to the darkest of depths", and that is when one realizes that the first person has been abolished, nothing is happening with strict reference to *I*, anymore – but it „engulfs" it and reduces it to a dreamless slumber – with the unconscious asleep, embedded in that state of „emptiness": *[...] if they could be compared with that state of non-existence they would still be lights [...] it takes me outside existence just as it*

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happened to me when I inhaled the chloroform on the surgery table.

Indeed, surgery opens up his „hidden place" which is penetrated in order to extirpate a rotten part of the self. The patient is brought into the waiting room (*[...] the chambers on that corridor were the place where all the tragedy and the pain happened, it was where it all ended [...]*) where the dying complete their „final acts". Like in a grotesque scene, going through the corridor, he is the spectator to the happenings that he will soon be part of. He is left skinned, only senses to be violated by death, creeping in olfactorily: *[...] a sultry and fetid odor of sulfur was spreading in the hallway [...]*. Awaiting surgery, the sensors are sharpened in „darkness and in silence", the world presses down on the accelerator (*[...] I felt with great intensity the twitching of the electric bell [...] like a sound dagger [...]*) and is revealed metonymically to the patient through the „heavy" steps of the stretchers bringing in the bodies or taking them out, in this apocalypse of sound.

This is how the disease, alias Virgil-the guide, takes the narrator in Blecher's novel down to the personal Inferno („entirely dominated by chance", in Georges Minois's words, referring to Camus's hell), which is the limit where „being becomes [...] synonymous with hell. Being aware of the futility of existence, of the fact of having been thrown into a world without purpose, destination or meaning, to be "alien" to others: this is what hell is. All that we can do is to examine our condition with lucidity, from a defiant stance."[5] Only the writing can bring light, like Beatrice, to the burrow, taking it away, as much as possible, from Dante's bolgias.

The blood-ink can only be fed by „thick", real blood as the hemorrhage is the necessary loss in the equation where I equals x plus disease and pain. The latter two having been removed (*[...] the pain had stopped completely and now a feeling of warm moisture invaded me [...]*), would remain the fictional ego – one that can afford unimaginable acts of „heroism". On the other hand, shaken by fever and delirium, „in a state of intense dizziness and confusion", the narrator detaches himself from immediate reality also through his increased decaying physical condition (*[...] it was as if pieces of reality fell into the room for a moment and then evaporated [...] a giant hand was pulling the strings [...]*), and witnesses the involuntary, but salutary breach of contact with stable guiding marks. When this happens, the being already finds itself in a danger from which it jubilates precisely due to merger of his perception with dreams and frenzy.

Sanatorium Diary – through countless dreams, aspirations and memories – proves to be a receptacle, almost exclusively, for immanence, where the ipseity „au dehors" (which reveals the „being-for-itself", that which is considered, as Sartre notes, „to be what it isn't and, by not being, what it is"[6]), battles the ipseity „au dedans" (obsessed with illness), both tracing on the battlefield the parameters of space for an ideal being arisen, in its turn, from the reactions before the experience of pain: *In this wound of unhealed flesh I had to be poured pure ether every day [...] It was inhumanly painful. Like thrusting dozens of knives [...] it poured its virulence [...] without anesthesia [...] I didn't scream, I didn't even groan [...] my "heroism"*. It is a fake factual-mimetic diary, but a genuine „private diary" („Emptiness, absence, indifference, in a word, counter-reality are the raw material of that which, in the absence of an accurate concept, is being referred to as intimacy"[7]), a hyper-aestheticized and fictional one, which invents situations and experiences them as they are being written, consequently, adds Mircea Mihăieș: „The self-portrait is the author's story of self-discovery through the confrontation with his own bovarism."[8]

If we read a page from Mihail Sebastian's *Diary* about the critical state Blecher was in, tortured by pain („At night I heard him groaning in his room, screaming – and I felt there was someone else in the house besides us, someone who was death, the destiny – I don't know who".) and compare it to the physical and mental strength the narrator in *The Lit-Up Burrow* assigns and imposes to himself when it comes to pain, we find that it is impossible in fact for the two to coincide, but they overlap perfectly when it comes to Blecher's attitude towards his tragic condition: „He lives in intimacy with death. Not with an abstract, misty ongoing death. It is his own accurate, finite, known in full detail death, as an object. What gives him the courage to live? What gives him strength? He is not even desperate. I don't understand [...]"[9], admits Sebastian.

What gives him strength is the very certainty of the end, the euphoria of death and the chink between moments, that thin line on which he moves, with unstable equilibrium, from one awful state to another, with the latter bringing even more convulsions. After surgery, the patient – having undergone extirpation, remodeled and sewn back together, tries to recompose himself mentally and what awakens him back to reality is, again, the pain: plastic, omnipotent, infinitely varied: *[...] I was floating in an ineffable state of swoon that kept pecking at my chest and prevented me to become whole again... In the end I began to feel all the pain that had kept still before [...]*. Like a ghost returned home from the chloroform-induced death, the patient has to struggle with thirst (*insipid ashes of my all-consuming thirst*) which, if it had been appeased by drinking the bottle of water on the bed table, he would have been thrown into an even more unpleasant state, after the unpleasantness of the surgery. From the frantic, self-consuming thirst, the Phoenix does not rise but to become ashes again.

Even lucidity will now have a subordinate role

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(*[...] no matter how logical my inner judgments were, they were defeated by the soft and exhausting warmth of thirst.*) to the survival instinct that turns out to be thanatophoric, idling on the surface of ever-expanding, self-sabotaging needs. The water of death, the one the patient sips as in an elementary need through every pore like a dehydrated plant (*[...]it felt insane [...] able to shatter my brain and make me laugh [...] "you got drunk on water"[...]*) compresses the world in a suicide gesture – gesture which, for a vital moment, takes him out of the frustrating state to deliver him to the exact moment when the dying person in the next ward gives his last breath: *Silence was setting in as engendered by a profound stupefaction*. From the „shelf of last breaths", Death, in a Deus ex machina state, pulls up the puppet-like characters from the stage, she is the only transcendental power they really rely on: *[...] and now a huge hand pulled the strings and the puppets played their part "taking Holy communion...necessity... water"[...].* The importance of such scenes is exclusively related to subjectivity, to the ordinary fact of belonging to someone – anonymously and, essentially, alone: *But every moment serious or trivial facts happen and the decor remains the same[...]* . Also, the importance of death is strictly limited, vulgarized, it doesn't tear up the skies, it doesn't even attract the unreserved empathy of fellow sufferers.

Thus, Blecher's narrator dwells in a livid world, a crepuscule which defines his dwelling as a continuous swing between tormenting conditions. Here, pain can only be undone by overstraining it: *[...] to get rid of pain you should not seek to "get rid" of it, but, on the contrary, to "deal" with it carefully [...] I then knew the very "outline" of pain [...] like a piece of music [...] with the same "themes" and, in order to create some balance in the suffering [...] I would squeeze the little finger of my right hand with extraordinary violence.* The cancer-stricken man finds in himself the power to „follow" the outline of pain as it flows through his body like music, pure essence in its penetrating evanescence. Through these transfigurations, *Sanatorium Diary* attempts to find the philosopher's stone, a breach beyond the limits of personal intimacy and fiction – a breach into the macrocosm: „First person is, in fact, a symbol of the universe, the beginning and the end of what man cannot know. Therefore, a discourse centered on the first person is a discourse on the whole universe[...].[10]

Aesthete of the sufferings and impulses of „raw" flesh, the patient becomes a filigree artisan, a specialist in excruciating pains which he defies with sarcastic remarks on his condition (*So I found myself in this state, having cramps, alcohol on my thigh and extension to the leg.*), a condition which, due to exacerbation, borders on the comical – proof that if you go to the bitter end, at some point, it is likely to break towards the wrong side: *[...] this situation made me laugh, smile to myself, as if it were something funny. In a few days I had collected in my body all possible complications. And this was just what made it extremely funny, the excess of it all.* From here, the possibilities are limited: either „to stay sick" or to die. Complete disappearance becomes desirable and refreshing in this bleak situation of the body – the retort of multiple pains: *Because [...] I allow myself to consider physical suffering abject and meaningless for those who suffer.*

The disease, in relation to which the narrator in *The Lit-Up Burrow* is forced to build his identity, attacks his retina, installing in it the germs of the absurd and of human futility (*After all, the essence of reality is a vast confusion of diversities without meaning or importance [...] When the character should be grave and sad, reality sometimes casts a weak actor who can barely support the part [...]*) for „subjectivity is truth"[11] and „nothingness can only become nothingness by being [...] in its core, in its heart, like a worm"[12], while anxiety, as Kierkegaard observes, is the realization of nothingness. The anguished being is „being- towards-death", for it every moment contains, just like a cell, all the data of the body. The life of the patient flows into a sequence of crossings from one moment of lividity to another, thus, finding itself in a position of *[...] an atom lost in the vast ocean of events of the whole world*. With no stable connection – or likely to produce major changes – with the exterior: „This boy has always been somewhat a stranger, who, in his atrocious suffering, seemed to be living in another world. We could never have any kind of enthusiasm, a total open-mindedness towards him. He frightened me a little, kept me aloof, as if behind the gates of a prison that I could not go into, nor come out of [...]. And when we parted, where did he go back to? How was the place that he got back to?"[13] That was what Sebastian wrote down in his *Diary* on Blecher's burial day (Sunday, the 5th of June, 1938). And the damned young man knew exactly how he was looked upon, his writings prove it, because the picture he sketches of himself does not ignore his being perceived by others: *It was the first time I traveled by train in a long time [...] – There is a sick man in it [...] an invalid [...]. That is when I realized I was ill, I found myself outside the alive and ordinary world of the healthy [...].*

The morbus pushes the individual to the margins of society (*The illness gave me the feeling that I was isolated on the edge of a paste of events, movements, sounds and lights that were the world itself.*), including him in the „theory of the secondary" developed by Virgil Nemoianu: „[...] the pathological reality becomes the modeler as well as the modeled, new semic features are created, and the disease is integrated into a new circuit of symbolic meanings".[14] Blecher's work becomes, from this perspective, a huge loop and digression on the so-called main, historical events. He no longer regards

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himself as part of the contingency that is the socio-political reality, especially, since in that period, to be Jewish was not exactly appropriate according to certain movements and governing parties, the legionary party in particular. The disease diminishes him to the point where he is seen only by reference to it, and in Blecher's eyes, as Sebastian also notes, „there could be greater misery than an anti-Semitic regime."[15] For eradication comes from the inside.

In its first phase, the crisis of the body rhymes with emasculation. Thus, Quitonce, one of the decaying characters in *Scarred Hearts*, a virile and potent man despite his frog-like walk, is reduced to a sum of failing organs: *[...] a virile man with yernings and impulses, he became a simple composition of decaying organs [...] the sexual organ that used to give the body its meaning and vivacity – had become a piece of flesh which was diminishing*. The „frog" would never turn into a prince. Boby, the narrator's friend in *The Lit-Up Burrow*, suffers terrible agony in the same area that used to bring him pleasure and escape.

But in a second phase, the disease effeminates, sharpens the senses and assumes the role of the weaker sex – the wound: *It was [...] open in the middle like an enormous vagina, swollen and bloody on the edges [...] a horrible wound [...] gaping, sensitive to the extreme [...] they had to pour in [...] pure ether [...]*". The pain appears as a phallus, extremely violent, it goes far beyond the nerve and enters the subconscious where it unleashes in the structures of the imaginary nightmares to last for generations of sufferers. Now the world „goes insane" (*reality had shifted a few centimeters [...] and thus gave extraordinary shapes*), the outlines slide away towards the sphere of dreams and delusions, hence „facts" happen in „unreality": *[...] we imagine life at every moment and it is valid for that moment, and that moment only, and only the way we imagined it then.* Descartes' phrase: „I think, therefore I am", is subtly replaced with something more from Gilbert Durand, like: *I imagine, therefore I am*, or from Jung: *I dream, therefore I am*.

Pain, not having an explicable sense in itself (*[...] the essence of reality is a vast confusion of diversities without meaning or importance [...]*), or through religion or mysticism to which Blecher doesn't make any reference throughout his writings, remains within the plane of the absurd where the characters from Berck (Teddy, Boby, Quitonce, Solange, Emanuel etc) play their part wearing the wrong mask, while the intensity of the suffering and the rigidity of the plaster bodice changes according to unknown rules. The pleasures of the body, in a sticky combination of gypsum with the sweaty skin underneath, are under interdiction due to a strong sense of ridicule and kitsch. Solange is turned down by Emanuel because their love is reduced to a grotesque ritual, mechanic and aseptic, and the alter ego character is molded on the idea of not limiting his experience to incapacity. Thus, he prefers to fantasize and deny himself. Through the double negation („A process consisting in the fact that negation in language expresses an affirmation of an intimate feeling: To present something that is as if it weren't."[16]), the invalid, repressed man denies himself in an attempt to diminish the effects of the disease on the spirit.

This is because the patients at Berck stand for the kitsch man – not in the spiritual sense, but by their appearance which makes them turn it, at some point, into the essence of certain gestures and postures – subject to a „frog perspective, that is unilateral and unidirectional"[17], of the suffering that demands its price, ignoring everything else. Amputated beings that frantically grow inside the ideal image of an existence that is possible only through imaginary constructs. In this case, the kitsch refers especially to inadequacy. Not coincidentally, the disease turns everything into unreality, fragmenting the ego and blowing up the world, and it just happens to choose this particular character, become „undone": *Everything I have done before falling ill had meaning for me ...] a sense [...] there was a kind of density to my existence that [...] kept my lucidity in balance [...] I was well fitted, and constituted a well formed "myself" [...].*

From the narrow angle of physical suffering, the narrator avoids taking on a flawed ego, and therefore, prefers to dissipate in *Adventures* that are subsumed to the „unreality" that also comes out of the conscience. For pain and disease have, however, the merit of introducing the tragic patient into an ethereal superreality (*It was a new material of reality with which the city was built, and me in the middle of it, anew, fresh, weightless and without organs, like a line from my own contour*), paradoxically cancelling his materiality. Thus, *The Lit-Up Burrow,* the oneiric house, appears, where things float like in a dream and the writing equals epiphany (*Sometimes I want to make a note of all my nocturnal reveries and dreams, so as to truly give vision to the lit-up burrow that is clogged in my most familiar and most intimate darkness.*), one enters a new order of existence, planes overlap and, here we are, a prey for surreal cinemagic, the ephemeral cure of the thanatophoric retina of Blecher's characters.

Notes:

1. Martin Buber, *Eu și Tu*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 1992
2. Ibidem, p. 32
3. Gabriel Liiceanu, *Tragicul. O fenomenologie a limitei și depășirii,* Bucharest, Humanitas, 2005, pp. 56, 126
4. Gaston Bachelard, *Pământul şi reveriile odihnei*, Bucharest, Univers, 1999, pp. 62, 63
5. Georges Minois, *Istoria Infernurilor,* Bucharest,

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Humanitas, 1998, p. 361
6. Jean Paul Sartre, *Ființa și neantul. Eseu de ontologie fenomenologică*, Pitești, Paralela 45, 2004, p. 35
7. Mircea Mihăieș, Cărțile crude. Jurnalul intim și sinuciderea, Iași, Polirom, , 2005, p. 93
8. Ibidem, p. 136
9. Mihail Sebastian, *Jurnal. 1935-1944*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2002, p. 86
10. Mircea Mihăieș, op. cit., p. 138
11. Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, A Mimical-Pathetic-Dialectical Compilation an Existential Contribution*, Volume I, Edited and Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1992
12. Jean Paul Sartre, op. cit., p. 63
13. Mihail Sebastian, op. cit., p. 164
14. Virgil Nemoianu, *O teorie a secundarului,* Bucharest, Univers, 1997, p. 102
15. Mihail Sebastian, op. cit., p. 145
16. Gilbert Durand, *Structurile antropologice ale imaginarului*, Bucharest, Univers Enciclopedic, 2000, p. 206
17. Gavril Máté, *Universul kitsch-ului. O problemă de estetică*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1985, p. 50

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Max Blecher
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