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The Category of the Self in Mircea Cărtărescu’s Literary Work—Between Dispersion and Totality

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Summary of PhD Thesis

Considering the fact that the reconstruction of the self constitutes the existential project of Mircea Cartarescu’s literary work, the present paper proposes an analysis of the modes in which the self is being built and investigates how it relates within the Orbitor trilogy and in Cartarescu’s prose revolving around it, constructing the identity space of the self and of Cartarescu’s writing in relation to the reader’s self.

Thus, I have followed the potential centres of semantic irradiation, dispersed within the literary work in the manner of controlled chaos, in order to observe how

representation becomes creation act as well as the relation that the conscious self manages between its present face and its avatars, as well as between these avatars, from different reflection and refraction angles. I intend to demonstrate that the identity space is configured via an alluviation-like process, creative of incoherent textures, of readings and re-readings of self-projections, following the ways in which the projection and re-presentation in the chaotic, labyrinthine levels of dream, hallucination, and memory become “alluviations” of the fractured and fractalic self-images. The mirroring-projection-unwinding of the labyrinthine wire at the very moment of its weaving stands for a continuous search: the Spider-prisoner of its own web is hunter and hunted at the same time. The mind, the dream, the imagination, the other, the time are such deforming mirrors, constructors of the self. I interpret these projections as out-of-void contemplations, that is, contemplations of a void being the Derridean remnant of the whole thus revealed. The egotic vectors do not aim at an immobile centre, but they build an alluviation-like vision, in which “the chaotic attractors” configure apparently unarticulated dynamics

of a plurality of “textual centers” which can form anywhere in the text that continues its implacable flowing.

I bring forth the hypothesis of reading the very imagining genetic code via the passing, chain by chain, of the cob webs/mirrors, textures, in an apparent incoherence. Losing its heroic-statuary body and the label designating its model and situating it into a predictable horizon, only to gain an even more complex definition, the character, central element of the narrative web, becomes *placed in relation*, illusory effect of a combinatory dynamics of the projective fields.

The purpose of the paper is, therefore, investigating the dynamics of these fields (of the mirrors that mirror each other, the dreams, the memories), out of the interference of which the self is (re)built.

The chaotic dispersion of the self on different narrative plans, on spatial-temporal lines that break the idea of a directing axis, highlighted by multiple mise-en-abyme, is not denying, but on the contrary, underlies, justifies the vivid existence of a self that is continually

inventing and reinventing itself through interrogations, assumptions, withdrawals, explorations of obtained images via reflection and refraction in different backgrounds.

The permanent gliding on the axes of some constantly changing plans, in the attempt of recovery, of closeness, of gathering the data of a personal, unifying totality, implies a continuous metamorphosis, a protean vision of the self that tries to “read” its genome in the drawing resulted from unpredictably intertwining universes, presupposing the existence of certain ec-stases: escaping the exterior time and space, corresponding to an immediate reality, but also escaping the ever metamorphosised self-projection fields, refusing the confinement in any of these, or simply feeling banished out of them by forces it cannot control, in an endless explosion, chaotic in its appearance, but orderly structured in its essence, one which the self is always struggling to reach.

Approaching the trilogy *Orbitor* in relation to the author’s other prose writings is necessary, first of all

because the author himself has warned us about the “carrier” role that the trilogy plays within the context of his prose, and second of all because one of the possibilities of noticing the unity in diversity is the metamorphic recovery of some spaces, times and characters having an essential role in the configurating process of the fictional self.

A great deal has been written on the subject of the trilogy in the Romanian literary press, for various reasons, not all of them being linked to the literary interest alone. Most of the critics have tried to catch the novel’s essence in some personal metaphor, in the majority of cases bearing some pictorial-musical implication, justifying it on the basis of some structural, compositional particular elements.

There are only two authors that included the novel *Orbitor* into a larger perspective approach, justifying a synchronic or diachronic framing.

Thus, in 2008, Simona Sora published a volume entitled *Regăsirea intimității. Corpul în proza*

românească interbelică și postdecembristă, in which she proposes to approach the selected literary works in the manner of a hermeneutics of intimacy. Tracing from the start the vectors of the concept and a possible typology of the literary intimacy, the author observes the bipolar structure: on the one hand, “imaginary intimacy – that which is inside the literary work, redeemed as authenticity, also borne through diverse authentic procedures of prose writing” and, on the other hand, “reading intimacy”¹.

Also, Simona Sora notices a double antagonistic dynamics in the configuration of intimacy space: “the introspective movement, sinking into the depths of the rediscovered self”, simultaneous with “the introspective movement, exposing the interior, insisting on the living body, corporality, the secret of intimacy”.²

¹Simona Sora, *Regăsirea intimității. Corpul în proza românească interbelică și postdecembristă*, București, Editura Cartea Românească, 2008, p. 13

²Simona Sora, *Regăsirea intimității. Corpul în proza românească interbelică și postdecembristă*, București, Editura Cartea Românească, 2008, p. 14.

In the chapter devoted to the post-December works, the author analyses the image of corporality as constituting the self, following the interpretative suggestions offered by Francoise Dolto's book *Imaginea inconștientă a corpului*. Therefore, in Cartarescu's works, the self is formed by "the hallucinatory rebuilding out of the body's memories and the mind's hypnagogic visions", in a deliberate mode, since the author is aware of the construction method chosen and is familiar with the theories of the subconscious. It is to be structured thus: "the postmodern myth of the Book Creator" in which the body is "the central metaphor and place one can gain access to a mythical Self"³.

In 2012, Sanda Cordos publishes a volume of essays entitled *Lumi din cuvinte. Reprezentări și identități în literatura română postbelică*, where the author starts from the hypothesis that in the period under investigation "the literary representations have always been the answer to an urgency command", being, therefore, resolution methods, answers to the identity crisis. The transversal or

³*Ibidem.*, p. 256

individual representations attempt to answer the question asked by the social being: who are we?

On a European level, the study of subjective literature, of the writing that configures the self in relation to the author's empiric and creative self, the act of literary creation and its receiver, constitutes a present-day subject that preoccupies the French literary critics, on the background of postmodernity's interest in the creation of a new relation margin-center between the creative subjectivity willing to expose itself and the opacity of its reception. The team of French researchers under the patronage of professors Isabelle Grell and Arnaud Genon organizes, at ENS or at Cerisy-la-Salle, starting from 2005 to the present, international colloquies (*Genèse et Autofiction* – 2005, *Autofiction* – 2008, *Genèses autofictions* – 2011, *CultureS et AutofictionS* – 2012, *Cultures, nations, autofictions* – 2013, *L'Autocensure* – 2014) on the topic of the writings about the self, focused on autobiography and autofiction, colloquies where researchers from various cultural backgrounds discuss the limits of autobiographical space and its paradigm, the

generic status of autofiction, the possible definitions and the poetics of this newly assumed literary genre.

In Cartarescu's works, the self is and is not at the same time the centre of his searches, it is that void left of a whole that must be reconstructed through self-contemplation and representation on various levels, that is through in-textual creation with the help of memory, remembrance, imagination and, not in the least, oblivion as a particular form of remembrance. If logocentrism positions itself at the centre of the universe, thus at the centre of human understanding: acquiring meaning through speech, egocentrism proclaims the institution of the universe through the self: acquiring meaning through self-speech. Also, the self's gliding on these diverse signification axes is directed by space and time vectors, the space that cannot be conceived of in the absence of time that identifies it.

The spec(tac)ular look on the self alters, fragments, deconstructs, fractures, and disturbs its image. At the same time, the self implacably glides towards the totalizing genome. The whole perfects itself,

incoherently, just by multiplying on diverse narrative levels. Totality escapes because it is phenotypic, it cannot be otherwise: it is configured through its interaction with different backgrounds to which it reacts differently and not necessarily symmetrically. Unity—the genome—remains the same and is drawn towards repetitiveness, but the background/ intro-projective field/hallucination, dream, reality is different and is shaped in different lines: firm, of force—hence the spatial fractal, spiraled on the vertical time axis, and weak, of reflection, on the horizontal, spatial axis.

If the purpose of Cartarescu's works is, as he has often confessed, self-recovery, then these tools facilitate the re-presentation of the self, articulated in the text. The flowing, gliding, expansion, dissipation, multiplication, alluviation to the Whole become, in Cartarescu's literary creation, modes of conscience reflecting in itself, turning its eye upon itself, similar to a Möbius strip.

In writing about oneself, that of the past, Mircea Cartarescu imagines, creates imaginary constructs and does not transcribe reality. The constructs are not copies

of a reality as it happened, but repositions, modifications of it, caused by the perspective from which they are seen.

The past is subject to memory, it is recollected, re-presented, projected. Memory is an act and an innovative and recuperative space at the same time. The self that recalls itself contemplates the image that it makes/constructs of itself, decrypts on and through itself. It can only reach itself through the agency of self-image, therefore circumstantially. The dream, born in the subconscious, can generate self-knowledge without an intermediary. Narrated, it becomes translatable, subject to translation, to deciphering and simultaneous deceit. The self, in Cartarescu's works, appears to itself in dream, pretends (that) in dreaming, tells dreams to itself—creates meaning through image and image through word. The whole world of the book is the effect of illusion, moving being only the other side of standing still, since the characters are not allowed to overcome their condition and, thus, understand it. The readers are just the same. They lack the possibility to read their entire being as a whole, because time fragments it into “flashes” that come

one by one like slides, projected by memory onto a screen of the mind, so that everything that can be perceived is this sequencing of images, frozen in a past time, impossible to be linked to something that is not yet lived, told, remembered. Unpredictable to its own self, the self is just a “blind projection”, an “optical illusion” that pierces the world, creating it at the same time.

Each memory becomes a transfiguration of time and space, a door out to the inner unknown, an encounter with the other that lives within the self. The past is a projection—a throwing forward of the self, recovered from the meaning of events, objects, beings that contributed to the shaping of identity spaces. They become specular, ego-scopic instruments of an ego-fantic self that creates and makes itself known to itself.

Self-recovery is realised through conscience reflecting upon itself, through an immersion into the underworld of the subconscious or through ascending into a superiour dimension that allows a different view on and understanding of the world. Every one of these immersions into the alternating selves creates and fortifies

a strand of the canvas, modelling thus the asymptotic curve, the fractals and the blended universes.

This state of self dispersion is at the same time one of unity construction: prisoner in its own temple, the self contemplates the world it projects only in a hypnosis induced dream. The passage from lucidity onto hyperlucidity represents an explosion of the center into elements that are at the same time familiar and anamorphic, so that, being written, invented, they can acquire meaning, that is., aesthetic functions. The dispersion and coagulation of totality, the play of wholes and voids of the being is a creative process: „It is in me <<at the same time acceleration and rest>> similar to the energetic field that forms the „world fabric”.

Memory and remembrance are ways from the conscient to the phantasmatic self. They are ways out of the conscient self, ek-stasies that take place through careful feeling of the past, projections in preceding hypostases. Hence, the relation of ek-stasis with time—the egon, the self that is outside time, above time. The ecstatic understanding presupposes an escape from the

space of logic, being incompatible with it. Any dogmatic formula represents an intellectual ek-stasis, a thought's gateway to antinomy. Only getting out of itself can it become creative.

Breaking from postmodernism, Cartarescu is nostalgically driven to its irony, which erases all known boundaries and generates other, unpredictable ones: „Now I understand so well what an original is and what a *second hand* is. And I know, and I exult at the thought that once I believed that what is new and original in my writing will diminish and will vanish „into the roar of time”, and the things that are written just to fill in a space or as play or caught from aside will grow and expand in the light of a new epoch, now unpredictable.”⁴

Space of a search for a personal truth, the book rebuilds the self's unity through the archeological approach, that of bringing to the surface the selves remodelled by memory and imagination. Cartarescu's

⁴ Mircea Cărtărescu, *Jurnal II*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2008, p.35.

book is not just a world, but an embodiment of the self, „book of my life”, cosmogonic act of a king that secrets his kingdom where he banishes himself in order to be redeemed from inside. Chosen and damned at the same time, together with his characters, the author feels unique and, simultaneously, a simple writing instrument into the hands of Divinity. The command that he receives, being at the same time the answer, is dictated through itself. Developed spiral-like, on the multiple orbits of the labyrinths of dreams, memories, hallucinations, the book represents a pilgrimage place of the self towards the self and, eventually, an encounter of those called to participate at its creation: author, characters, and reader.

Absorbed in itself and confronted with itself in the world with no borders and no time, the author does not restructure, but reconstructs the inner spaces, modelling the image as he projects it, reconstructing it gradually on different intertwining plans that give substance to the inner reality. In its turn, the mirror is not passive, but generates a tense relation with the reflection: it transforms, deforms, mutilates, decomposes and rebuilds

it. Thus, the self writes and inscribes itself into the book, offering continuity and dynamism to the texture, transforming it into a space that is “alive, vibrating, pulsating” through the embedment of author and reader, who becomes aware of the fact that “we are all characters” in a book, false image of reality, but more real than the real, confined within the book covers, but opening all boundaries to the human being.