

Exegi monumentum...: Mircea Cărtărescu's *The Levant*

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Mircea Cărtărescu's poem *The Levant* counts among the foremost ten or fifteen great volumes of Romanian poetry – no less, for instance, than Eminescu's volume of *Poems* of 1883, Arghezi's *Flori de mucigai* ("Blooming mould") and *Cuvinte potrivite* ("Matching words"), Bacovia's *Plumb* ("Lead") etc. Coming from such an outstanding writer whose books published so far have never failed to impress his readers, it is not in the least surprising. And yet, when he first read the opening chants of *The Levant* in the „Junimea” (“Youth”) literary circle, it came as a breathtaking surprise, because the poet usually showed up at the meetings unexpectedly and made vague promises about submitting a short story, or maybe an auto-biographical novel, or just a poem. Here as well he differed essentially from almost all the other members of the circle who carefully prepared their appearances or came as special guests, Cărtărescu simply stunned everybody at the „Junimea” that evening with what he read. There were talks, not lacking emphasis, about the historical quality of the moment and about how lucky the listeners were, who had had the privilege to witness it. Moreover, there hovered a feeling of unspoken complicity in the air, since Cărtărescu's epic poem contained all the signs of the age in which it was written: the famine, the freezing, the fear (“The three Fs”), the darkness and filth in the streets – in other words, our miserable everyday life. One thing, however, spoiled the first impression, namely that nobody then and there could have certified that any better times were yet to come, which meant that Cărtărescu's poem already qualified as a classical instance of *drawer literature*. In the *Twelfth Chant* of *The Levant*, the poet himself foresees such a fate (“O'er the years, maybe, my reader, on your life's path/ You'll come across this here body of glaze and fog/ That feeds on my brain, that pecks from my spirit,/ Or else it will burn and its smoke will waste into thin air”). The censorship is also present, with all its absurd humours: in the *Third Chant*, for instance, the poet Iancu Aricescu addresses a letter to Zenaïda, in which he relates in detail how the censor used a pocket-knife to delete or modify words and phrases from his book of odes, elegies, satires, fables and translations from Lamartine and concludes, in an outburst of anger: “...may his name be written and then scraped with the same pocket-knife from the memory of the living”.

Beyond these petty details, however, the main reason for which Mircea Cărtărescu's *The Levant* had no chance to be published resided in the story in the poem.

The starting-point is the well-known letter sent by Ion Ghica to Vasile Alecsandri, entitled *In the age of the riot*. Ghica tells his friend that:

“Riga, the poet, former secretary to Prince Alexandru Ipsilante, together with Scufa, a Creek tradesman from Odessa, with Professor Santo the “pharmazon” and Diceu the archimandrite had established a secret society called “Eteria” (Comradeship)

Those who wanted to become blood-brothers went to church dressed up in their Sunday clothes and there, on the threshold of the altar, stuck a needle into each other’s arm until a drop of blood emerged that they licked with the tip of their tongues; they then exchanged weapons and said these words: «Your life mine and your soul mine»...

This story, combined with that of *Conrad*, told by Bolintineanu and thereafter by Nicolae Bălcescu, or even with Byron’s famous poem *Childe Harold*, seems to have offered Cărtărescu the idea of the extraordinary conspiracy the young poet Manoil and his sister Zenaida become part of, together with the awesome pirate Jaurta the One-Eyed, master of all Greek seas. The two men meet at sea and immediately recognize one another as members of the fraternity, then stab their fingers with the knife, according to the “eterist” ritual. Through another poet, Iancu Aricescu, who eventually turns out to be the Prince’s man, Zenaida receives instructions from Wallachia in enciphered letters recommending her to look for the great inventor Leonidas the “Ampotrophagous” on the Island of Hosna. He would build a balloon for the rioters to reach Bucharest and kidnap the Prince at night. This apparently so simple a plan becomes more complicate with the appearance of a French spy, and the meeting itself with the Ampotrophagous, on the Island of Hosna, is no easier since the tatter’s wife, Zoe, is furiously republican; finally, the inventor’s den, a mixture of *popular book* and *science-fiction*, seems borrowed from another world, populated as it is by house-size shellfish, by crabs with snakes’ mouths, where the boulders are translucent and carved in the form of furies or satyrs with huge testicles; the group of rioters walk across the rainbow that arches over the island splashing their bodies and clothes in its colours, down to a miscellany of mechanical mumbo-jumbo that performs the wildest of jobs:

“A machine that uttered buzzes, neat and small like a canary Flew a few feet in the air and tried catching all the flies.

.....
 Yet another, short and robust, there polished with a brush The rough rock from underneath, until one could see through it, Through the whole thick Earth down there, antipodean continents With the cities upside down, where they go by, all those fools, With their feet propped up and their heads turned, hanging low, So they may in all their freedom look under the beauties’ skirts.

A whole bunch of pipes there spring from a tall wide melting pot
 That keeps boiling a black foam, star-spangled cerebrum,
 And the smoke rolls up the chimneys, it builds spheres on the sky
 That swarm peacefully up high, like flickering ephemeras,
 For they are all and each a planet, holding peoples, lands and kings,
 Floras, animals all kinds, laws that no one can spell out,

Histories soaked in blood, inventions, geniuses,
 Masters, slaves, diseases, crystals seeing through millenia,
 All. .ill nourish hope that they will live forever.
 In thr me! fvftything pops off like a dried out skin ball..."

(Fifth Chant)

The Ampotrophagous is eventually attracted to the greatness of the cause ("Arts and sciences are nothing but a simple lot of trifles./ Much more useful is a pair of good trousers/ Than the vanities all written by Diderot or d' Alembert:/ It is not of perpetuum mobiles we should dream, but of such places/ Where all can be equal, all work hard and sound of mind./ Yes, I want committed science, I want art that take a stand!"), so the conspirators work everything out and settle a meeting in Giurgiu in two weeks.

In the nacelle of the montgolfier flying towards the meeting-place, Zoe and Manoil discuss what is to be done once "that vampire-Prince" has been kidnapped and killed, who would lead the Romanians and how:

"... In the meantime Zoe argued
 On politics high and mighty with Manoil who looked over
 The whole wide Archipelago. "Let us say we have kidnapped him,
 That vampire Prince we want. What comes next?" "He dies,
 Thus the people long tormented finding their revenge at last"
 "Well, and then?" Zoe asked still meditating.
 "Then the golden age will follow that we have been waiting long,
 The Romanians will get rid of all vicious tyrannies,
 We will all love one another, our country to ourselves,
 Our nation live forever, foreigners – let them all die..."

(Sixth Chant)

Here is, then, a war of the "socio-political patterns", just like in Ion Budai-Deleanu's *Țiganiada* ("The Gypsyad", another easily identifiable source of inspiration for *The Levant*): Zoe would rather have an enlightened Prince, Manoil – a democracy. Let aside the originality of this surprisingly actual dispute, the scene anticipates one of the key-problems in the poem, that will be resumed at the end of Manoil's journey: what role does the artist play in the world, where does he stand as far as power is concerned. The true actuality of this question springs out of its eternity For the moment, Leonidas' monkey Hercules suddenly bites the balloon canvas and the conspirators fall upon the island H. in the Greek sea, where a mountain splits in two and swallows them in. There follows something like an initiation of the poet Manoil alone in the arcana of time and of "the Romanian scriptures" (a parallel to Eminescu's poem *Epigonii*, 'The Epigons'). Holding Princess Hyacinth's crystal globe in the palms of his hands, Manoil steps into the "Mechanism of Poetry", where seven fascinating statues are about to answer the poet's question:

You enormous stately dome o'er which these statues cry
Tell me what is poetry,
whereto it's heading now, Be my prophetess and show me all those spirits deeply wise
That will take into the future sweet melancholy of dreaming... (*Seventh Chant*)

Although unnamed, the seven coryphaei of poetry are easily identifiable from the verses they recite: in a first, diamond, hall stands Eminescu ("Of the seven coryphaei he comes first, he is the youngest,/ Noblest lover of the Muses and of *Venus* the fair god dess"), followed by Arghezi, Barbu, Bacovia and Blaga, "masters of the poem in a century so changing", and, in the last hall, by Nichita Stănescu, a statue made of "lucent pearl", himself followed by the statue of "pure glass" of "the last significant poet of the century-to-come" who recites the first fourteen lines of *The Levant*. So, in the "Mechanism of Poetry" Manoil witnesses a fascinating history of the whole Romanian lyrical creation that Mircea Cărtărescu "interprets" and rewrites in a state of seducing grace, in the unifying mode of the stylistic synchronism that characterizes his writing. Such performance could be interpreted as a game as well. But there is no question here of any parody or pastiche: the poet is completely involved in an unprecedented challenge to literature and to his own destiny.

In the *Ninth Chant*, the conspirators manage to repair the torn balloon and resume their journey through "turkised Bulgaria", all the way to Giurgiu, where the poet Manoil actually comes out of the author's typewriter and after a short fight drags the author himself, as a character, into his own poem, among his own other characters ("They all live, they breathe, none among them seems aware/ They are born onto a page, in the deepest dungeon locked/ And I wonder what huge body is now staying at my table/ Typing there in the kitchen where I used to type myself").

The *Tenth Chant* complicates the adventures even more: the group of heroes, now including the author himself, drop by an old hag's, a witch who lures them into a "backward church" from which a giant hermaphrodite rises to the sky holding between his fingers a mystical rose. His grandiose apparition coming after the delightful Walt Disney-style cartoon from Leonidas the inventor's island or the initiatory dream from the "Mechanism of Poetry", with caves, talking statues and magi, more appropriate to German romanticism, adds a genuine page of psychoanalysis of the abyss to the otherwise rich enough imagination of Cărtărescu's poem.

When they finally reach Bucharest in their balloon in the *Eleventh Chant*, the rioters are surprised to discover that the riot can no longer take place, because the Prince has been informed of the whole plan by the traitor lancu Aricescu who has been bought with the permission to have his censored booklet printed. As in Francis Godwin's novel *A Man in the Moon*, the Prince too has had a boat made for himself, drawn by seventy swans in the sky, and flies out of the city to fight the conspiracy.

Still, with help from the Amphotrophagous, the rioters manage to escape this new trial and engage in another thrilling journey through the underground catacombs of the city, that take them, after numberless obstacles, all the way to the princely palace looking rather like an outlaw's den ("There are rooms with wine pots in their earthen shell/ With black wine so spiced your mouth is set on fire,/ While in other cells deep hidden lie and rot, for all forgotten,/ Blindmen, lepers, all those fools who have ever fought the tyrant") But, to everybody's surprise,

the wise poet Manoil refuses to take over the country's affairs, as if we were in nowadays Europe and the poets, philosophers and playwrights argued over power with the "professional revolutionaries":

"No, my friends, for me everything is but illusion,

I would only like to feel eternity's most bitter scent,
One line only if I wrote, like
a tiny drop of dew That contains in it the world now so old and yet so new,
If one line were to survive me, I would then think of myself
A more blessed than an angel, holier than the Lord God"

At the end of a prolonged experience with nothing gratuitous in it in spite of the gratuitous experience called poetry, Manoil meditates like Plato about the wise Socrates. For him, true life is now the one within himself, not the outside life, the act of creation or concentration that is the true sense of the journey he has just made. He has set out on an exile and conspirator's journey, like Conrad, Bolintineanu's hero, and has reached its end like Homer's Ulysses or, rather, like Saint John Perse's explorer in the *Anabase*, another great poem to which Cărtărescu's *The Levant* seems indebted.

The pirate Jaurta is the one who rises to the throne of Wallachia, a Prince as mean and changing as his predecessors; the author looks out the window of the princely palace and sees the University, the Underground entrances and a walkie-talkie militiaman, so he grabs his chance, sneaks away, gets on Tramway 21 and rushes home.

In the *Twelfth Chant* he has resumed his work at the typewriter when someone rings the bell: before the door stand all his fellow-conspirators from the poem, including the noble poet Manoil. The author's wife, Cristina, offers them an instant coffee she has kept for special occasions and then listens amazed to the great story of stories they have gone through. Eventually, Manoil reaches out towards the bookcase in the room to pick a book, *The Levant*:

"From the overladden shelves of the bookcase high and wide
Manoil casually takes down a book like no other seen:
Its pages shining like sheets of pure crystal,
On its cover golden letters fabulously carved in shape
Spell the title:
THE LEVANT.

Towards the end he opens it
And the following he reads with a soft and worn out voice:
«From the overladden shelves of the bookcase high and wide
Manoil casually takes down a book like no other seen:
Its pages shining like sheets of pure crystal,
On its cover golden letters fabulously carved in shape
Spell the title:
THE LEVANT.

Towards the end he opens it
And the following he reads with a soft and worn out voice:» ...”

and so on. Here we are caught in an endless story we may never come out of again.

There is no equivalent in all Romanian poetry to what Cărtărescu has achieved in *The Levant*, all the more so if we agree that the achievement itself would not have been possible outside this type of poetry. Like Borges' character Pierre Menard who rewrites Cervantes' *Don Quixote* word for word and yet manages to obtain a completely different story, Mircea Cărtărescu “rewrites” the Romanian poetry in a gesture of total intertextuality, for the eye through which he looks at poetry is the body itself of poetry. The first sign of Cărtărescu's *postmodernity*, so much debated upon, that he has really managed to render plausible in our literature, is his extraordinary capacity to bring together words, styles and literary forms, as in a sort of magical *aleph*, synchronizing them apparently without effort. His sense of history, indispensable to those who wish to go on writing poetry after twenty-five years of age, as T.S. Eliot puts it, affects the past and modifies it into something of an awesome vortex that eventually takes the reader out of time. Poets like Bolintineanu and Anton Pann or the famous lines of Alecu Russo's poem *Cântarea României* (“A Hymn to Romania”) appear next to Eminescu, while the Văcărescu brothers' or Conachi's sweetness, or even the outstanding poetic experiment of the post-forty-eighter poets appear side by side with the pictorial onirism from the lines of Leonid Dimov who might as well have written a similar poem – Mircea Cărtărescu claims at the beginning of the *Twelfth Chant*. Therefore, toward the end of *The Levant*, he is only too right to look down on the surly philologists-critics:

“Philologos, you seek to put your finger on the lace,
To show this knot or that, how badly it is knit,
That tens and tens of errors have crept into the threadwork,
That look, here «vitious» it is written and there «vicious».
You cannot understand my poem is all artifice?
Do not rise above the pattern for only there
Can you be an Apollo of declinations and morphemes...”

The author of *The Levant* is so familiar with Romanian poetry that he can show it a special kind of love, that of covering it altogether at the same time and turning it into a single major poem. Seen as such, Mircea Cărtărescu's epic is closer to the *parallel universes*, the *uchronies*, or the modern *SF heroic fantasies* in which the worlds intermingle as in a dream, ignoring any anachronism, making it possible for Heisenberg to exchange information with the inventor Leonidas the Ampotrophagous or with Daguerre. A difference yet to be noticed: *The Levant* is a *heroic fantasy* of the paperworlds apparently emerged from the imagination of a huge typewriter. At the beginning of the *Sixth Chant*, the typewriter actually appears, like a true god of literature, crushing the characters with its giant keys and levelling them into the paper or growing, alongside with them, as high as the sky above:

In the middle I saw a huge fantastic «Remington»
 Its black shining side mirroring all grayish world.
 It typed alone: its round lettered keys descended,
 Their faces white enameled, crackling noisily
 And writing something on the sky-high rising sheet.
 I went closer and jumped up on a glossy circle
 But fell deep down into the awesome typewriter
 I wandered among springlets, levers, nuts and bolts,
 I climbed onto the whole steel skeleton until
 I got up in the clouds, where the sheet escapes the roll.
 Any letter written on the paper is as tall as I am
 And I tried to read, my eyes as weak as a cochineal's,
 Unable to grasp the immensity. Then desperately I saw
 The giant statues come down from their stands
 And fill the endless square. «Mamma, mamma», then I cried
 And leaped onto the white paper on the roll
 But a letter smashed me down like crucified.
 You devious reader, this dream is all pretext, of course...

Everything in *The Levant* is paper come alive, everybody lives between the covers of a book, they travel, love and fight according to the will of their God the author. When the balloon built by the Ampotrophagous crosses the sea, the word HELLESPONT is written over the face of the waters, like in those geographical atlases from our school days in which we used to forget ourselves, and later, when it reaches its destination, strange figures appear all over Bucharest, that are nothing else than the page numbering of the manuscript. The author himself falls asleep resting his forehead on the text he is about to write, only to find the story “tattooed” on his face when he wakes up, like Ray Bradbury’s “illustrated man”. All in all, it is “a paper world”, but a magical one, a world with “text-appeal” that Mircea Cărtărescu brings to life by finding a common background for Eminescu’s philosophical despair, the post-forty-eighter poets’ hunger for words, Jules Verne’s inventivity and the *Beatles*’ state of mind in *The Yellow Submarine*. The result is not only a “floating history”, as Cărtărescu puts it, but a multiple-faced diamond, a shining fractal trying to say *everything* in the poet’s demiurgical dream.

Equally postmodernist is Cărtărescu’s inclination towards *biographism*, closely linked to his careful citation of every step of the *textuation*: we know where *The Levant* was written, how long it took to write it, what satisfaction it gave its author and what difficulties. That which for other textualists is simple anecdote or coquetry, or is narratively justified, becomes a state of mind with Mircea Cărtărescu, an obsession, a double challenge (literary and existential), very close to the complex suffering in the metatext of Eminescu’s poems:

...Poor paper beings, you. May you think, my friend Manoil,
 At the disk of sea below, at the waves’ so loud a roar
 Reaching us up here high. May you think of freedom then,

You at least of all I put in this booklet of cartoons
 I've been working for a year to engrave onto this canvas.
 I could make you lose your mind, make you fly I could as well
 Yet myself how can I help, with this foggy life of mine
 That takes me no other place than from home to work and back,
 In an age of broken wings, in a room of cut-off heat?

(*Fifth Chant*)

In the poem, while the group of rioters fight the mercenaries and the Prince, the author fights his own *texistence* (*sic!*). If the former battle mixes together dramatism and a sort of picturesque balkanic way of being, the latter is essentially tragic. Therefore, I do not think that there is another author, in our post-war poetry, to possess literature and be possessed by it to a greater extent than Mircea Cărtărescu.

It is also true that several times he names his poem “a halavah epic”, encouraging the impression that he might simply resort to the well-known topos of feigned modesty. It is not only that, and neither seems the reference to the *balkanic* deposit in our literature or the *comic* to have been his primary concern in this case, although *The Levant* is, from all points of view, a great humorous achievement and a synthesis of our literary balkanism. “Michelangelo had marbles, I have cakes of halavah...”, Cărtărescu states at the beginning of the *Third Chant*. What presently comes to mind is to remember the great tradition of the *Ecclesiastes* where everything is vanity, smoke and dust. Yet with his idea of a “paper work” or “halavah” monumentality, Cărtărescu crosses the line into the realm of the most dying theories about *dream, fiction, reality or art*. All these have universe status, all are real and palpable in their inconsistency, because irrespective of where we look at them from, they exist one inside the other, like those Russian wooden dolls, with the only difference that this fantastic intermingling of worlds never ends. Everything going on in *The Levant* reduces to nought any claim of truth coming from one single world, since imagination, dream or art are as consistent as marble or bronze. It should be noticed that every battle in *The Levant's* fiction takes place during sleep (that is to say, in a second fiction), they are being dreamed of by the heroes who take part in them, or else that the intricate happenings are being worked out by means of some fictional trick. For instance, seen through the lens of the pirate jaurta, the English ships chasing the group of rioters suddenly go topsyturvy and sink, a disaster at sea that only seems to be an optical illusion: the English nevertheless disappear and Manoil's “comrados” escape from being hunted down. Similarly, the airborne fight between Manoil's “montgolfier” and the swan-drawn boat *exists*, although the author warns us that it is he who has made it up from pieces, at his working table, in a skillful exercise of editing:

You who read *The Levant* there lying on your couch
 Did you see the other night that film *E to nave va?*
 At the end they show the studio where the story all was filmed,
 That enormous metal structure upon which the great ships move
 While you think it is for real, that their sway is genuine.

Since the method is postmodern, here I am using it too.
You should therefore know the battle to be read in these here pages
Is due to effects most special, to images with others mixed,
To all kinds of clippings, to computer animation,
It is all composed minutely, better than in *Star Wars Three*.

A synchronization of styles and of systems of cultural norms (“trivial” or learned), biographism as opposed to the modernist impersonality, the poetic discourse, textualism and the art of editing together with the whole range of human emotions, from a juicy humour all the way to the deepest scepticism of those who believe that nothing is to be done – here are a few of the faces of this epic poem, *The Levant*, one of the brightest syntheses of life and literature that any Romanian writer has achieved to this day.