Maximalist Autofiction, Surrealism and Late Socialism in Mircea Cărtărescu's *Solenoid*

Doris Mironescu

"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

Andreea Mironescu

"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

Abstract

This article studies the fictionalization of late Eastern-European socialism in contemporary Romania, namely the literary projection of the 1980s in Mircea Cărtărescu's autofictional novel *Solenoid* (2015). The novel is an ample, paranoid, metaphysical, and counterfactual autobiography that uses a late-communist backdrop to create a metaphorically skewed representation of the self and the world. In order to describe this narrative structure as an emergent subgenre of the postmodern maximalist novel, we coined the term 'maximalist autofiction.' We then discussed Cărtărescu's option for maximalist autofiction and the effects this literary choice has had on his representation of Romanian late socialism. This option is influenced by the author's biography, as well as by his own relationship with the memory burden of socialism in today's post-Cold War world. Cărtărescu uses hyperbole, metaphysical parody, and a maximalist surrealist imagination to propel the discussion of socialism and cultural peripherality beyond the dated parameters of the East/West dichotomies.

Rezumat

Lucrarea noastră studiază un caz de ficționalizare a socialismului târziu în România contemporană, și anume proiecția literară a anilor 1980 în romanul autoficțional al lui Mircea Cărtărescu *Solenoid* (2015). Romanul este o autobiografie vastă, paranoică, metafizică și contrafactuală, în care fundalul comunismului târziu servește la crearea unei reprezentări deviate metaforic a sinelui și a lumii. Pentru a descrie această structură narativă ca un subgen emergent al romanului maximalist postmodern, am propus conceptul de „autoficțiune maximalistă". În continuare, am discutat opțiunea lui Cărtărescu pentru autoficțiunea maximalistă și efectele acesteia asupra reprezentării socialismului târziu în România. Alegerea sa decurge din propria experiență biografică, dar și din relația sa cu povara memoriei socialismului în lumea postsocialistă contemporană. Cărtărescu se folosește de hiperbolă, de parodia metafizică și de un imaginar suprarealist maximalist pentru a aduce temele discuției despre socialism și periferalitate culturală dincolo de parametrii dihotomiei est-vest.

In 2006, the Romanian literary critic Dan C. Mihăilescu (2006, 147) lamented the absence of what he called in a self-mocking manner 'the Great Novel of Our Suffering under Ceaușescu' (*Marele Roman al Suferinței noastre în ceaușism*).[1] But this absence did not mean nobody had tried writing one. Novels documenting or fictionalizing political repression, persecution by the secret police, and allegories of oppression had been and are still being published, and after 2000 there has been a significant increase in autofictional works that focused on life stories from late socialism and the post-1989 transitional period (Mironescu and Mitroiu 2020), most of them falling short of achieving the canonical status Mihăilescu and other critics expected of them. However, one author, Mircea Cărtărescu (b. 1956), who is considered by most literary polls the best Romanian writer today, retains the central position in the national literary system reserved to canonical authors, while migrating from fiction to autofiction and from pre-1989 poetry to the prose written in postsocialism. His novels deal with the author's childhood and youth, using haunting images of ordinary life from the 1960s through the 1980s, autobiographical

sequences which acquire, through repetition, personal validation and symbolic value. While many of his books fall under the category of autofiction, a fact that should hinder their reception as canonical (since they tend to turn self-centredly to the same autobiographical landmarks), theirs is an original version of autofiction which includes maximalist novelistic ambition and surrealist vision. Drawing on Stefano Ercolino's (2012) notion of maximalist novel, we identify Cărtărescu's literary formula as *maximalist autofiction*, a literary hybrid that belongs to a whole class of otherwise unclassifiable literary hybrids born at the turn of the twenty-first century in many literary cultures around the world.[2]

This article investigates Cărtărescu's option for maximalist autofiction and the effects this literary choice has had on his representation of Romanian late socialism. This move is influenced by the author's need to not only negotiate a place for himself in the national canon and on the international literary stage, but also to define his own relationship with the memory burden of socialism, to debate the peripheral status of Romania in the world, and to address the East-West equation, in a postsocialist moment when these dilemmas of the 1990s need to be more creatively dealt with. Especially in his 2015 novel *Solenoid* Cărtărescu writes the kind of 'false' autobiography that allows him to imagine an alternative destiny for himself and to explore the reality of late socialism in its grim details. In doing this, he draws attention to the universality of the pervasive squalor late socialism displayed and to the nostalgic charm and paradoxical promise this squalor still retains.

From socialism to postsocialism, from poetry to prose

Solenoid tells in first person narrative the story of a young teacher in the 1980s, formerly an aspiring poet now retreated from literary life, who works in one of the many demoralizing, overburdened, and poorly maintained schools in Bucharest. His biographical coordinates (age, family history, education path, etc.) are very precisely coincident with what Cărtărescu himself has lived from 1980 to 1989 at school 86 in the Colentina district of Bucharest. The teacher becomes familiar with the reality of poverty, economic distress, racial inequality, discrimination and violence of the educational system, but also the grim situation of all those living under the communist dictatorship. Several characters from the school receive more attention: a beautiful math teacher, Florabela, a wealthy teacher, Caty, who joins a cult to combat the depression of aging, a daredevil workshop instructor, the school doorman who gets raptured to heavens, but most of all the physics teacher Irina, a reader of theosophy, who will become the narrator's lover. The narrator himself lives an

existence of seclusion in a bizarre house, but numerous signals from colleagues and pupils prompt him to investigate the roots of what looks like a conspiracy. The spiralling cabal includes an old librarian, the constructor of the house he lives in, a religious sect whose members roam through Bucharest at night, a schoolgirl with a gift for literature, the historic figures of the Romanians Nicolae Minovici and Nicolae Vaschide, the Americans Nikola Tesla and George Boole, the Polish Michal Vojnicz, and others. While searching for meaning and letting himself be amazed by the wondrous events and mysterious objects encountered, the teacher makes it clear that, in giving up literature, he is setting himself up for something far more important and meaningful, a mystical form of experience, a search for something 'true,' as opposed to literature's 'lies.' But, as the cabal spirals to its final, centripetal conclusion and the seeker draws closer to finding his place at its centre, as Bucharest comes close to imploding, the hero abandons his mystical aspirations and is content with saving his new-born girl and his girlfriend, heading for a life of secluded, domestic bliss.

The nexus on which hinges the entire career of the autofictional character in the novel *Solenoid* is a disastrous reading of his first poem *Căderea* [*The Fall*] at a student literary circle in late 1970s Bucharest. After the disgraceful scene where everybody present at the so-called 'Moon Circle' deals blow after blow to the young author's ego, he gives up writing and contents himself with being an alienated school teacher. Years later, he muses at what might have been if he had triumphed at the Moon Circle. But this is the 'fiction' part of autofiction. In real life, Mircea Cărtărescu read his poem *Căderea* at the now-famed 'Monday Circle' when he was a student of the Bucharest Faculty of Letters and was hailed then a true poet by the authoritative critic Nicolae Manolescu, who was running the literary circle. Indeed, he was a teacher at school 86 in Bucharest from 1980 to 1990, but during all that time he published several acclaimed volumes that made him the most prominent poet in his generation, called the Eighties generation. His ample, narrative poems spoke about love and abandonment and described Bucharest in a mock-festive tone, taking aim at the failed modernity of the communist capital, its poor display of consumer goods, the drabness and ugliness of the housing districts and the industrial landscape. There is an excess of foreign brand names that play on the reader's awareness of their rarity and the frustration with the absence of similar quality in local brands (Dumitru 2017, 275). The usefulness of these skirmishes with the regime is, however, debatable in terms of political efficiency. The ironic contemporary references were designed first and foremost to help artists 'save face' for their lack of political agency. Postmodernism was the name of the game for the Eighties generation, but their association with the aesthetic current was also put into question because of the

obvious absence of social postmodernity in an economically struggling socialist country in the 1980s (Martin 2009), and Cărtărescu himself was soon ready to admit the depletion of his own jocular, 'postmodern' energy. Apart from *Dragostea* [*Love*], a volume published in 1994, with a seven-year delay, all his books after 1989 make the case for an ending of literature's games, first in the mock-heroic ample poem *Levantul* [*The Levant*], a monstrously intertextual enterprise that revisits all modern Romanian poetry as a form of good-bye (Cărtărescu 1990), then in *Nimic* [*Nothing*], a book of poems written in 1992 which denounces visionary imagination and turns irony against the author, whose trust in poetry withers away in the process of writing his book (Cărtărescu 2010).[3] Afterwards, Cărtărescu reinvented himself as a prose writer and an international author (with translations published in more than 20 languages and several important literary prizes acquired, as well as recent nominations as a credible candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature), and that meant also giving up the postmodern moniker, which was timely, since the Nineties saw a repeated and, in the end, successful assault on this once glorious literary emblem.

The experience of writing poetry in his first decade as a published author was not altogether wasted in the literary transformation that followed. Alongside the jocular and self-mocking political and social critique, there was always a series of poems that referred insistently to the same childhood memories, to the places in Bucharest where he was born and grew up, among picturesque or strange neighbours, to the towering, mythological figure of the mother, to a mysterious twin brother dead in infancy, or to nightmares about dental treatments. These recurring images, which failed to integrate properly in the 'postmodern' books of poetry, found a better output in Cărtărescu's autofictional prose, published since 1989 in a series of ever larger volumes. The landmarks of this literary reinvention are *Nostalgia* (Cărtărescu 1992), an imbricate fantastic novel made of several interwoven novellas; the three-volume, 1500 page-long novel *Orbitor* [*Blinding*] (Cărtărescu 1996–2007), a maximalist composition attesting to the author's ambition, fusing myth, fantastic imagination, personal recollection and encyclopaedic knowledge of modern architecture, natural history, human anatomy and the like (Stancu 2018); and finally the 800-plus page novel *Solenoid* (2015), a maximalist autofiction that subverts and transforms the postmodern mannerisms of playing with narrative form, self-referentiality and metaliterary awareness still present to a certain extent in *Orbitor*, and choses to discuss an alternative life of the author, what might have been had he not become a professional writer and had instead lived an anonymous (but, it turns out, spectacularly mystical) life as a teacher in 1980s Bucharest.

Solenoid is a 'fiction of self-retrospect' (Terian 2020, 5) that plays with the verifiable details of its author's life and career (profession, literary output, family situation), preserving some of them and imagining others. The *counterfactual biography* it creates is essential in order to construct the necessary halo of ambiguity of an autofiction, where truth and invention are at least partly indiscernible. This constitutive contradiction of autofiction was voiced from the very beginning of the subgenre, when Marie Darrieussecq (1996, 369) conjured up the idea of a text which makes clear it is lying and expects to be taken for its word at the same time. Several aspects of Cărtărescu's story are undoubtedly 'true': the character's name, for instance, never uttered in the novel, but which sounds, as the head of the student literary circle notes, like a pen-name (indeed, 'Cărtărescu' in Romanian means 'man involved with books'), or the reality of the places where he grew up, Floreasca district and Ștefan cel Mare street in Bucharest, or school 86 in Colentina district, where he taught Romanian in the 1980s, even the title of his debut poem *Căderea*; other details are definitely made up, such as the multitude of supernatural encounters in the derelict factory near the school where he teaches. But not all surreal encounters are invented, as the author announced in interviews that he has been keeping a dream diary for years and some of it has been transposed as such in his novel. And this is not the only studied ambiguity of *Solenoid*. Several scenes might look like allegorical descriptions of real events—the story of the character's failed marriage, which might allude to Cărtărescu's first marriage—while others describe the more absurd aspects of life in a European socialist dictatorship, with the surreal parts looking like mere exaggerations, humorous in intent, but turning instantaneously into metaphysical parody.

Maximalist autofiction: scope, structure, mode

In discussing Cărtărescu's *Solenoid* as a maximalist autofiction we rely on Stefano Ercolino's concept of maximalist novel, first described in a 2012 article and further developed in his 2014 book *The Maximalist Novel: From Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2066*. Ercolino makes a brilliant case for including the ample, complex and energetic novels written in the last five decades into a category of their own, which may occupy the place earlier reserved to postmodernism as a device to illuminate the Jamesonian 'cultural logic of late capitalism' (Jameson 1991). But in his taxonomy, he neglected to include autofictional maximalist novels, which in our opinion are extremely relevant for the said logic, given that many of them are written in marginal cultures struggling for world recognition in the times of global capital.[4]

Alongside Cărtărescu's *Solenoid,* one may easily count as maximalist autofictions Péter Estérhazy's 800-plus pages long *Celestial Harmonies* (2005) and Karl Ove Knausgård's six-volume *My Struggle* (2012-2018), books that stem from similarly semi-peripheric countries, Hungary and Norway, respectively. Of course, in cultures seeking to work through their perceived marginality, maximalist novels may function as 'a sort of down-market synecdoche of "Culture",' as Ercolino (2012, 244) claims, thereby compensating not only for the 'diffused cognitive opacities and dramatic existential uncertainties' of our era, but also for the identity complexes of their countries (Terian 2020, 13). Maximalist autofiction, we maintain, plays well as a device for claiming recognition by those who do not have it, meaning not the authors themselves, but the cultures they feel delegated to represent. The maximalist dimension of these novels lends canonicity at home and abroad, while the autofictional dimension helps to attest the lived experience (or, in Esterházy's case, the family history) that these novels are recounting.

To summarize Ercolino's theses on maximalism, we will boil down his ten features into just three main categories, regarding scope, structure, and mode. The first, scope, is illustrated by the maximalist novels' length and encyclopaedism. The second, structure, relies on several formal and ideological parameters, among which polyphony, diegetic exuberance, 'completeness,' paranoid imagination and others, all of which are summed up by the critic under the formula 'internal dialectic,' meaning the novel's capacity to encourage entropy and at the same time to orchestrate it as revealing a secret order. This dialectic is active between the poles of 'chaos' and 'cosmos,' respectively, which implies that there is a tendency toward simultaneous construction and deconstruction in maximalist novels, a dynamic that keeps them safe from the dangers of both predictability and narrative obesity. Thirdly, the maximalist novel's dominant narrative mode is identified by Ercolino (2012, 242) as 'hybrid realism,' a formula which reconciles mimetic poetics and antirealist practices, be they parodic or downright fantastic.

We argue that maximalist autofictions generally fit the patterns described by Ercolino, but tend to partially amend them because of the formal requirements of autofiction, on the one hand, and because of the marginal position of their authors in the world culture economy, on the other hand. These corrections do not amount to invalidations of Ercolino's classification, as they only seek to make room for autofictional maximalism in his schemata. However, the emergence of maximalist autofictions in semi-peripheral cultures at about the same time that maximalism is exported from the United States to Western Europe may be seen as a strategy for cultural inclusion, whereby a new novelistic form is assumed with a notable

difference. While the maximalist novel illustrates a will for canonical construction, its autofictional versions add to literary excellence the extra-aesthetic value of 'personal truth,' which also implies the 'local' and 'historical truth' of a specific community. Autofictions from Northern and East-Central Europe (or other semi-peripheric areas of the world, for that matter) are not mere fictions of the idiosyncratic self, but are tied to a certain place and time in the world and tend to bring it with them in all literary endeavours, either maximalist or not. The obvious difficulty, which makes the concept of maximalist autofiction appear almost paradoxical, if it were not for the reality of the texts we are referring to, is given by the inherent tension between its two elements. Maximalism, by its very definition, is wide and open, not allowing itself to be constrained by any one person's memory, voice or subjectivity. For instance, Ercolino (2012, 250) considers that 'narrative omniscience' is one of the main formal parameters of the maximalist novel. If it were so, then neither Cărtărescu, nor Estérhazy or Knausgård should have anything to do with this subgenre. Therefore, by acknowledging the existence of maximalist autofiction, the restriction to an omniscient point of view would have to change. The paradox works also at the autofictional end of the discussion: if it were to stay true to its memoir-writing roots, autofiction, however subversive toward the discourse of linear memory, should not aim to diverge from the author's recollection of personal experience in the direction of an exploration of the world, history, ethics or art itself; yet this is exactly what these authors do.

In order to discuss the *scope* of maximalist autofictions, we need not only refer to their impressive length, which may have been at first only an expression of canonical ambition from the part of the authors,[5] but ended up providing a fine terrain for literary experiment. Ercolino (2012, 243) describes the amplitude of maximalist novels as encyclopaedism, understood as an exploration of a vast trove of information in the most unexpected fields of knowledge, attesting to a will for completeness and being a testament to the diversity, plurality and openness of their project. There is a similar aspiration toward vastness in maximalist autofiction, whether it is Cărtărescu's surprising competence as regards fabrics, nuances of colour, types of stone and construction material, or Knausgård's account of the physiological transformations of the dead body, or Estérhazy's stylistic prolificity. But, more than that, maximalist autofiction makes use of a memory-driven encyclopaedism that aims to fuse personal and world memory. A fitting example may be again found in Cărtărescu, whose attention to all sorts of minutiae, from the spectacular colours of the houses on a street to the names and functions of all parts of a dentist's chair, indicate the author's fascination with the diversity of the world that

his false memoir aims to capture. But this fixation on variety and vastness is not limited to technicalities borrowed from dictionaries. The novel speculates on the form of objects from 'the fourth dimension' and immerses itself imaginatively in the realm of dust mites, describes or invents biographies of actual Romanian, American or Polish personalities from the dawn of the twentieth century and invokes unreadable manuscripts holding probable descriptions of worlds parallel to ours. *Solenoid* includes encyclopaedic personal memory and alludes to other possible knowledges which lack encyclopaedias of their own, and in this way hints to completeness and remains open at the same time.

In what regards the *structure* of maximalist autofiction, it features certain deviations from the general patterns of maximalism. The form of the maximalist novel is defined by a tension between 'chaos' and 'cosmos,' openness and completeness, form and exuberance, 'choral' harmony and 'polyphonic,' deconstructive horizontality (Ercolino 2012, 250–251). All these are also present in the form of maximalist autofiction, with a particular twist indebted to the general definition of autofiction as an oscillation between 'truth' and 'falsehood' and to its kinship with the memoir genre. For instance, the dynamic integration-digression highlighted by Ercolino is reflected in the dynamic between the struggle for novelistic form and the obligation to respect, to some degree, the divergent 'truth' of personal experience. In *Solenoid*, the huge amount of biographical and historical information about Cărtărescu and the city of Bucharest in the 1980s is counterbalanced by their integration into a 'great conspiracy' narrative that in the end brings together most of the characters involved and the mysterious objects and beliefs they are attached to. The polyphony of the numerous scenes and characters in 'authentic' maximalist novels may appear lost in autofictional novels because they are inevitably constrained to using only one narrative voice (occasionally making room for limited intervention from others) and one narrative thread. Maximalism seems to become, instead of an exuberantly expanding narrative, a self-contained object rotating in place and precipitating centripetally into itself. There is another tension that is particular to maximalist autofiction even more than to other instances of the maximalist novel. This particular brand of maximalism does more than focus on the self: it promotes a *hypertrophy of the ego* to the size of the world (as in Cărtărescu), an inflation of the admissible content of biography that may reach an ample family and regional history (as in Estérhazy). The space of memory is further destabilized and reconfigured by the intervention of fiction and, even more, of the 'paranoid imagination' (Ercolino 2012, 250) specific to maximalism. The hypertrophic ego may create the impression of a monomaniacal narrative, fixated on one thing,

redundant or plainly boring. In Cărtărescu, this shortcoming is alleviated by the impressive number of elements that become involved in the 'paranoid' intrigue: persons from the character's past resurfacing with a message, mysterious objects that need to be presented and interpreted at length, strange encounters that seem to ambush the narrative and keep it in place. Therefore, there is an abundance of digressions in autofiction too, by virtue of allowing the novel to develop a particular pace that includes acceleration and deceleration. The techniques of circularity and leitmotiv, aptly revealed by Ercolino, are very important here. Cărtărescu transforms most objects that take hold of his character's memory into a haunting leitmotiv, returning to them repeatedly. At the same time, the novel's pace is given by the dominant trope of intensification, of the painful burden of memory, threatening to block the narrator's ability to write. As a plus, maximalist autofiction does not seem to have trouble with bringing things to a close and giving out the orderly impression of an organized 'cosmos.' The narrative threads that are being spun out at an impressive rate throughout the novel come together in the end: the multitude of puzzling encounters, the wonders and enigmas that occur in the first three parts of *Solenoid*, even some episodes whose importance may, at a first reading, be overlooked, come together in the fourth part and are included in the mystery race of the conspiratorial trama of the novel.

The content issues attributed by Ercolino to the maximalist novel (paranoid imagination, dominant visuality, and ethical commitment) apply very well to maximalist autofiction. The third issue is especially relevant, given that most memory writing is concerned with ethical questions, but for Cărtărescu and for other authors coming from semi-peripheral cultures it becomes even more relevant. These authors are confronted, on the one hand, with their own 'duty of memory' (Ricoeur 2006, 30) toward the past, and, on the other hand, they have to deal with an international readership which equates them inevitably with the culture they come from, and therefore they have to define themselves by processing in some way their own relationship with their home culture, its struggles, its national canons and its burden of accumulated historic guilt (Mironescu 2017, 290). Cărtărescu (2004, 59) has, in some instances, tried to distance himself from the label of 'East-European writer,' which he found limitative, but the tension between personal and symbolic identity remains and it is tackled head-on in *Solenoid*. The book is concerned with the theme of living in a dictatorship, but also with the personal hell of a thankless job and of difficult relationships. The ethical rumination triggered by these themes is even more pressing here than if it took place in a fictional novel, because of the very fact that whatever is narrated in autofiction has to be 'real' at least to some extent, and even

verifiable.[6] So one of the themes of *Solenoid*, inscribed as a pun in the name of the book, is that of solitude in the face of evil and the solidarity of the victims in their suffering.

Finally, in what regards the *mode* of maximalist novels, Ercolino (2012, 253) uses a very wide-encompassing and somewhat vague formula, 'hybrid realism,' which indeed fits all maximalist autofictions, as well as probably all ample novels starting with the late Twentieth century. But too vague a concept might not prove helpful in defining the elements of the subgenre. In *Solenoid*, realism is only a starting point for three main types of divergence, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section: hyperbole, metaphysical parody and surrealist objects. The result, in Cărtărescu's novel, is something we may call *surrealist maximalism*: a form of creative deviation from a generally realist narrative which initially takes the form of exaggeration or literary allusion, then veers into a full-fledged paranoid plot which highlights a metaphysical quest by means of surreal meetings, landscapes and objects. Sometimes Cărtărescu may use citation as a way of reclaiming kinship with the surrealists[7], when he invokes Salvador Dalì's 1946 painting *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* to describe a secluded site of fantastical interactions (Cărtărescu 2015, 520). But, more often, he projects surrealist vision on an ample scale, making time collapse or shaking the foundations of three-dimensional representations of the world. For instance, in his quest for metaphysical clarity, the hero in *Solenoid* speculates on the possibility to visualise objects that have a fourth dimension by using the three-dimensional eye, or projects himself back in time to the moment the sperm inseminated the ovule, or immerses himself into a low-level reality, that of dust mites, only to find himself relive the tragic destiny of an unrecognized and crucified infra-Christ.

Life in Romanian late socialism and how to evade it

In choosing to write a maximalist autofiction, Cărtărescu expresses a willingness to put himself into play, but he also expresses a preference to discuss identity dilemmas present in contemporary Romanian culture in relation to its past. As shown before, the premise of *Solenoid* is that, by losing, in an alternate reality, his identity as a writer, the author remains a slave to his job as a teacher and lives through the 1980s in Romania rejected and alone (the title *Sole-noid* might allude to his solitude), enduring all the suffering and humiliation that an ordinary person in a thankless job was going through at the time. As a result, the novel is filled with references to life in late socialist Romania, with long descriptions and abundant detail, invalidating *de*

facto the critics' opinion that Cărtărescu enacts a 'total rejection of the political and the social' (Ungureanu 2017, 288). Indeed, *Solenoid* not only relies on an ample political and social background, but integrates the social as a determining part of its story. It contains a layer of quasi-realist description of life in the 1980s in Romania, stressing the various ways in which the state oppressed and humiliated its citizens, and the manner in which people (teachers and students, mostly) managed to torture one another without the state's intervention. This layer often uses humour, parody, and sarcasm to illustrate the bizarre manifestations of such a society. But, in truth, this does not set Cărtărescu apart from the surrealists whose influence he absorbs in his maximalist autofiction (Ungureanu 2018, 5), since their novels (among which, primarily, André Breton's *Nadja*, 1926) employ a similar attitude toward the verifiable reality. In Breton, the various corners of interwar Paris are evoked at length, in such detail that they convey an emotional attachment, even as they are systematically 'cancelled' from believable reality in order to instate surreality in their place. In the same way, Romanian late socialism is, in *Solenoid*, the 'skin of everyday life' (Ungureanu 2017, 268) that the author/narrator seeks to pierce through. We are interested in this dimension of Cărtărescu's prose, as it contributes essentially to the formulation of a surrealist, metaphysically driven version of socialism.

The representation of late socialism in Cărtărescu has something mysterious, even before his novel veers noticeably into surrealism. On the one hand, the direct references to the official side of Romanian socialism are intentionally blurred or camouflaged. There is no mention of the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu at all; the words 'communism' and 'socialism' occur just eight times in total in 800 pages. We see here the author's intention to restrict the possibility to interpret this book as an 'anticommunist' novel, to draw the reader's attention to the concrete forms of loneliness and humiliation that someone living in the 1980s might have experienced, rather than to give in to the temptation to ideologically stigmatize an entire era as 'wrong.' The idea is not to redeem in any way the documented abjectness of many aspects of that time, but also not to condemn for partial, ideological reasons a decade which, for all its crimes, is not that different from any other historical era in terms of human alienation. There are various episodes, lyrical or essayistic in form, that convert the hardships of life in a dictatorship into symptoms of a metaphysical crisis of man in general: for instance, the description of Bucharest as a 'ruined city,' designed and built as a grandiose ruin that highlighted the decay inherent in the human condition (Cărtărescu 2015, 28). The other reason for blurring the representations of official socialism is that the author does not aspire to give an exhaustive description of Romanian late socialism, but to evoke a personal version of

it, since most of its details come from memory and from other non-standardized sources. By 'non-standardized sources' we refer to oral reports or hearsay. Since the state controlled the legal channels of information in socialist Romania, the population's tendency to use alternative sources was natural, and in this atmosphere, 'secrets,' rumours, and urban myths abounded. For instance, one heavily documented fact is that, following the state ban on abortions in 1968, the school population grew exponentially and the number of teachers and classes had to increase accordingly. But there are no official records regarding, for instance, the punishments given to schoolgirls for wearing skirts that were too short, or regarding the exact quantities of scrap paper brought to school by each student for 'recycling campaigns,' and this is why Cărtărescu feels entitled to exaggerate to fantastic proportions these numbers and transform them into a crucial device in the 'paranoid' plot he constructs. His exaggerations and the significance that can be given them highlights the author's engagement with the issues of memory and memory politics in East-Central Europe today.

There are three main ways in which Cărtărescu deals with the representation of late socialism, all of them part of the autofictional process by which self-narrative is confiscated by the fantastic. In dealing with the legacy of the 1980s, Cărtărescu employs a strategy of fictionalization through *hyperbole*, *metaphysical parody*, and, as we have already mentioned, *surrealist objects*. The first step in his strategy is *hyperbole*, exaggeration, the projection of mundane details of ordinary lives as larger-than-life attributes of an emerging mythology. What in most accounts of 1980s Romania appears as precarious, unpleasant or just plain ugly becomes, in *Solenoid*, horrible, repelling, and abysmal. Ugliness becomes ominous through proliferation, and this happens repeatedly in the novel. For instance, schools are teeming with throngs of pupils in myriads of classes hidden along contorted school halls and identified with succeeding letters from various alphabets (Latin, Greek, Hebrew, plus several other, unknown ones, Cărtărescu quips) (Cărtărescu 2015, 56). When the children have to bring scrap paper, used bottles and other materials to school in large quantities for 'recycling week,' the building has to be abandoned for long periods of time, as it becomes impracticable (Cărtărescu 2015, 654). On the walls of the school hang photographs of ever-changing cultural personalities: they are Romanian at the beginning of the book, then they become Bulgarian, Hungarian, Ukrainian, Montenegrin, Latvian, Estonian, Uzbek (all of them nations under communist rule at the time) and so on. In doing this, the amused, forgetful narrator, of course, derides the educational reinforcement of national canons, as well as the aspirations of small cultures who long for recognition, but in their efforts for greatness become all the

more similar, practically interchangeable. The school itself is vast and tentacular, its halls stretching mysteriously into the unknown. Its library is in the basement and it also operates as detention room (Cărtărescu 2015, 61). There is also a school dental clinic, and apparently in every building in Bucharest—even in the city morgue— there are rooms filled with dentist's chairs waiting for patients. Bucharest itself is a ruin, replete with haunting edifices that are either too old, beyond repair, probably as a result of the political masters' lack of interest in the monuments of the preceding regime, or an expression of malfunctioning industries in late socialism. More than once, on top of derelict buildings, trees have started to grow from seeds carried by the wind. The quantitative accumulation often becomes grotesque. As every dental clinic in Bucharest is filled with patients waiting for a terrifying intervention, they look like inmates in prisons waiting for the imminent execution of a punishment (Cărtărescu 2015, 263). Also, because school children rip the tags with their matriculation number off their uniform sleeves, the state decrees that the numbers shall be tattooed on the children's arms (Cărtărescu 2015, 61), which inevitably evokes the infamous tattooed serial numbers of Holocaust victims. Hyperbole illustrates the author's genuine drive toward maximalism (or the appetite for a 'planetary imagination,' in Christian Moraru's (2015, 112) reading), but it also serves to give indirect expression to the author's antitotalitarian politics.

The second step in Cărtărescu's strategy of representing late socialism is *metaphysical parody*. The hyperbolic description of Bucharest in the 1980s has hilarious, but also unsettling effects. That is because of the use of parody, a literary technique that relies on turning recognizable literary patterns on their head. Since this literary technique has 'a hermeneutic function with both cultural and even ideological implications' (Hutcheon 2000, 2), it is to be expected that parody in *Solenoid* will have a political dimension, which is probably more important than the literary one. Underlying the comic intent of exaggerated descriptions of social phenomena, there are intimations of a 'higher' reality, which ultimately prevail. This happens in many instances that have something to do with the spiritual, mystical side of things, which may appear inappropriate in a socialist country with an official atheist agenda. In Cărtărescu's description, not very different from our personal experience, the Eighties were a time of popular, although not necessarily religious, mysticism resulting, probably, from the suppression of the open profession of religion and from the confiscation of the scientific discourse by the ideology of socialist progress, which seemed to invalidate at least in part the explanatory value of science. This is why the teachers at school 86 in his novel are devoted to ever changing, ridiculous rituals prescribed by various Russian or Czech doctors for all

kinds of conditions, from cancer to melancholy, by ingesting mud or some form of self-regenerating algae (Cărtărescu 2015, 62). And this is also why religious 'sects' are described as thriving in subterranean activities that are absurdly perceived by the state as a threat to its existence and are therefore persecuted. Cărtărescu focuses on the 'picketists,' a 'sect' whose adherents picket the institutions that deal in suffering (hospitals, morgues, cemeteries, prisons, police stations) and hold up signs protesting against pain and death (Cărtărescu 2015, 183). While the presentation of the 'picketists' has some humorous aspects (for instance, people believe the cult members have power over insects, probably because of an apparent etymological kinship between 'sect' and 'insect'), the group will illustrate an important theme in the novel, that of metaphysical protest. Manifestations of mysticism in *Solenoid* are subverting other, more mundane activities, often connected to ideological practice. For instance, a teacher initiates an amateur circle of 'scientific atheism' which, apart from lampooning a literal reading of the Bible, has a 'practical' part: a contest in which the participants compete to precision-spit on an old, beautiful icon of the Virgin Mary with the Child (Cărtărescu 2015, 243). Although the children are engrossed in the act of profanation, the care with which, after the end of the session, they clean up the icon, carry it gently to the teacher's car and store it away until the next atheism class indicates a certain kind of paradoxical religious fervour. The same can be said of the episode which shows schoolchildren queuing up in front of the school nurse to receive their obligatory vaccine in the shape of drops of syrup on a sugar cube, with the nurse murmuring something to each of the students as they come before her (Cărtărescu 2015, 123). It is a clear allusion to the ritual of the Eucharist, a parody which in fact serves not to lampoon Christian ritual, but to attribute involuntary metaphysical implications to banal scenes of school life in socialism. The same parodic twist can be detected in the detail that the sponge for wiping the blackboard clean in a classroom is soaked in vinegar, calling to mind the vinegar-soaked Holy Sponge offered to Jesus on the cross in the Gospels (Cărtărescu 2015, 699). We believe that the Biblical allusions in *Solenoid* are not testament to a particularly religious devotion of the author or the heroes, but a form of metaphysical parody of mundane situations, made to evoke exemplary religious stories and therefore to allude to a transcendental reality.

The third manner in which late socialism is presented creatively is through the use of *surrealist objects*. Ungureanu describes various artefacts present in *Solenoid* as 'surrealist objects' that enable the artist to 'prophesy his future' (Ungureanu 2017, 8) and to play with time and history, thereby proving his essential creative calling as an inventor of worlds. While we acknowledge the heavy surrealist influence in

Cărtărescu's writing and the unmistakable provenance of some of his representations of *impossibilia*, of objects hard to represent visually, the objects we describe here are different in two ways from the canonical definition. Firstly, they are not 'non-utilitarian'; secondly, they indicate eloquently their cultural and temporal frame of existence in the 1980s societies of the Eastern Block. In Cărtărescu's writings, the metaphysical aura of surrealism gains a more mundane dimension when referring to the plural socio-political worlds people live in, and especially to the plural worlds of consumer goods people strive to live in simultaneously even in totalitarian, closed societies. We insist on the spatial and concrete dimensii of these objects, because, however fantastic they may appear sometimes, they belong to a place and a time, late socialist Romania, that they illustrate and define, just as they (attempt to) transcend them. One such object is a Burda fashion catalogue, a treasured artefact for women behind the Iron Curtain, offering styles of dresses, of furniture, of living. The novel repeatedly describes the German magazine catalogue as something otherworldly, an object that comes from another dimension, superior to the socialist block, one that invites East Europeans to dare to dream of leaving this world for a life of bliss in superior spheres (Cărtărescu 2015, 179). Of course, the presentation is ironic and it is addressed mostly to the Bovaric mentality of socialist fashionistas, but irony in Cărtărescu has a way of turning metaphysical. Another surrealist object is the Rubik's cube. It was invented in the 1970s by Hungarian architect Ernö Rubik and, as such, it is very much a late socialist object, even though its fame became universal. In *Solenoid*, it is presented as an almost accurate three-dimensional representation of how objects in the fourth dimension might be perceived, and therefore it suggests a way of transcending reality by intellectual means, a fervent aspiration of the book's hero (Cărtărescu 2015, 469). In our opinion, it is striking that the best way to visualise four-dimensional objects in Cărtărescu's novel is a trivial toy, invented within the confines of the Iron Curtain and omnipresent in the rather drab world of socialist entertainment. A downright magical object is the fine blue vase that a girl brings to school during recycling week, in her desire to meet the absurdly high quota of used bottles demanded of every student:

> Într-o asemenea grămadă de cioburi verzi și cafenii, ce-și întăreau stropii de lumină din concavitățile lor reflectându-se unele-n altele, am perceput deodată o pâlpâire albastră. Mi-am amintit de-un poem și am avut, brusc, viziunea unui gât de păun, albastru metalic: sub grămada de imagini sfărâmate era îngropat un păun, încă viu poate, care mă aștepta să-l eliberez, să-l trag afară de sub sticlele de ulei și borcanele de compot, să-l mângâi pe aripile gingașe, să-i ating cu degetele

pleoapele roze ce se ridicau să-i acopere ochii, să-l văd cum își înfoaie deodată coada fantastică, făcând-o să ardă în dreptunghiurile de aur topit de pe dalele de piatră și să-și topească ochii colorați ai penelor în penumbră. (…) M-am lăsat pe vine în fața mormanului de sticle și borcane și-am atins, sfios, lujerul albăstrui. Am simțit un fior în degete: obiectul nu părea din lumea asta. L-am tras afară și curând m-am ridicat în picioare ținând în palme un vas pe care-am încercat, acolo, pe loc, să-l descriu pentru mine însumi și n-am reușit. Amfora albastră, translucidă în lumină, nu era amforă, nici vreun alt fel de vas cunoscut sau posibil în lumea noastră. Era, de fapt, incognoscibil și indescriptibil. (Cărtărescu 2015, 658–659)

[In such a heap of green and brown debris, which enhanced their liquid light by reflecting their concavities in one another, I suddenly glimpsed a blue hue. I remembered a poem and I abruptly had the vision of a metallic blue peacock's neck; under the pile of broken images a peacock was buried, maybe still alive, waiting for me to release it, to pull it from under the bottles of oil and jars of sauce, to caress its tender wings, to touch with the tips of my fingers its rosy eyelids, raising up to shyly cover its eyes, to see it quickly display its fantastic tail, making it burn in the golden rectangles of the stone below and melt into shadow the coloured eyes on its feathers. [...] I squatted in front of the pile of bottles and jars and I timidly touched the blue stalk. My fingers awoke with the thrill: the object didn't seem to come from our world. I pulled it out and then I stood up, holding in my palm a vessel which I tried to describe to myself right then and there and couldn't. The blue amphora, translucid in the light, was not an amphora, or any other known or possible vessel from our world. It was, in fact, unknowable and indescribable.]

It turns out that the blue vase is not only arrestingly beautiful, but also endowed with surreal powers, as it is a gift from a mysterious underworld that supplies the schoolgirl with delicate, amazing, inexplicable objects. This is a surrealist object in the etymological sense, as it may be used to have small beings, such as insects, travel to another dimension; at the same time, it is a 'transparent' and 'non-utilitarian' surrealist object just like the ones visualised by Breton and Dalì (Ungureanu 2017, 7). However beautifully described, the blue vase recalls to mind the abundance of serial glass or porcelain ornaments that filled the shelves of decoration shops in late socialism and the memory of its survivors, usually derided for their universalizing, low-level bad taste. It seems that, for Cărtărescu, daily life in 1980s Romania was

brimming with transcendental envoys, with mementos of the proximity of the miraculous and warnings for the necessity to escape. The modest, lowly origin of these metaphysical mementos is an additional guarantee for the availability of hope, even in such dire conditions. The supreme surrealist object is the solenoid, featuring in the title of the book and as a key to the fantastic story of the novel. It is an electromagnet used for all sorts of industrial tasks, well suited to express Romanian socialism's ideologically motivated enthusiasm for heavy industrialization. There are seven solenoids hidden beneath selected places in Bucharest and they mark the outline of a territory that will be raptured, lifted to the heavens in the last pages of the novel (Cărtărescu 2015, 815), as a proof that all the signs and gateways to another dimension were real, that a metaphysical sphere, a predestination, a great master plan indeed exist.

Conclusion

In closing, we have to wonder whether there is a reason why all the surrealist objects, all the metaphysical parodies and the hyperboles in *Solenoid* deal with the reality of late socialist Romania, other than the fact that the author happened to be Romanian and his youth coincided with the Eighties? There must be, since Cărtărescu could have written an autofiction starting from any other moment in his biography, without emphasizing primarily the first half of his life, but since he did, this option becomes telling in itself. In this article, we elaborated the concept of maximalist autofiction to explain how a personal life narrative is given larger significance through fictionalization, while the more unbelievable aspects of the story are seen as illuminating, either ironically or allegorically, the author's biography. We chose to read *Solenoid* as a mega-narrative of late socialism that makes use of enhanced, conspiratorial and fantastic representations of ordinary life in those times, but at the same time drops hints at the mundane, trivial origin of all these surreal phenomena. By making all fantastic encounters originate in everyday reality, the author allows the individual the possibility to think up a way of escaping an unbearable situation. In the novel, Cărtărescu seeks an escape by projecting himself counterfactually in the miserable life of a secondary teacher in 1980s Bucharest (which he indeed was, for almost a decade) who has failed as a writer (which he decidedly had not) and insistently claims that he wants to go beyond aesthetic play, and that the 'truth' of his experience is superior to the personal gratification of literary success. Living in a cultural space that is so evidently enclosed and isolated such as Romania in late socialism, when all the illusions of early communism had gone and the material,

moral and intellectual failure of the regime were visible in daily life, represents an unexpected advantage. Poverty, humiliation and oppression keep the person in that situation alert to the necessity of finding an efficient escape, one that will not offer him or her a mere alleviation of the oppression, but 'true' absolution. Because, the reasoning goes, in metaphysical terms, every individual is marginal, every space is peripheral if we refer to a spiritual dimension that transcends all. Cărtărescu's maximalist autofiction is therefore a tool that enables him to narrate late socialism in a manner that does not dwell too much on Cold War dichotomies and postsocialist frustrations, going beyond the narrative patterns of trauma and nostalgia and describing a metaphysical version of the 1980s.

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About the Authors

Doris Mironescu, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the Department of Romanian Studies of "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi, and a senior researcher with the "A. Philippide" Institute of the Romanian Academy. He has studied modernist literature in its interconnections with cultural modernity, wrote a critical biography of M. Blecher, *Viata lui M. Blecher: Impotriva biografiei* (Humanitas, 2018), and edited this modernist Romanian-Jewish writer's work. He teaches and writes on 19th century Romanticism, literary practices of memory and aesthetic nationalism.
E-mail: dorismironescu@yahoo.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2241-5971

Andreea Mironescu, PhD, is a Senior Researcher at the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Department within the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași. Her domains of interest are Romanian modern and contemporary literature, postcommunism, and cultural memory. Her current research deals with the novel of memory and in particular with its Romanian embodiments both during and after the fall of communism. Her recent publications include 'Post-memory: The Labour of Critical Remembrance after Communism,' in Christian Moraru, Andrei Terian, Alexandru Matei (eds.), *Theory in the "Post" Era: A Vocabulary for the 21st-Century Conceptual Commons*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2021.
E-mail: andreea.mironescu@uaic.ro
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9454-8792

Notes

[1] Translations from Romanian are made by the authors.

[2] In a recent analysis of *Solenoid*, Terian (2020, 2) argues for 'its simultaneous branding as maximalist novel, autofictional work, and late-career novel,' with a focus on Cărtărescu's narrative rewriting of his own career.

[3] In fact, in 2020, Cărtărescu published a book of poetry, after almost three decades of poetic pause, *Nu striga niciodată ajutor* [*Never Call for Help*]. The publication is self-avowedly singular, as it conveys an 'interior scream,' the echo of a seemingly health-related personal crisis that justifies the stylistic difference from the author's erstwhile poetry. In our opinion, this volume does not alter at all the conclusions reached in this article.

[4] It must be said that, in critical accounts of the postmodern novel, the autobiographical/autofictional dimension has often been overlooked. Some authors reacted to the excessively restrictive frame of reference of what Linda Hutcheon called 'historiographic metafiction,' pleading for the inclusion of 'biographic(al) metafiction' (Gratton, quoted in Gudmundsdóttir 2003, 245).

[5] Cărtărescu stated in an interview about his 1996 novel *Orbitor* that he wanted to write a novel so thick that the entire title would fit horizontally across the book's spine.

[6] Cărtărescu's account of life as a teacher in 1980s Bucharest and at least some of the vivid and haunting dreams he narrates in *Solenoid* seem to have been experienced first hand. But the verifiable part of his autobiography is still very small if we compare it to Knausgård's sometimes scandalously intimate family narratives, which led, in some cases, to the public outrage of his relatives, or to Estérhazy's family history, which, at least in some of its episodes, has the notoriety of national history taught in secondary schools.

[7] The numerous actual and possible literary interrelations between Cărtărescu, the surrealists and, more generally, the surrealist 'planet' were extensively studied by Ungureanu (2018).