

**Indisciplined Literature:
Aesthetics and Critique after the Waning of Affect**

There is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for
Everyone and No One*.

Europe is shaped like my brain.

—Mircea Cărtărescu, *Pururi tânăr, înfășurat în pixeli* (Forever
Young, Wrapped in Pixels)

Instead of upholding territorial sovereignty and enforcing a regime of simultaneity, literature, in my view, unsettles both. It holds out to its readers dimensions of space and time so far-flung and so deeply recessional that they can never be made to coincide with the synchronic plane of the geopolitical map.

—Wai Chee Dimock, “Literature for the Planet”

I must say I have never been much taken with Fredric Jameson’s notion of the “affectless” postmodern, and I have not bought as enthusiastically as others have into his broader definition of postmodernism either.¹ I must also admit, however, that two, possibly correlated developments in post-Cold War U. S. culture and theory seem to corroborate his “waning of affect” argument about postmodernism. The first is, if a bit on the ironic side, the vanishing act of the postmodern itself. Of course, the case for a “post-postmodernism” of sorts has been variously made, especially in North America, Australia, and Great Britain.² I have made it

myself too, and so I will not rehearse it here.³ I will only repeat that, as far as I am concerned, we are, indeed, currently witnessing a transition out of the postmodern paradigm. This does not necessarily mean that postmodernism is dead. It simply means, to me at least, that it is unhurriedly fading away. It is, in any case, no longer the cultural dominant, the cutting-edge discourse formation it arguably was forty years ago but a self-recycling, agonal kind of discourse, a Pynchonian “bleeding edge” slowly soaking into an incrementally different cultural backdrop—the late-global world of the post-1989 era.⁴

The second thing that happened around the same time is what Aaron Chandler, Ruth Leys, Patricia T. Clough, and others have aptly called “the affective turn.” From within critical theory, this shift ended up giving aesthetics—a certain kind of aesthetics, as I will explain a bit later—an unexpected new lease on life. For all intents and purposes, the affective turn is an aesthetic turn, so much so that what we are talking about is an emerging “aesthetics of affect,” as critics from Simon O’Sullivan to Charles Altieri describe it in their books and articles. These works amount to a mountainous scholarship already. What interests me within the new way of understanding and doing aesthetics is situated, roughly speaking, on the margins of this critical-aesthetic model. But what these margins forefront is the model’s *geopolitical*, *worldly* application or relevance, one that does not overlook but reaches beyond, or rather across, the individual and his or her body, the personal, the intimate, the private, the idiosyncratic, and the local. In that, such concerns with and inside the aesthetics of affect may not be peripheral at all. At any rate, they allow me to paint, in broad brushstrokes, a picture of the field and its players.

This is, in fact, what I want to do for the first half of this article so as to set up the discussion in the second part. The latter will consist in drawing out some of the methodological and disciplinary implications of the rising aesthetics, more exactly, of its philosophical

underpinnings for dealing effectively with 21st-century literature in the U. S. and elsewhere in the world—with a literature, namely, that is more and more *of the world* and *of this world's global present*. Finally, as I will propose in dialogue with the fiction of one of the most important East European writers to emerge in decades, Mircea Cărtărescu, such dealings must come to grips with a literary output whose makeup, production, circulation, and reception are increasingly short-shrifted by their “cubicular” study, that is, by the analytic and political “disciplining” and territorialization of literature within traditional disciplines, departments, and their national-territorialist—still intimidatingly, not to say terroristically, territorial, turf-bounded—epistemologies.

Now, to “historicize” it a bit by picking up on this very notion of territory and fief, the affective turn is, in a sense, a post-Cold War era hallmark insofar as the large quantity of theory this reorientation has yielded boils down essentially to a multiple, symbolic as well as literal, *reinscription of the body, and of the human therewith, into the world*. This is a mundane reinsertion of our sentient corporeality against, over, and astride the world’s boundaries and borders. What I mean by these is whatever frontiers, divides, and logical-cognitive distinctions and decoupling protocols had been deployed philosophically, aesthetically, geopolitically, economically, militarily, demographically—Cartesianism, transcendental aesthetics, Orientalism, Platonic mimesis and the entire discourse of representation, the former Eastern bloc, this or that “pact,” “alliance,” “treaty,” or “wall”—between body and mind, between, on one side, this body over here and its “hereness,” and, on the other side, other bodies and their places, then between the same body and its various incorporations at different junctures in history, between individual bodies and the body politic, between polity X and polity Y, between corporeal entities and their environment, and so forth. In my work, I have tackled this post-schizoid ontology, this

Heideggerian *Weltung* or “worlding” of the body and of the world of bodies as a cultural phenomenology of relatedness, and I have also argued that the fall of the Berlin Wall marks if not the absolute onset of world relationality, then at least its unprecedented heightening in the U. S. and around the globe. For, it seems to me, being-in-relation, whether we like it or not, is what defines us and our world now. Notably, this relation need not be of an affective kind (of empathy or care, for instance) or a good one, (e.g., of cooperation).

Nor does it have to be an intimate relationship, as Philip Roth hints in his 1961 novel *Letting Go*. At the height of the Cold War confrontation, Roth speaks directly to the era’s geopolitical bearings on the private, the emotional, and their expression; one might say that he is, as great artists often are, onto something here, to wit, onto a certain Cold War world configuration of what Lauren Berlant describes as “affectsphere” (2011, 69). A character of his book actually complains that nobody can love anybody anymore because “we are all of us living in the shadow of the Bomb” and its consequences: “emotional anarchy, separation, a withdrawal of people from people. A kind of moral isolationism” (Roth 429). To be sure, this feeling of “feelinglessness” flies in the face of New Age “free love” and the like. More notably, and way ahead of the “affective turn” and, subsequently, of the recent inquiries into the “geopolitics of emotions” and the interplay of the ideological and the emotional during and after the Cold War, the feeling underscores that individual affect and its representation are colored by the world-as-world, or, differently put, that people’s emotional “withdrawal” from other people is articulated with, if not utterly touched off, by the forced, “politicized” separation of *peoples from peoples*: the love affair with the Bomb has, in other words, profoundly alienating if not *geoalienating* upshots insofar as it tends to map private affairs onto world affairs, or something like that.⁵ I might add that Roth is not alone in his insight. Pynchon, John Updike, Robert Coover, and Don

DeLillo “feel” the same throughout their work. Likewise, Ian McEwan has a character of his 2012 Cold War novel *Sweet Tooth* dismiss as a “monstrous solipsism” the temptation to “broo[d] about a stranger who caressed [her] palm with his thumb” while “[C]ivilization [is being] threatened by nuclear war” (191).

I will come back to these instructive homologies later. For now, I would like to call attention to the steadily rising emphasis on feeling, emotion, passion, and on being “moved” in scholarship. It is not that writers, or critics for that matter, are for the first time dwelling on how sentiments are *represented*. Incidentally, representation itself is not the issue, or not the ultimate issue. If this were the case, we would be back to mimesis via expression and to M. H. Abrams, more generally to representation as “content” and to what Altieri calls “thematic allegorizing” in his 2003 book *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (33). Here, he does not set out to revisit “sentimental” literature, for example, a genre like romance. This had been done by feminists, with Janice Radway a name that comes to mind first. Instead, he wants to *rescue emotions from their thematization, from cognitive-ideological control*—from being “disciplined” by the critic’s rationalizing methodology or, worse, by his or her politics, including gender-inflicted agendas. As is well-known, the feminine, the emotional—the emotional as a presumed symptom of irrationality—and, most notably, the corporeal as a medium thereof have been tightly intertwined and even equated in a number of androcentric traditions. Therefore, a dominant impulse of classical feminism has been to pry them apart. In a less mainstream feminist vein, Altieri is drawn to the phenomenology of affect in poetry and painting because he seeks to “loca[te] value beyond the cognitive” (20), that is, beyond belief as “represented” in the arts and valued by critics to the extent said concept, thought, or truth matches, or is made out to match, or does not fit, or clashes with their own beliefs. Altieri is a self-professed anti-utilitarian, and,

needless to say, this is not something new either. What is refreshing, and in some cases even groundbreaking with critics like Altieri himself, with Lauren Berlant, Sianne Ngai, Sara Ahmed, Teresa Brennan, Kathleen Stewart, Cari M. Carpenter, with earlier thinkers and theorists such as Martha Nussbaum and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and with books like *Cruel Optimism* and *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Berlant, 2011 and 2007), *Ordinary Affects* (Stewart, 2007), *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Ahmed, 2004), and *Ugly Feelings* and *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Ngai, 2007 and 2012) can be understood, largely speaking, as a reaction against the *disembodied rationality* still reigning supreme across a range of epistemologies in the humanities. Over time, the reaction has evolved into a very loose and shifty critical model whose main tenets, features, foci, and concerns can be summarized as follows:

i. This model is quintessentially aesthetic in that it marks a surprising return to Ancient Greek *aesthēsis* and its combined meanings: “sensation,” “perception,” “feeling,” “sense,” as well as “knowledge” and “consciousness.”

ii. Knowledge is embodied knowledge, situated in the body and brought forth by passions, by what a body “goes through.”

iii. If this is true, the Cartesian mind-body, cogito-passion distinction/hierarchy and everything deriving from it no longer hold sway as it used to.

iv. This is another way of saying that affect is “instructive” in and of itself. Affect constitutes cognition by other means, the cognitive beyond cognition, as Altieri argues. Therefore, it need not be “translated,” taken to the bank of rationality and cashed out as explanatory concepts in order for it to mean something, to be *worth* something. Affects *are*

“value judgments,” but affects are non-judgmental judgments, so to speak, axiological practices or practical, bodily axiologies that decline to take up the traditionally rational-cogitative form.

v. Here, I think two directions in the aesthetics of affect become noticeable. On the one hand, people like Altieri approach emotion as opaque, utterly immanent, unrationalizable, for, he claims, it does not illuminate a “more general condition” (244).

vi. On the other hand, a more Marxian strain in this orientation—Berlant, Ahmed, and Ngai for example—does look at affect as a symptom of a socioeconomic condition bound up with certain forms of modern and late capitalism and embedded in the everyday, in its material high- and low-brow culture, in humble objects and quotidian practices. In this line of thought, one can still say in the same sentence “affect” and “critique”—including critique of commodity culture, of things as possessions, tools, instruments, prostheses and accessories of the self-privileged human subject.

vii. Either way, the point is less what our emotions stand for, what they signify according to a traditional, impatient, psychologizing semiotics eager to assign a signified to a signifier; the point now becomes more what emotions *do*. The point, less semiotic, less mimetic, less psychological, less expressivist, is what affects accomplish; what they preform textually and readerly, affectively; the kind of *motions* they take the work and their readers through; how they *move* and by the same token fashion, *make* the text and the public as the work becomes what it is and works on its audience.

viii. Spinoza redivivus? Most certainly. The most significant thinker for affect and for affective aesthetics is Spinoza. Kant is dead; long live Spinoza!—or something like that. The mandatory reference is his *Ethics*, especially Book III, where *affectus*, as opposed to *affectio* (dealt with in Book I), is defined as a “move” of a body from one state to another under various

transforming (“affecting”) stimuli or “actions” that impact on a body’s inherent *conatus essendi* (70-71).

ix. If Spinoza is the classical place, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are those who, through Nietzsche, gave Spinoza pride of place in recent conversations around art and affect. *Affection* is a body state (and a nation-state also, as we shall see momentarily); *affectus* is the passage from one *affectio* to another: a change, a transformation, an in-betweenness, not a well-contoured domain but a throbbing fuzziness, a passing and an eventful occurrence, an *event*, as the two philosophers keep stressing throughout their work.

x. This is probably the most important principle for an aesthetics that also wants to be an ethics, and even a politics, an *intervention*, with it: art, affectively and therefore *effectively* understood, is political not because one can, and oftentimes does, “politicize” it nor because it carries a political theme, an agenda. It is political because it makes for that kind of discourse, for that place, where affect as event holds out the possibility of becoming and change, where the artist draws previously unavailable trajectories of bodies and worlds moving from one place, state, or mode to and into another. But these new routes, states, spaces, and modalities are *not* external to the world. They are immanent to it. One need not “transcend” the world, or the bodies in it, or these bodies’ affects to get where an alternative to the present, the present state, or status quo lies, and that is because *affects are always embodied*. They represent substance between its various states. They are matter in its changing form, “moments of intensity” as Brian Massumi and O’Sullivan insist (126), hard to pin down and name, fluidities rather than marked-off junctures, to the point that a critic like Ngai attends to affects such as “stuplimity” (2007, 5). Apropos of this inexistent word: Massumi specifies that because affects are a- and counter-structural in nature, flows between states rather than discrete states, the vocabularies of structure

and structuralism, of difference and deconstruction or poststructuralism, of signs and semiotics, of the Symbolic and psychoanalysis, and ultimately all vocabularies, all attempts to represent *and* unrepresent, to capture representation *and* to deconstruct it, are bound to fall short.⁶

Naturally, this makes it pretty hard to talk about them, to read them at all; it is not just that affects fall in-between extant terminologies or that the new aesthetics spreads its wings far beyond “beauty,” which is no longer the unique yardstick or aesthetic measurement, as it still was, by the way, in the modernist aesthetic of “ugliness.”

So, it seems, on the one hand Deleuze and Guattari—and other theorists of the event like Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Rancière, or the inevitable Slavoj Žižek—*dignify* art in the extreme; after all, the most intriguing pronouncements on aesthetic matters have come of late from this direction, and with them a whole new High-Theory wave. On the other hand, these thinkers make it difficult—Deleuze and Guattari in particular—to show analytically exactly how art operates as event, how, *more than anything else in this world*, it both makes the possible possible and stages, performs, or enacts change. Because, while affect declines to “mean,” to lend itself to thematization, to rationalization into something straight away, it does do something by acting something out.

This something comes down to the production of alterity. In fact, as Deleuze and Guattari maintain in their book *What Is Philosophy?*, the manufacturing of otherness, *heterogenesis*, if you will, is precisely art’s department. Aesthetically—affectively, etymologically speaking—art’s scope extends far beyond the aesthetic, the classical aesthetic, that is, into precincts from cooking and fashion to texting and sexting to make a difference in the world by *affording the different itself*, and that is because affect brims over the individual, the psychological, and even the human itself. As we are “affected” and go through “states” and the motions leading through

and across them like Melville's Ahab, says Deleuze famously, we may become whale or have access to a *transforming intensity of being* describable as becoming-whale or becoming-stone. This is a deterritorialization-with-reterritorialization of our being or state that renders visible the altering and othering forces crossing us, relating us to other humans and cultures but also to animals, things, and entities outside the anthropological and over and against our anthropocentrism, humanism, and disciplinary habits thereof, connecting us and forging, for us, a connection to the world. As noted earlier, affect rewrites the human back into a worldly continuum from which the rational/irrational, cogitative/emotional, intellectual/corporeal, human/inhuman, animate/inanimate, and other similar antinomies had, ironically enough, cast it out.

Simultaneous to working us back into the world, the projection of otherness in this world—a full-blown *aesthetic* phenomenology—is the ultimate event. An “eventogenic” site, art is also an event, or *the* event itself, and so no longer just an object, or a representation, let alone a pastime. When Altieri “reads” the William Carlos Williams poem “The Young Housewife,” one does not learn from his reading what one would from regular commentaries but rather joins the poem's emotionally transformative flow of fleeting “momentariness” carrying with it both scenery and people and assigning them pulsating contours, mutating bodies, and glorious flickers on Dasein's radar without substituting rationalizations for them (235).

This is a bit too elusive for my money, though. True, Altieri deals with poetry, and a very elusive kind of poetry at that. I am primarily interested in narrative, fiction, to be more precise, and I think that genre does make a difference in terms of specifically encoding or stabilizing a little, if you will, the Nietzschean play of affective forces. *Narrative itself is, to me, an event*; its reading can be, therefore, multiply eventful. What a story carries out is a diegetic articulation of

eventuality *and* a formal protocol of eventfulness, a becoming rite that must be taken into account as such. If, as O’Sullivan quotes Badiou, “at stake in art” as an “event site” (127) is what art as site or place does in and to the temporal-spatial registers as affect transforms history and place, time and space themselves, then I think there is a modicum of hope for the sticklers for details in the sense that the altering or switching *affected* by affect in us and in the world can be attended to with some clarity.

The reader may have guessed already: I am going for a bit of tactical “literalization” of the Deleuze and Guattari’s rhetoric of territorialization. This is a perfectly legitimate move, as far as I am concerned. The philosophers themselves make it frequently, when, in *What Is Philosophy?*, they talk about territory as terrain and about philosophy’s “grounding”—philosophy as *geophilosophy* (95). In particular, what interests me is the de- and re-territorialization of the body and of its multisided *é/États*, of its state (status or situation), nation-state, and world, of the *body as and in the world*, which territorial realignments an affect-driven imagination accomplishes, thereby bringing aesthetics, as *geoaesthetics*, so close to philosophy. Of course, with this disciplinary proximity we are back to territory and the vexing issue of the map, with it: if some critics talk about literature as “cognitive mapping,” Deleuzian and Guattarians like O’Sullivan gesture toward an *affective mapping* or, better still, *remapping* of the world as we know it. This is an aesthetic cartography of sorts in which the prose writer I want to briefly turn to reimagines place, the body, and the world by aggressively de- and –re-territorializing inside and outside, here and there, local and global, national and transnational, and so forth. With this kind of art, which alternates microscopic and telescoping mappings, surveys, and snapshots of being, we begin to see (*and* “get a feeling” of) the Deleuzian molecular behind the molar; of the rhizomic underneath and across the limit, the category, the conventional,

the neatly structured, categorized, disciplined, and territorialized; of the outside inside the inside and vice versa; of the body in the world and the world in the body; of the macro in the micro and the other way around; of the nation in the world and the world in the nation—all of them “quilting points” and points of passage, lines of flight to and across each other, and more.

My writer is Mircea Cărtărescu. Why? Cărtărescu is not only one of the most notable contemporary writers of Eastern Europe—and of Europe generally, I would argue—but also one of the greatest “corpo-realists” of our time and one of the most “Deleuzian-Guattarian” writers I can think of. The driving force of his whole *oeuvre* is affect—affect, the bodily becoming, and the embodiment it variously warrants, the butterfly, the metamorphic paragon, the butterfly *and* the spider, the self and the other back and forth into each other’s place and body, the body and its environment, the visitors’ bodies in the Bucharest subterranean museum and the cathedral in the underground body, the boy, the girl, the hermaphrodite, and the one as the other, the protagonist and its twin, and so on, for thousands of pages. What these pages convey and enact is a transformation as aesthetic, or affective, as critical and political—or perhaps “geopolitical,” or, even better still, geopolitical and geoaesthetic simultaneously.

In *Nostalgia*, for instance, the dreamwork politics of the urban imaginary, the world-relational toposophy goes head-on against officially upheld “tradition,” an exceptionalist-solipsistic notion redolent of the early 20th-century, agrarian-Orthodox and nationalist-chauvinist doctrines on which the Communist Party was falling back in the late 1980s.⁷ The novel symbolically liberates Bucharest’s bodies *and* body politic by linking it with other urban bodies and bodies of work, with other places, *topoi*, styles, texts, and contexts. An *other* to the city and its officially sanctioned corporeality thus coalesces beyond the closed-off self, community, and place, an other into whose capaciously agglutinating texture *Nostalgia*’s main first-person

narrator weaves himself and his kin. The weaving spider is, in effect, Cărtărescu's signature *mise en abyme*. A motif *in* the story, it also designates, metafictionally, the novel's multiply intertextual fabric and, inside it, the web of Kabbalah-like copulas between stages and layers of existence where the individual brain and its perception instruments are plugged into other bodies, brains, and their projections into other worlds and the worlds behind those, *ad infinitum*. As in one of the novel's sections, the narrating writer-in-the-novel plays the spider sliding up and down the threads of various plot lines. He gets in and out of his *dramatis personae*'s minds, transforming into his characters while telling us about their own changes into others. At the same time, he shows how the phylogeny of these becomings (another Cărtărescu trademark) rehearses cosmic ontogeny—cosmology—by recapitulating a whole *cosmallogy*. Indeed, what he ultimately puts up is a spectacle of the world-as-world, of the All (*Totul*, “totum”) and of those without whom this provisional, non-totalistic whole's wholeness would fall short, a performance of self and—and necessarily *with*—others (*alloi* in Ancient Greek).⁸

People's bodies; Bucharest's crumbling body; the nation's hyperterritorialized bulk; and the world's geocultural corpus: these are *Nostalgia*'s concentric circles of belonging, its network-mundus. Treating individuals and locales as headings of greater units stretching above and athwart the Party-state's immediate, totalitarian totality and ossified taxonomies, this *pars pro toto* planetary figuration only reformulates, from the vantage point of the part, the *totum in parte*. Thus, either way, Cărtărescu's characters act out a drama of being—they *are*—as they are in relation to others, thence de-termined, at the same time bounded and freed by the proximity to others and their modes of being in culture and history. Propinquity, nearness, vicinity, the terminus that both limits and assigns the self a contiguous meaning, also liberates it, brings it forth and across.

Political through and through, topological and cultural relatedness is thus *Nostalgia's modus essendi*. Bucharest's "little context" reflects the shape of bigger places and units or feeds into them without warning. The micro and macro worlds are similarly built but neither repetitious of nor opposed to each other. In broader bodies, venues, and sequences, the self does not run into versions of itself but into others. An ontological alloy—made of the Greek *álloi* ("others")—the planetary All's structure is not a globalist cosmology but non-*allergic*, *cosmallogical*. This constitution features others and calls upon the self to acknowledge them both outside and inside itself. Further, if the planetary All is indeed the Alpha and Omega of "little" existential forms, and, further, if these forms mirror the whole's own form, then they are its microcosm; further still, because the levels of this ontology interface and overlap, the microcosm is not only formally unique, but, in its very uniqueness, it is also isoform and juxtaposed to the macrocosm, as well as a portal to it, an *Aleph*. The macro world collapses, Aleph-like, into the micro, but, upon fictional "decompression" on the page, it becomes readable in the cultural small print of the place as much as the Stoics' innermost circles of "we" (selfhood and family) present themselves as ripple or butterfly effect—outer circles—of far-off, "eccentric" "we"-constellations.

The dialectic of micro and macro world pictures becomes even more transparently political in Cărtărescu's later work, especially in the three-part narrative and "affective" tour de force *Orbitor* (Blinding). The deeply constitutive, fundamentally worldly appetite of the book is unmistakable. One is undoubtedly struck by *Blinding's* intrinsic and insatiable yearning for the greater world, by its desire to take this world's affective measure no matter what and bear witness to it, painful as it may be, from a place half a century of brutally isolationist politics purported to cut off from other geographies and their vaster repertoire of topography, affect, and

material culture. Here again designated as “(the) *All*,” this larger, geopolitical and cosmic-metaphysical world continues to be the novel’s ontological provocation, challenging *Blinding* into existence by simultaneously fueling and frustrating its writing (2013, 75). While the Cold War allows Mircea, Cărtărescu’s protagonist, to experience locally the *All* only “in part” (hence the Saint Paul epigraph to one of the volumes), this non-totalist totality becomes accessible through the affective imagination, through a feverish, hyperconnective, planetarily (w)holistic feel for the world that, over and over again, plugs the forlorn, the isolated, the ostracized, the incarcerated, and the trivial into the ecumenical and cosmic, and, vice versa, telescopes the last two into the rest. Thus, the subversively metonymical poetics of a whole cultural-aesthetic movement—Romania’s programmatically postmodern “Generation of the 1980s”—reaches in Cărtărescu’s prose a climactic moment as it successively juxtaposes and collapses the domestic microcosm and the world’s macrocosm, laying them side by side and inside each other, showing how they touch, take each other in, intersect, dovetail, and communicate.

Mircea, the hero, is a postcommunist Marcel of sorts. Think of *Blinding*’s non-stop spectacle of affective memory as a latter-day Proustianism, one filtered through Borges (and through Borges’s Kafka). And think, in the same vein, of Cărtărescu as a postmodern/post-postmodern Proust who has survived the Cold War on a steady diet of Pynchon novels and now shares with the befuddled world the absurdity and surrealism of things past. Strictly speaking, Mircea’s memory is neither involuntary nor limited to recollection, or to *personal* reminiscences for that matter. To remember is to remember a felt past, but feeling, past or present, is here also to fictionalize, perchance to dream, even to dream other people’s dreams and feelings should Mircea’s own remembrance fail (2013, 48). All Mircea is left with in the third volume, *The Left Wing*, is the past (75), but that slice of time, the only dimension in which temporality can be said

to have (ever had) any “reality” to it, is both ontologically unavailable and ethically implausible, “absurd and delusional” (319). In reality, it is not so much that Cărtărescu starts writing his book after fall of Communism, but, given its forty odd years of documented horror and absurdity, the Communist past has become quasi unrepresentable, an impossibility both unlikely to have been and, to the extent that it *has* been, morally disconcerting: it is so hard to make your audience “feel” it. In that, *le temps perdu* of Communist autocracy mounts a serious challenge to remembrance, concomitantly setting it off and jamming its works, as well as to expression, to the notion of narrating and relaying all this. The basic question, then—equally faced by the survivors of the Nazi Holocaust and of the Communist experiment—is not just how you might go about recalling this temporality, but also how you might talk about it, how you might convey its monstrosity to somebody who has not lived through it to understand that which defies understanding.

A striking phrase Mircea, the fictional writer, uses to relate what he sees when he climbs on top of the roof of a Bucharest building suggests a possible answer: “[a] nation of melancholy” (31). A psychoanalyst’s bonanza, *Blinding* teems with Freudian moments. This one stands out because it provides an all-clarifying insight into the protagonist’s affective apparatus and the social unconscious dramatized by it. With the rise to power of the tyrannical regime in the World War II’s aftermath and especially since the 1950s, when Mircea’s story gets under way, melancholia becomes the nation’s defining mood. Under a most repressive totalitarian system, this mass psychology becomes psychopathological and, as such, usurps the place of politics as civil society implodes and the “mood” translates, within a decade, into a full-fledged political mode prohibitive of any freedoms whatsoever—into an institutionalized “melancholic inhibition,” as Freud would call it. Generalized and painstakingly enforced by a repressive apparatus some of

Mircea's acquaintances eagerly join, this disposition cancels out individual initiative and resistance. The society falls apart inside and outside families like Mircea's, and this leads to social "loneliness" and its political corollary, a feeling of "impotence," which Hannah Arendt deems so typical of totalitarianism. "Melancholic" more than ever in their history, Romanians watch passively the silent movie of their own ruin in the late 1980s. Collective self-destruction is thus the final upshot of Cold War melancholy, but neither material devastation carried out in the name of pseudo-developmental fantasies nor the dark humor—the mass wistfulness—that made it possible abates following the regime's bloody collapse in December 1989. The past's protracted agony makes itself brutally and multiply felt in the panorama of urban abjection repeatedly rolled out by Mircea in the postcommunist present, which cannot part company with the absurdity and surrealism of Communist realities and occurrences such as the church on wheels, moved hastily to make room for Nicolae Ceaușescu's new residence, The People's House.

The world-famous behemoth is a symbolic presence in Cărtărescu's Bucharest and narrative. Demolition crews uprooted urban life on many square miles when they broke ground for this architectural aberration. Built against history, the anti-historical People's House became, however, the Palace of the Parliament and, ironically enough, a historical landmark and major tourist attraction after the regime's downfall. Both a monument and a memento—the words are etymologically related—"the biggest building in the world" solidifies a mercilessly resilient time into the language of a Saturnine architecture in which Romanians contemplate their history and responsibility for it, their guilt, past and present helplessness, and the overall "worthlessness" derived, as Freud would point out, from the gazing subject's narcissistic identification with the abject object. This identification afflicts—affects—the community as well as the individual,

including extraordinary individuals like Mircea and Herman, our main hero's alcoholic and visionary friend. Perfect illustration of what Freud also determines as the melancholic ego's "consent to its own destruction," Herman is Mircea's master up to a point. Solitary and dejected, the aspiring writer has his double, Victor, the twin brother, much as the butterfly, Cărtărescu's arch-symbol and fictional "mascot," has its mortal enemy, the spider. Separated from Victor as an infant, Mircea will reunite with him in the monstrous palace on *The Right Wing's* climactic last page, making the infinitesimal and the infinite, good and evil, inside and outside fuse explosively.

Victor, though, malefic as he appears, is also the envoy of a much bigger and resplendent world. This world, however, has been lying inside Mircea all along. It is the twin world and face, the world's otherness as self-consciousness buried behind Mircea's face and "telescop[ed]" (77) within the world of memories and within those memories' world with which his brain is pregnant. That face is both an inside and an outside or environs at once. "That hyaline cartilage," Mircea tells us, "there on the shield where the three heraldic flowers meet—dream, memory, and emotion—that is my domain, my world, the world. There in the sparkling cylinder that descends through my mind" (88). The individual mind is a world assemblage because it harbors its other, its double and becoming-double potential, a cosmic hypostasis and fraction, and, conversely, the template for another, bigger and wiser brain through which "we will climb, unconscious and happy, onto a higher level of the fractal of eternal Being" (283). This Being is "made of cosmoses," we find out later on (417), but these cosmoses are composted and refracted by the author's perceptions into the downtown Bucharest "scenery" across which Mircea's parents, Maria and Costel, stroll "drowned in the whirls and fractals of history," and yet, *nota bene*, "without distinguishing themselves from their world, and without understanding that they lived

on a grain of sand on a beach wider than the universe, spread out and sifted, melancholically, by a mind that chose the two of them and decided their destinies” (247). Where Herman only sketches out, rather abstractly, a vision of symmetries, analogies, antagonisms, *coincidentia oppositorum*, and cosmic connections, Mircea lives this vision out by trekking affectively across a fractal universe in which the story of his family and his childhood meshes with the history of post-World War II and postcommunist Romania as well as with other temporalities and spaces of centuries past and faraway landscapes.

The eventful late December 1989 is the euphoric-liberatory, post-authoritarian and planetary *kairós*—“right time” but also “right place” in Ancient Greek—when the macro and the micro finally fasten onto one another as if “you have pierced” the planet’s “folded map with a needle, uniting incompatible and disparate places in an incomprehensible trajectory, perpendicular to the paper” (309). Now, the world’s Face and the city’s face gaze into each other because kairoitic time, dislodged from its totalist-totalitarian chronology of repetitiveness, is one of suddenly accelerated, world-making worlding. At this point and *in* this point of the new world, Cărtărescu’s telescoping reaches its apex, for, in fact, *kairós* is best understood as a world-becoming paroxysm, radical reorientation in and toward the world. At this climactic moment, the planetary maze and Mircea’s whereabouts in a “revolutionary” Bucharest (his “cobweb map of [his] place in the world [309]),” the world’s macro cartography and that worldly portrait’s scaled-down versions in “the filigree design of coffee cups” and snowflakes (309-310), the cosmic butterfly and the one resting in your palm, the world’s geopolitical intrigues and the patterns of Maria’s handmade rug in the first volume, *The Body* (Cărtărescu 2002, 135, 152), alongside other, countless instantiations of the internal-external, small-large, inward/inworld-outward/outer-world planetary dynamic “snap” into place, into the same co-incident, synergetic

spot of co-presence to “with-ness”—to be with and bear witness to—each other. At last, the world’s Face with its previously illegible topography, barely visible on a world map either crumpled and rolled up into an ignominious ball to be discarded by a careless author/cartographer or folded up origami-like becomes once again “legible” (249), its “fractals, twisters, non-linear equations, folds [. . .], Russian dolls crammed one inside another . . . Spaces pregnant with spaces pregnant with spaces” (248-249).

The territorial pregnancy Cărtărescu describes here and throughout his work, whether in his poetry, in his fiction, or in his essays, posits a topo-cultural model whose intensities and extensities are deliberately at loggerheads with the nation-state’s cartographic self-representation. As Michel Foucault maintains in his 1977-1978 Collège de France lectures, “sovereignty and discipline, as well as security, can only be concerned with multiplicity,” more to the point, with the multiplicity of bodies, values, culture, etc. in their spatial, political, and institutional arrangements (12). The nation-state has historically enforced a certain spatialization of this plurality, which in the practice of territorial administration operates as spatial reduction, compartmentalization, and monitoring, as *disciplinary* distributions, enclosures, taxonomies, and vocabularies. Cărtărescu speaks forcefully against this approach to space, culture, bodies, identities, of how one “feels” inside or about them. His fictional mapping give full play to the emotional intensities (heterogeneities) and extensities (expanses) of place and culture the nation-state homogenizes, reduces to its own (“jealous,” “possessive”) ethno-territorial projections, and harnesses to its ideology-driven epistemological agenda.

Thus, the “crisis of territoriality” (Levy and Sznajder 197) Cărtărescu’s bodies dramatize is not solely one of national frontiers, of “political sovereignty,” and self-determination understood primarily as “peripheral” issues (pertaining to boundaries, margins, and so forth), but

also of centers themselves and of their systems of centralization, of *state cultural apparatuses* and their aggressive *overdetermination* of culture's and cultural identity's meanings through administration, research, education, and the like. In its self-perceived, ethno-linguistically, territorially, and institutionally monist configuration, the state has set itself up as the post-Wesphalian era's default aggregation unit and "scalar variety" of cultural production and analysis (Dimock 2006, 219, 226). However, writers like Cărtărescu are forcing us to reconsider the "one-on-one correspondence between the geographic origins of a text and its evolving radius of literary action." "We need," as Wai Chee Dimock further argues, "to stop thinking of national literatures as the linguistic equivalents of territorial maps. . . . [H]andily outliv[ing] the finite scope of the nation, [literature] brings into plays a different set of temporal and spatial coordinates. It urges on us the entire planet as a unit of analysis" (2001, 175). Cărtărescu's corporeal *cosmology* unfolds along these very coordinates. A critique of the same epistemological and geopolitical sovereignty queried by Dimock, his work raises tough yet pressing questions about the place and meaning of literature inside and outside the nation-state, inside and outside nationally established academic units and disciplines, and inside and outside the national language.

Notes

¹ The original *locus classicus* of the problem is Fredric Jameson's 1984 *New Left Review* article on postmodernism that went into the opening chapter ("Culture") of *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), for which see pages 10, 19, 23, etc.

² Jeffrey T. Nealon's *Post-Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* is only the latest, Jameson-derived, installment in a series of inquiries revolving around the "what comes after postmodernism?" question. On the intensifying disputes around postmodernism's simultaneous obsolescence and endurance, see John Frow's "What Was Postmodernism" section of his 1997 *Time and Commodity Culture* (13-63), initially published, in 1990, in Ian Adams and Helen Tiffin 139-152. Frow's chapter title is, of course, an allusion to Harry Levin's 1960 classical essay, "What Was Modernism"); Brian McHale's own 2007 article with the same title in *Electronic Book Review*, December 20, 2007, <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/fictionspresent-/tense?mode-print> (accessed March 8, 2013); Andrew Hoberek, John Burt, David Kadlec, Jamie Owen Daniel, Shelly Eversley, Catherine Jurca, Aparajita Sagar, and Michael Berube's 2001 *College English* "symposium" "Twentieth-Century Literature in the New Century"; Timothy S. Murphy's 2004 *symploke* article; in the same *symploke* issue (53-68); Neil Brooks and Josh Toth's 2007 edited collection *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*; Alan Kirby, 2009 article "The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond"; and other works by Robert L. McLaughlin, Mary Holland, Amy J. Elias, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (proponents of "metamodernism"), Alison Gibbons, Caren Irr, Leerom Medovoi, Rachel Adams, Min Hyoung Song, Bharati Mukherjee, and the list could go on.

³ Moraru, 2001, 2011 (especially 307-316), and 2013.

⁴ This is, of course, a reference to Thomas Pynchon's 2013 novel *Bleeding Edge* (2013).

⁵ See Moïsi 4.

⁶ See O'Sullivan's comments on Massumi's (131).

⁷ Cărtărescu, 2005. *Nostalgia* came out previously, in censored form, as *Visul* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1989).

⁸ *Totul* (All) is the title of one of Mircea Cărtărescu's poetry volumes (Bucharest, Romania: Cartea Românească, 1985).