

D'Anca, Christene. Book Review. "Cărtărescu, Mircea. *Solenoid*. Bucharest: Humanitas Editions, 2015. 858 pp."

Mircea Cărtărescu's latest collection of poems, *Nu striga niciodată ajutor* (Humanitas, 2020) has thrust the already famous author back into the literary limelight. However, the collection, produced nearly thirty years after his last one, has garnered a series of mixed reviews as those on [Goodreads](#) proclaim its excellence, while literary critics such as [Mihai Iovănel](#) (*Scena9*), remain more restrained with their praise, rather reserving it for the author than the work in this case.

Nevertheless, the collection's main themes, solitude and the universal search for meaning necessarily unertaken by every individual, harken back to Cărtărescu's earlier works, namely *Nostalgia* and *Solenoid*. It is the latter that merits further review as it, too, encompasses ideas previously presented throughout the author's oeuvre.

Mircea Cărtărescu's *Solenoid* is a tour de force in the surrealist genre. As the story unfolds, told from a first person perspective by an unnamed narrator, the reader is introduced to a disgruntled middle school teacher in Bucharest, whose failed attempt at becoming a writer has dictated his path in life, leading him towards a desire for escaping the confines of his body, and consequently reality.

Despite the narrator's less than successful forays into other endeavors, such as teaching, the fateful night when he presented his epic poem *Căderea* [*The Fall*], for which he was gravely ridiculed, remains the moment that haunts him, and acts as the driving force for his life trajectory. Nevertheless, notwithstanding his inability to garner success for his writing in the world in which he lives, through creating the confessional style novel of his life, the narrator explores what it means to construct one's self through writing. Thus, he achieves his goal of escaping within the universe he crafts for himself, even as he insists on multiple occasions that

what he is writing is not in fact a novel, but rather a lengthy journal, drawing attention to the disconnect between his self-awareness and delusion, while also bringing into question to what extent an author has authority over his work.

As the narrator uses a combination of memories, hallucinations and dream-like sequences to make sense of his metaphysical journey, he simultaneously experiences everything while being confined by the boundaries of human understanding, which cannot be remedied through escaping the human body. He comes to the realization that “amintirile mele cele mai vechi, care-mi apăreau din când în când în memorie, nu erau popriu-zis amintiri, ci vestigii ale unui system mai vechi de captare-a efluviilor lumii, organe atavice ale animalului mnezic adăpostit în țeasta mea” (205) [my oldest recollections, that appeared from time to time in my memory, were not actual memories, but vestiges of an older system of capturing the effluvia of the world, atavistic organs of the mnemonic animal housed in my skull]. Yet, he is tragically aware of his limitations as he laments for example, his inability to understand the import of a particularly lucid dream where “s-a-ntâmplat ceva de o supremă importanță, dar de neînțeles pentru bietul meu creier, prizonier în țeasta lui stupidă” (771) [something happened of supreme importance, but cannot be understood by my poor brain, prisoner in its stupid skull]. In other words, while he can channel the universe through his mind, it is nevertheless trapped within the physical confines of his skull, to which he remains tethered.

Moreover, beyond the physical constraints of the body, the narrator must also contend with the parameters of time, namely the human life span. As the narrator grapples with the definitive end – death – he must also cope with the fact that despite the linear progression of time, life plays out in multiple directions, with the past and present always encroaching on the future. In much the same way that the characters in *Nostalgia* could not escape their past, here no

one can escape their present and future, which are both intricately tied to death. It is this very notion of inevitability that plagues the main character whose first encounter with death, that of his brother, happens during childhood, and remains with him throughout his life, constantly resurfacing while providing a thanatological component to the narrative and overall novel. The multiple people he encounters, such as the boy, Traian, in the Voila sanitorium, all serve as recurring reminders of his eventual death. Even as Traian explains that death is nothing more than a long journey where eventually “te naști din nou și din nou” (503) [you are born again and again], the emphasis does not rest on rebirth, but rather refocuses the process of reincarnation to underscore the repetition of death.

Throughout the narrator’s constant return to the subject of death, is his consistent effort to avoid it. Arguably, his first attempt was through writing, a means of immortalizing his name within his work. When he cannot do so professionally, or publicly, his private journal suffices in creating a record of his existence. By accounting for every facet of his life, from his dreams, memories, hallucinations, general thoughts, to the everyday minutiae, he is essentially using it as a means of recreating himself in text form. However, he is not alone in his endeavor to escape death. Amidst others he meets, are the “pichetiști,” [picketers], who gather around places associated with death, such as cemeteries, and morgues, picketing none other than death itself. Among their efforts, their ultimate act of rebellion is to ironically offer a human sacrifice in the form of their prophet and leader, a man by the name of Virgil, who has until now guided his followers through the hell that is earth in the hopes that his sacrifice/martyrdom would eradicate the need for future generations to suffer in anticipation of death. Needless to say, the scheme doesn’t work, and the narrator is left fumbling to find yet another means of avoiding the inevitable.

Cărtărescu thus creates a series of events for the protagonist, in which he superimposes real historical figures throughout his character selection in much the same way as he recreates Bucharest, by combining real and fictional elements for the city, rendering the overall narrative recognizable, but also defamiliarized. The narrator's uncanny adventures, however, that eventually lead him to understanding the importance of the fourth dimension in order to overcome death while simultaneously reaching his goal of escaping his body, and thus reality, prove to be futile. As he is faced with the ultimate dilemma, left with a choice between creating and preserving art, in the form of his journal in which he has recorded all of his findings, dreams, hallucinations, and has essentially provided himself with a means for immortality, and preserving his and his daughter's life in the world in which he lives, where Bucharest is torn from the ground, bound to disappear into the sky, he opts to destroy his journal, page by page. And with this decision his body is transformed from a prison to be fled into a means for a different kind of escape – one that leads to self-preservation that offers salvation for himself and his family. In other words, in these final pages, the narrator comes to terms with his reality, as bleak as it might be, with his mortality, and its inevitability, and ultimately presents the reader with the overarching message that had until this point remained hidden from view – life is worth living.