

Romanian Society for Psychoanalysis
Psychoanalytic understanding of ageing (from midlife and beyond)

Cartarescu from the Distance and beyond the Seas

Psychoanalytic Notes

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«Though I can't remember it, I could never forget it.»
Solenoid (p. 154)

Foreword

The novel *Solenoid* by Mircea Cartarescu doesn't have an English version yet. This takes me to a personal English direct translation from the incredible Spanish one that Marian Ochoa de Eribe made —I want to state that she is Cartarescu's «official» Spanish translator. I also felt free so as to write to her just to thank the big effort she made, because her translation appears as an invisible one: unbelievable achievement. It's a pity that the quotations' translation I will deliver were made by me, as well as the page numbers will refer to the Spanish version, but this is something I hope you'll understand.

Of course, you must also consider that I will just deliver several notes *from the distance and beyond the seas*, because this paper isn't a psychoanalysis applied one: these are just notes I want to share with you. Moreover, at any moment I will take an author's supposed life as an object of interpretation: I would think of that as banal and without value.

If I were prompted to choose one of the core subjects of *Solenoid* —among a lot of possible interesting ones— I don't hesitate in selecting the subject of *reality*. Let's listen to the author:

«What is reality? Which is the visceral and metaphysical drive that transforms what is objective in subjective?» (p. 526)

What Cartarescu names «visceral and metaphysical drive» leads to fear, and this is the reason why he also writes:

«I can't help thinking that reality is just fear in itself, iced fear. I live with fear, I breathe fear, I swallow fear, I will be buried in fear. I pass my fear from a generation to the next, in the same way I received it from my parents and grandparents.» (p. 399)

But reality not only brings fear but strangeness:

«What strange is the world where I live! It doesn't seem real, but a stage built for me that disappears at the same moment that I lose its perception. How many times would I have wished to turn my back suddenly just to take by surprise the hectic work of sceneshifters, the colliding of decoration, the fall of the buildings built with a single wall tied from behind, or, simply, the dissolution of all sensory stimuli in a kind of emptiness equivalent to death!» (p. 624)

The core of the novel is also a heartbreaking story in search of authenticity: how does each individual need to «invent» reality to acknowledge he is born. The author makes an effort to understand what individuals name as reality —something that from the very beginning everybody achieves in isolation.

Solenoid hopes to become a total novel. It encompasses the entire life of its main character, dressed in the clothes of the author. I want to pay attention to what I am stating: Cartarescu doesn't hide himself in the main character, but the main character disguises as Cartarescu —something completely different— a literary mechanism that only a genius as Cartarescu may accomplish.

But *Solenoid* is also a descent into hell and a way back to the world: a kind of alchemical transmutation ending with an open door to uncertainty of being, and with a closing chapter open to hope.

This is the reason why it's easy to mix up the novel with an autobiographic device or with a memoir: false data. As the main character disguises as Cartarescu, the narrator has a kind of freedom that is absent in self-biographies and memoirs.

The story mutates from (invisible) peculiarities of the body —internal organs, the deep composition of organic matter— towards the (invisible) peculiarities of the Universe —the subtle laws that rule the different dimensions, specifically the fourth dimension—, trying to update an essential human search for what is meant as the microcosmos-macrocosmos equation, just to suggest that «phenomena of life and death» —listen up— would remain as unknown.

We can find several other symbols or emblems in the novel —all of them working as meaningful nucleus: the history of the «anomalies» —as he names them— of the main character, Bucarest as a primal myth, dioramas as an attempt to replace reality for a precision mechanism, solenoid as an energetic field making possible several phenomena out of human scope, Hinton's squares and the tesseract as a mechanism able of making visible the fourth dimension, the mirror as a reflection within the mystery of duplicity: the arcaic dread that one day the mirror won't reflect our image but nothing in itself, the «picketists»' sect as representatives of humankind in horror, dread and fighting against death, photographs as a representative of unbearable absence and the *camera lucida* as the instrument making it possible fright, Nicolae Vaschide and his workshop to sculpt dreams working with whores who tried to reach the *orama*: the supreme dream, Voynich manuscript as the archetype of what would never be deciphered but what for sure hides an important truth; plaster gorgons, satyrs and bacchantes hanging from Bucarest's balconies, Nicolae Minovici controlled hanging techniques trying to feel what happens at the moment of death, stereograms with the optical illusion of the third dimension, Dylan Thomas' poem *Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night*, *antikhytera* Greek mechanism to predict astronomical positions and eclipses, pheromones as a magic against aphanisis, the number 7129 always returning —such as the 2719 times the author repeats the expression ¡Help! (p. 687-97): the same numbers as 7129, etc.

We'll watch now a brief video I prepared just to show any of these symbols in the novel.

But among the novel's emblems I want to highlight what I named «the prisoner's metaphor» —repeated and hinted many times—, because I believe it an important articulator —full of meaning — all along the story. (pag. 70, 87, 92, 95, 97, 125, 265, 299, 300, 361, 432, 437, 438, 522, 533, 534, 536, 553, 592, 601, 659, 672, 707, 711, 722, 723, 732, 735, 740, 765, 782 [for sure I think I didn't take into account many others])

When I understood the importance of «the prisoner's metaphor» I thought it would be wise to invite our Travesia Foundation colleagues for a working brunch in order to share with them the text I will transcript now, asking them for a collective working-through of its multiple meanings. Yesterday, when we watched the video during the Opening Words you could see our members working around this subject. Now, you'll find the outcome!

«The Prisoner's Metaphor»

This is the story of a prisoner that was putrefying his life in prison for a lot of years. Sentenced to life imprisonment, he is watched so carefully that he is sure his life will end in the dungeon. But one night he listens to some slight knocks on one of the walls. He approaches his ear and can listen to these knocks with much more clarity: bright, intelligent, an elaborated series of knocks that are repeated at regular intervals. For the sake of clarity, the prisoner believes in one of the hallucinations that used to be his company in prison. But on the next day and at the same hour, he listens again to the series of knocks on the wall, and so, again and again, one day after the other. He decides to learn by memory the series of sounds, and begins to write them on the part of the wall hidden by the bed. Every now and then, these alternations become more complicated, as if the neighbor on the other side of the wall would bring in new «words» to the code. The prisoner needs several months to find the intuition for the first connections in the secret warp of the knocks and to find meaning of its language afterwards. Finally, the prisoner begins to answer to the series trying to use the same code (written by himself in an invented spelling with half moons, gearwheels, crosses and triangles scrawled in the plaster) and begins to give shape to a kind of a dialogue. The neighbor —now he understands it— is explaining to him an escape plan of such an audacity that takes the breath away, and, at the same time, of an incredible simplicity. One night, after having carried out all the necessary preparations, following the instructions verbatim, the prisoner manages to escape. After several years, rich and famous, with a false identity, he asks for permission to visit the prison with the idea of meeting, finally, that one whom he was in debt of everything, and be able to rescue him as well. He is led to the cell where he spoilt his youth and, once there, he asks the guardian for the-other-side-of-the-wall's prisoner. But, to his surprise, he is told that on the other side there are only the sky and the sea. The wall, dozens of meters on the breaking on the stone shore waves, faces directly to the exterior.

Mircea Cartarescu
Solenoid (p. 70)

The shocking power of the tale may be synthesized in the following series of elements:

1. The prisoner invents an object which he relates to.
2. The prisoner invents a language.
3. The prisoner escapes from prison.
4. The ex-prisoner returns to free his cell neighbor.

The paragraph selected implies a full compendium of psychoanalysis, because it is noteworthy how internal world shapes reality, because the prisoner received knocks and sounds,

and he would have shaped a really different thing from his escape. It seems as if he would have had hope and this would have made him find his proper decoding to express this internal hope. It is always much more important the decoding each individual does, than the specific external factor that causes it.

The need to build an inner object is a need to find a way out (to-have-a-life). We could think that when the object is absent, we need to find whatever event in order to build it, because the threat is dissolution.

The prisoner was in the need of «inventing» an other to think, because he just listened to the messages as someone-else's messages. When he «understood» we has having a place in the mind of another individual who was willing to help him, he «invented» that other one instead of the hallucinations to which he was accustomed to.

Of course, this leads to the question whether it is possible to find an object —as it is the case with the prisoner— if before it wasn't settled even before in a precarious way, or if at least there wasn't a trace of that experience.

Both premises lead to a kind of tension that is very important to hold: an other individual is needed as an existent one in order to have a way out, because if that other individual doesn't exist we need to create it through the mechanism of invention.

It's a paradox, but the prisoner could have also found a paranoid resolution of his situation, because the text states that «he is watched so carefully», that we could easily think that he could have «chosen» that election, to get a dissolution of his personality... and here is where internal psychic resources and psychic work-through are needed.

Of course, I can't leave without stress that prison is also the absence of an object.

Thinking winnicottially, we could also think of the prisoner as someone who could solve the riddle of the knocks he heard because he could incorporate the capacity to be alone (in the presence of an other individual). I consider that the inference of the presence of another individual is the knocks on the wall that lead the prisoner to that certainty. In the same way, the sea may also represent the maternal primal object speaking those sounds that the prisoner can decode. I think so, because the sea has always been there and because we must be sure that the knocks have been there from the very beginning of his imprisonment, but there was a specific moment when they become noticeable by the prisoner, and from then on he began to decode the knocks and noises.

From Piera Aulagnier's perspective, the sounds the prisoner decodes are pictographic representations, something equivalent to the sounds that the mother's body produces and that reach the embryo while pregnancy: intrauterine life.

The prisoner escapes «following the instructions verbatim», says the author in a beautiful sentence, because the verbatim instructions were an invention of the prisoner himself, that is to say: his plan for a new life was something he himself had planned.

When he understands that that other individual in the neighbor cell is not there, because there is no such a cell or such an other, the prisoner —now a free man— acknowledges that he had developed a full language for his own freedom, as if we said: his freedom was and is within him.

«You can't escape till you don't believe you are able to escape, though you were in a cell with strong and thick walls, without doors and windows.» (p. 265)

In some way, the psychoanalyst's work may be considered equivalent to the work of the prisoner: decoding the sounds, the music, the rhythms, the music time that build the language of the unconscious that the psychoanalyst (the prisoner) has to articulate and try to understand.

The prisoner's metaphor also alludes to the human condition, because all of us are in life imprisonment: death is waiting for us at the end of the road and there's no alternative way out from this. Life imprisonment implies to be in prison till death: human beings are alive till the exact moment when they die. The prisoner is fundamentally trying to escape of human sentence to death... and he finds this (in the same way that that other bright Cartarescu's character: our beloved roulette player, who can always survive the game of the roulette because he's a literary character.)

«We grow old, we wait quietly in the line of those sentenced to death. We are executed one after the other in the worst of the concentration camps. First we are strip away from our beauty, from youth, and from hope. We are wrapped in penitent of illnesses, tiredness and putrefaction' clothes.» (p. 181)

The paragraph alludes to an audacity that seems to be related to the essential dare to have-a-life, let's say: to be alive till death arrives (DWW dixit).

We can also find a developmental understanding of the prisoner's metaphor, because the references to age and the passing of time make it evident that the prisoner is a man in his middle age that spent his youth in prison.

I think that midlife allows us to work-through the understanding of the life imprisonment to which we are condemned, and everyone may be the prisoner of Cartarescu's story, if we decode those incoming messages that urge us for freedom.

The understanding of the code that the neighbor's cell transmits may be acknowledged as the maturing effort of decoding drive (*trieb*) increase coming out when male and female climacterics begin. We can't forget that the so called psychic apparatus relates to the body as a kind of object-relation. But the question is: what is the different final outcome of this process in each individual?

As I already told you, it is really important to highlight *in what specific moment* the prisoner began to listen to the sounds coming from «the outer side», because these, for sure, had been there forever: they were the noises of nature! And this is why I consider that what happens to the prisoner is equivalent to what happens during midlife, because the «noises» coming in are related to drive increase, and the true possibility of listening to them is what allows the subjective renewal we can find during maturing working-through.

I say that midlife demands the urgency for the deciphering of a new code, finding an escape plan, something that may be re-signified:

Which are that new words?

Which is the new code?

We could also wonder why the prisoner comes back:

Why couldn't the prisoner think that «both» had escaped?

Why did he assume that his cell's neighbor remained in prison?

This return initially may be understood as an evidence of the psychic working-through activity showing any kind of (symbolic) regression. We could also think that the object the prisoner built was an equivalent of the primary object, and that he regains contact with it due to an inner need. More: we could think of him coming back with a feeling of gratitude. In some way, the prisoner «comes back» as an expression of the typical working-through activity of psychic secondary processing. Following Piera Aulagnier's concepts, we could think that secondary process gives meaning to what he lived pictographically.

Why does he return with a false identity?

Which is his real identity?

Escape from «life imprisonment» is only possible through a false identity?

Now, we could also think of a rare paradox: prison with authentic identity and freedom with a false identity! (What a strange paradox!)

We can also consider two antithetic possibilities to understand why the prisoner comes back. First, he went back to acknowledge which was his true agent of transformation, the fact that allowed him to live free. Second, we could think he went back because he remains acknowledging parts of his self imprisoned, and goes for their rescue.

As I already stated, the paragraph also expresses a metaphor for human existence: all of us are the prisoner, all of us live listening to different noises, such as the words of other individuals, the effects other individuals cause on us, everything we can imagine coming from outside is «rebuilt» within the limits of our subjectivity. What's there «in the other side»? We would never know because we are all in the same prison of our existence, where we arrived alone and from where we will depart alone as well, and we could never know how we enter this world and how will we leave it. An enriching and encouraging metaphor!

Psychoanalytically speaking, the noises coming from the other side of the wall, are equivalents to sexual excitement when listening to the noises of parental couple having sex, something that also asks for a decoding activity of the mind that also promoted psychic development.

We can also find in the novel allusions to the mystery of anatomical difference between the sexes and sexual reproduction:

«However, intercourse and death depicted another story, one we weren't allowed to understand at that moment, but that *it reached to our ears* through illegal and dark hundreds of roads.» (p. 458)

«They lose their condition of gods when they have intercourse, and then grow old, they wrinkle, they bend their backs, they lose their teeth, they lose their hair, they get horrible illnesses, and finally they die. They don't say us the truth about birth and death because they don't want we could see how they are in reality: for real passenger shadows in this world.» (p. 459)

To grow old is something important all along the novel, and Cartarescu puts it in the words of several characters, not only in the main character where we could also find the shadow of the fear of aphanisis.

From this vertex, we will find a perspective from inside the hell of existence and another from the external world:

1. A perspective from inside the hell of existence:

«They now knew that vulva lips were dry now, and that the penis, half in erection, and that April, May and June had already passed as in a dream, without any possibility of coming back. Men, bald and white haired, would have offered whatever to feel again, yes, even that hard pain in the testicles when they were coming back home, after ten stops of the bus, by night, after having spent dead hours in the lonely bank of the square with the girl that now, a mature woman, is moving with difficulty inside his arms, transpired and hot as they will never be again in this life that is inexorably degrading.» (p. 177)

2. A perspective from external world (a key to escape from prison!):

«Yes, we could see the line of future, formed by thousands and thousands of individual lines dancing along the center of everybody and of no one. What has been will happen again, we say. The sun will rise tomorrow because it has risen since we are aware of ourselves, and our ancestors testified that in their time it also rose daily. Men were born, have lived, had children, and died. Life lasted seventy years old, for the strongest it was about eighty years old. This will remain always the same during the time planet Earth lasts. All of us foresee this future interwoven with millions of examples. Reinforced by millions of phantasmal lines. It is as if we had behind our eyes a bridge over a river, but just because yesterday it was there, and in the past, and several decades ago. So we can walk over the river with the certainty of having a firm ground under our feet.» (p. 729)

This opens the hope that the end of the novel let the reader follow the main character with his wife and daughter going to live in the country, full of love and wisdom after a dark night, in a renewed way.

But... there is always a «but»... perhaps we could already infer which was the crime the prisoner commit, which was the reason of his imprisonment. I hope that we could discuss now something that would allow us to finally understand which the crime we are speaking about is!

Thank you very much!