

Mircea Cărtărescu – Crossing the Borders of Romania and Sweden

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Abstract: In the present article the significant impetus of Romanian novelist Mircea Cărtărescu on a Swedish audience is discussed, with special attention focused on the concept of Nostalgia, and Cărtărescu's relation to the aesthetics of dream reality, first introduced in Sweden by August Strindberg with his "A Dreamplay" from 1901. Viewpoints on more precisely what kind of readers that Cărtărescu seems to have attracted in Sweden are also presented, as well as on the translations into Swedish of his novels that have been made by Inger Johansson.

Key Words: Mircea Cărtărescu, Romania, Sweden, August Strindberg, Inger Johansson, Nostalgia, Dream Aesthetics,

The main representative of contemporary Romanian literature in Sweden today is Mircea Cărtărescu. Since the release of the Swedish translation of the novel *Nostalgia* in 2001, followed up by the monumental trilogy *Orbitor*, all within the frameworks of the prestigious *Panache* series at prominent publishing house Bonniers, his renown in Sweden has constantly increased, enhanced also by the author regularly taking part in literary events in Sweden in recent years. Especially in the region of Stockholm, Cărtărescu seems to be a name constantly referred to, a writer attracting a special attention that appears both striking and lasting.

To be sure, Mircea Cărtărescu is a name that belongs to World literature, his Swedish success among both critics and readership is no unique phenomenon - but still one might ask why the launching of his novels have met with such good response in a country where the general knowledge of and interest in Romania and Romanian culture still may seem undeveloped and limited. How do Cărtărescu's in many ways unfailingly Romanian

qualities relate to the special Swedish cultural preconditions? Is there any deeper ground to be found considering the obviously particular affection among many Swedish readers for his work? Such questions I wish to briefly explore and speculate upon in the following, starting mainly from the capital breakthrough of Cartrarescu in Sweden with *Nostalgia* in 2001.

The title of the novel itself may be the best hint in this case. For decades there has in Sweden prevailed a constantly increasing boom for nostalgic moods and interests, so strong has the tendency been as to make it hard to locate the beginning of it. An early literary outcome of this dominating aspect of contemporary cultural life in Sweden, is the writer couple that laid ground for the most important contribution internationally speaking of Swedish and Scandinavian literature today, namely Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, who in the 1960s and into the mid 1970s, with a significant series of novels, set the standard for the high quality Crime Literature that ever since has streamed out of the Nordic countries.

The perhaps most original and typical ingredient of their work, pronouncedly followed up by for example their main inheritor Henning Mankell, and his famous detective stories about police inspector Kurt Wallander, is exactly the inclination for a nostalgic dwelling upon the past, in the Swedish circumstance especially connected with the gradual downfall of the unique, utopian and up until the 1970s highly fulfilled project of the Swedish Welfare State, with its deeply democratic, consensual focus on social solidarity, care and a general spirit of togetherness. Along with the sensitive, nuanced psychological realism of everyday life, guaranteeing a particular authenticity in the depiction of not to the least the relations between the principal characters, and also providing convincing psychological profiles of the criminals, the bitter sweet lament of the lost ideals and visions of the welfare project, that created a still remaining high esteem and respect for Sweden and the Nordic countries in general as good examples, is at the very core of the Scandinavian Crime Story tradition.

Sjöwall and Wahlöö's Martin Beck and Henning Mankell's Kurt Wallander are only the most well-known characters symbolizing this common denominator in Swedish Crime Literature, conjuring up one of the most significant tendencies in contemporary Swedish and Scandinavian mentality. Nostalgia has truly become the lot of all the

neglected children of the near but still today so far away and thoroughly left behind paradise of the Welfare Nation, whether just a figment of an idealizing imagination, or a real experience.

An example pointing to the same proclivity for letting oneself be seduced by nostalgic sensations, coming however from a completely different cultural domain, is the bestselling book *Nostalgia – the History of an Emotion*, written by professor of History of Ideas Karin Johannison, and published in the same year and by the same publisher responsible for the Swedish version Cărtărescu's *Nostalgia*, which of course in itself marks something more than a mere coincidence. Johannison is of one of the academic scholars in the Humanities in Sweden of today who has managed to reach a wide audience, with her easily accessible, but still on impeccable research founded books on ideas and attitudes foremostly considering medical issues. Drawing on its history as a clinical, medical diagnosis for among other things home-sickness among soldiers in the field, Johannison tells the story of how nostalgia in contemporary society has come to stand for a personal sentiment, the bitter sweet longing for days in the not too close and not too far past – a private, self-sufficient notion indeed, typically fixated upon the unique and original experiences of the individual, but also something that most people of today seem to share, and thus being a significant trait in the general mentality of contemporary Swedes.

Whether obsessed by an illusion or not, it is evident that people in Sweden since decades have developed a special sensitivity or even passion for exactly that which the self-reflecting, self-analyzing narrator in Cărtărescu's *Nostalgia* posits as his only aim and interest: to create for himself a past, a series of images that should exist and replace the chaos that prevails in the here and now, the feeling that the inner visions can outmaneuver and become more important than the outer, external reality. And however real the harmony and positive spirit of the Swedish Welfare state might have been, it is undeniably also a created, imagined, idealized vision of it that is projected upon the past by many contemporary Swedes, all from the standpoint of their unique, individual memory images of a common past. How sharply Cărtărescu's created fiction on his part stands in contrast to his attitude towards present day Romanian circumstances, is clearly made evident by his weekly columns in the newspaper *Evenimentul zilei*, which

constantly give evidence to an uncompromising, severe criticism, that perhaps only the one who simultaneously - in Cărtărescu's case as a fiction writer - creates for himself a better, made-up world, can allow himself without becoming cynical.

Is this common, mutual depreciation of the present a reason as to why Cărtărescu's poetical lament of the dissolution of everything in *Nostalgia*, immediately seemed to strike a sensitive spot in the Swedish readership? Is this why his fragile melancholy seems attractive also to Swedish audience, which - however for different reasons and with other motivations - seems equally immersed by the past and an emotional restoration of it?

From a more specific literary perspective, it is also interesting to observe how close Cărtărescu's general aesthetical starting point, that it only is in the dimension of dreaming that a true whole can be created, indeed comes to August Strindberg's pioneering vision in his groundbreaking *A Dreamplay* from 1901. So essential for the development of expressionism in the arts, for example laying ground for the prose of Kafka, who Cărtărescu typically has confessed himself to be inspired by, Strindberg with *A Dreamplay* and his other late dramas evidently is present in the cultural preconditions of Cărtărescu's proclamation in *Nostalgia*, of how our world essentially is a fiction. But more significantly in this context, the Swedish readers who so to say with their mother's milk can be assumed to have taken in this classic play by Strindberg, may of course be particularly well prepared for the mind-blowing intermingling of perspectives and experiences, created as well as realistically founded, in Cărtărescu's fictional universe, introduced for them exactly one century after Strindberg's play originally was written.

The very conclusion in Strindberg's *A Dreamplay*, by the author himself deemed as the outcome of his greatest agony, is that the writer knows best how to live, since he is the one who consciously creates the fictions that life itself ultimately consists of. The very essence of Cărtărescu is in the same manner to create himself through his fiction, deliberately and with all-powerful subjectivity, if however constantly flanked by an invisible, intangible other, who is equally present in the significant religious dimension in Strindberg's later works. The Ego is everything, but it never stands alone. Through the later, expressionist works for the theatre by Strindberg, which arguably are Sweden's most important contribution to World Literature, the very aesthetical kernel of

Cărtărescu's fiction is anything but distant for the educated Swedish reader, however deeply rooted in an exotic, unfamiliar Bucharest, that the explicit references of his prose may be.

But with the important connection to Strindberg, the limits of Cărtărescu's impact in Sweden is also hinted. It is evidently a sophisticated, culturally trained audience he has reached, which in the Swedish circumstance may stand out in sharper relief than in many other Western European countries. In Sweden there is not to be found a strong, unquestioned, dominating cultural elite in a way comparable to for example Germany or France. There is no influential group of intellectuals setting the agenda also for the rest of the people, if by presenting opinions for the rest to take a stand against. Just like the major names of 'higher' Swedish culture, an August Strindberg or an Ingmar Bergman or a Lars Norén, Cărtărescu with his success in Sweden is both esteemed and ignored. On the established cultural scene of Stockholm he evidently has a strong position, but in the country in general, with its significant tradition of equality and utilitarian pragmatics, an exclusive, advanced cultural figure such as Cărtărescu may come very far from what is deemed to be of merit or even of interest. Doing research for this article, I significantly enough found out that on the local library of Sunne, the hometown of acclaimed Swedish novelist Göran Tunström and far from any sleeping small-town in Sweden, the untouched copy of Cartarecu's *Nostalgia* was since long sorted away in the cellar, due to lacking interest among the customers.

Just like Gabriela Melinescu, who before Cărtărescu has acted as an important cultural advocate for Romania in Sweden, and unlike him even has chosen to live and work in Sweden, and has managed to infiltrate and become a part of the cultural sphere of Stockholm, Cărtărescu is both engaged in and ignored in Sweden, is both important and unimportant. In a country where the book market is particularly well financed, and the economical preconditions for cultural activity are uniquely well organized, but where the attitude and mentality concerning cultural matters is far from united by a common interest and evaluation, the case of Cărtărescu in this aspect is only too symbolical.

But to the extent that he has been acclaimed and praised to the point of recurrently being discussed as a Noble prize candidate, the excellent translations made by Inger Johansson is perhaps the most decisive explanation for his successful way into the minds

of Swedish readers. It is perhaps a solid confirmation of the international, cosmopolitan, open-minded and liberated spirit of Cărtărescu, that his work has been set free for a true, authentic transformation and adaptation into Swedish, into a rhythm and a system of linguistic associations that seem to come from within the Swedish language itself, in the way Inger Johansson has been allowed to create her own Swedish version of the poetical universe of Cărtărescu. This while the Romanian books available in Swedish otherwise seem to have been predominantly delivered by Romanian translators, with Swedish as their second language.

Hopefully the work of Johansson, and the permissiveness and tolerance of Cărtărescu towards her, leads the way for a true cultural interchange between Sweden and Romania, where the uniqueness of both cultures and languages are respected and protected.

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