

A BALKAN ODYSSEY OF EXCESS: A CASE STUDY OF MIRCEA CĂRTĂRESCU AND HIS LITERARY PROCESS OF BECOMING-MINORITY

VERONICA ISAILĂ*

Abstract This paper explores how Mircea Cărtărescu's most recent novel, *Theodoros*, revitalizes the concept of Balkanism in current Romanian literature through a shocking, harsh and excessively visual narrative. Our aim is to analyse a possible typology of the main character Theodoros, revealing, in fact, Mircea Cărtărescu's ability to overcome the Manicheist perspective and ironically mimic the Western discourse that watches the "barbarian" from afar and surrounds it with stereotypes. Moreover, we propose a socio-cultural reading of the novel, focusing on how the process of *becoming-minority* is depicted and how Cărtărescu's Balkan odyssey, filled with symbols, decorativism and elements of magical realism, ultimately turns into a materialization of irony.

Keywords Balkanism, becoming-minority, minor language, escaping the archetype, irony.

The Revival of Balkanism

The Balkan odyssey *Theodoros*, which fictionalizes a kernel of history, capitalizes on a series of literary motifs and symbols specific to several Romanian literary genres and recreates the Balkan "aesthetics" of modern literature, "beginning with *Istoria ieroglifică* [*Hieroglyphic history*] and brilliantly completed in the work of Mateiu Caragiale, Ion Barbu, Bucuța or even Panait Istrati,"¹ an aesthetic which Mircea Muthu said much earlier in literary criticism that "it continues now, in multiple forms, crystallizing, precisely through this process, our literary Balkanism."²

* Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. gabriela.isaila@ubbcluj.ro.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1948-5120>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2026.31.1.04>.

¹ Mircea Muthu, *Balkanismul literar românesc* [*Romanian Literary Balkanism*], vol. I (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 2002), 90: "începută cu *Istoria ieroglifică* și finalizată strălucit în opera lui Mateiu Caragiale, Ion Barbu, Bucuța sau chiar Panait Istrati" [here and below, unless otherwise specified, the translation is ours].

² Ibid.: "se continuă acum, sub multiple forme, cristalizându-se, tocmai prin acest proces, balcanismul nostru literar."

Based on the analysis of Balkanism proposed by Mircea Muthu,³ Theodoros as a character seems to be classified as *the dehumanized*, the tyrant king or the upstart, embodying, in other words, a collection of specific typologies. Simultaneously, the protagonist is characterized by a particular complexity, which exceeds the grid of value judgment in terms of *good vs. bad* and makes the eponymous character an exponent of the human condition itself, with subtle sensitivities, hidden weaknesses, devastating obsessions and the naivety common to his limited nature, because his major desire, throughout the novel, is the will to “deify” and the power to be (like) God. Therefore, in this study, we propose to analyze the construction of the main character, based on two main coordinates: on the one hand, Mircea Muthu's theorization of the concept of *balkanism*, developed on the basis of Byzantinism as the universal knowledge of the world, and, on the other hand, the premise of the complex portrayal of the protagonist, who, although conceived with the intention of being an archetypal character, reveals Cărtărescu's ability to mimic Western discourse and integrate it into an ironic-moralizing narrative and, thus, emerges from the archetype, establishing himself as *becoming-minority* through the Faustian pact of “deification.”

As a surface of interpretation, Theodoros could be perceived through the hypostasis of the Levantine figure, with an emphasis on his condition as a tyrannical leader, visible from one end of the narrative approach to the other, in which the protagonist opts for *deification of his own self*. I chose to associate the term “deification” with the hypostasis proposed for analysis, because it represents the defining feature of Theodoros as an exponent of the Southeastern European man, who, as Mircea Muthu claims, is generally made up of “contrasting states and located in an always unstable balance.”⁴ Theodoros reveals a complex character not only by having, throughout the prose, three identities, but also by his ability to hold a symptomatic attitude for several “prototypes found in all Southeastern European literatures,”⁵ being placed in a variety of references for Balkan culture, as Cărtărescu himself mentions in an interview: “Theodoros is an archetypal man who repeats himself in all eras and in all hypostases, in all avatars, but at the same time he is also a universal book.”⁶ In the same interview, the author states that the main goal of constructing the protagonist is to follow, with his help, the process of dehumanization, up to the condition of damnation:

³ Muthu, *Balkanismul literar românesc [Romanian Literary Balkanism]*, vol. I-III (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 2002).

⁴ Muthu, *Balkanismul literar românesc [Romanian Literary Balkanism]*, vol. I, 79: “stări contrastante și aflate într-un echilibru mereu instabil.”

⁵ *Ibid.*, 86: “prototipuri regășibile în toate literaturile sud-est europene.”

⁶ Mircea Cărtărescu, “Dacă îți faci cruce cu mâna năclăită de sânge va fi crucea primită? Un dialog despre omenesc, credință și tiranie cu Mircea Cărtărescu” [“If You Make a Cross with a Blood-Stained Hand, Will It Be Accepted? A Dialogue about Humanity, Faith and Tyranny with Mircea Cărtărescu”], interview by Magda Grădinaru, *Spotmedia*, December 23, 2022, <https://spotmedia.ro/stiri/opinii-si-analize/daca-iti-faci-cruce-cu-mana-naclaita-de-sange-va-fi-crucea-primita-un-dialog-despre-omenesc-credinta-si-tiranie-cu-mircea-cartarescu-video>, accessed 08.05.2026: “Theodoros este un om arhetipal care se repetă în toate epocile și în toate ipostazele, în toate avatarele, dar în același timp este și o carte universală” [here and below, unless otherwise specified, the translation is ours].

“All his life, he tried to do this. He tried to do what is impossible for human nature. Only a divine nature can do what Theodoros set out to do, that is, not just to become an emperor on earth, he wanted to become the blue emperor, who does not exist in any fairy tale.”⁷

Beyond the author's observation, the protagonist's ambition to be *everything* and have *everything* is announced by a prolepsis immediately at the beginning of the novel: “You have prostrated yourself at your own feet since you knew yourself, Theodoros, you have had no other God...”⁸ Thus, the reader is constantly left with the impossibility of deciding who Theodoros is – Tudor, the young man from Wallachia, born of Wallachian and Greek blood, Theodoros, a feared pirate and predator in the Greek Archipelago, or Tewodros II, king of Ethiopia. In outlining the three identities of the protagonist, the narrative is built through several geographical spaces, known only to the protagonist and the narrator (the voice of the Archangels), who relates the events in the second person, in the form of an accusatory discourse, reminiscent of the possible scenario of the Last Judgment:

“You would remember the winter in Ethiopia, melting in the scorching African sun, as a foreign world, the only one where Christmas smelled of walnut and poppy seed cakes, and of orange trees and mulled wine with cloves, and the air smelled of cold and torn cloth.”⁹

The narrative voice continuously addresses only Theodoros, indicating one and the same person, regardless of the name used, which is why we identify a transfer of identity similar to that in German Romanticism, illustrated by Hoffman (especially in *The Devil's Elixirs*), or even in the romanticism of Mihai Eminescu, as seen in *Sărmanul Dionis [Poor Dionysus]*. Through this magical transfer, the Wallachian protagonist, born Tudor, becomes Kassa Haile Giorgis, retaining, in return, the same character behind a different appearance. Cezar Gheorghe also notes, in connection with the narrative perspective of the novel, the fact that “The first novelty compared to Mircea Cărtărescu's previous books is that most of Theodoros' story is narrated in the second person,”¹⁰ because Cărtărescu's narrative is no longer presented from the perspective of the protagonist as

⁷ Ibid.: “Toată viața sa, el a încercat să facă acest lucru. A încercat să facă ceea ce este imposibil unei naturi umane. Numai o natură divină poate să facă ceea ce și-a propus Theodoros să facă, adică nu doar să ajungă împărat pe pământ, el a voit să ajungă împăratul albastru, care nu există în niciun basm.”

⁸ Mircea Cărtărescu, *Theodoros* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2022), 12: “Te-ai prosternat la propriile tale picioare de când te știi, Theodoros, n-ai avut alt Dumnezeu...” [here and below, unless otherwise specified, the translation is ours].

⁹ Ibid., 44: “Aveai să-ți aduci aminte de iarnă în Etiopia, ce se topea-n soarele dogorător al Africii, ca de o lume străină, singura în care Crăciunul avea mireasmă de cozonaci cu nucă și mac, și de naramze și de vin fiert cu cuișoare, iar aerul mirosea a frig și-a pânză sfâșiată.”

¹⁰ Cezar Gheorghe, “Theodoros – o sinteză a etosului valah” [“Theodoros – A Synthesis of the Wallachian Ethos”], *Observer cultural*, February 28, 2023, no. 1148, <https://www.observercultural.ro/articol/theodoros-o-sinteza-a-etosului-valah/>, accessed 08.05.2026: “Prima noutate față de cărțile precedente ale lui Mircea Cărtărescu este că cea mai mare parte din povestea lui Theodoros este narată la persoana a II-a” [here and below, unless otherwise specified, the translation is ours].

a transmitter, who recounted his deeds according to the model of a confession or a personal diary, but moves to an external character. This time, the protagonist is the recipient, and the narrator presents another element of novelty, specific to the Christian rhetoric, identifiable in a Balkan script, as Mihnea Bâlici noted: “In *Theodoros*, Christian cosmology overlaps the book's narratology. It will be shown that the second-person narrators are, in fact, the Archangels in heaven themselves.”¹¹ This also justifies the recipient position which the protagonist acquires in this novel, atypically for Cărtărescu's prose, the novel *Theodoros* itself becoming the protagonist's Book of Life, prepared by the Archangels, “which God will read at the Last Judgment.”¹² Thus, the narrator describes Theodoros from the very beginning, suggestively, through his status as king on the Ethiopian Orthodox throne, at the same time anticipating his tragic end, which occurred as a result of his own choices:

“Tewodros II, whose real name was Kassa Haile Giorgis, had been one of the warrior princes who had fought for power for centuries, the most trivial and the most mocked of them, because he had no descendant of the sacred Solomonic line among his ancestors and because the rumor that his mother had sold kosso, a cure for worms, in her youth was much laughed at, but in the end, by some miracle of determination and bravery, he had destroyed his enemies and made his way to the throne, becoming the first negus to interrupt the millennia-old dynasty of Solomon and Menelik.”¹³

The presentation of Theodoros is built from the beginning, as I mentioned, on his status as king of Ethiopia, which is also the peak of the character's journey, considering both his social status and his journey of *becoming-tyrant*, borrowing the terms of Deleuze and Guattari (from *A Thousand Plateaus*) referring to *becoming-minority*.

Theodoros – The Balkan Character Surprised in the Process of *Becoming-Minority*

In their analysis, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari state that there is no majority, nor is there an independent minority, the two concepts being codependent and impossible to avoid in defining society. Moreover, the problem posed by the two poststructuralists is not establishing a

¹¹ Mihnea Bâlici, “Ted,” *Scena9*, February 8, 2023, <https://www.scena9.ro/article/cronica-theodoros-mircea-cartarescu>, accessed 08.05.2026: “In *Theodoros*, cosmologia creștină se suprapune peste naratologia cărții. Se va dovedi că povestitorii la persoana a II-a sunt, de fapt, înșiși Arhanghelii din ceruri” [here and below, unless otherwise specified, the translation is ours].

¹² Gheorghe, “Theodoros – o sinteză a etosului valah” [“Theodoros – A Synthesis of the Wallachian Ethos”]: “pe care Dumnezeu o va citi la Judecata de Apoi.”

¹³ Cărtărescu, *Theodoros*, 31: “Tewodros II, pe numele lui adevărat Kassa Haile Giorgis, fusese unul dintre prinții războinici ce luptaseră de secole pentru putere, cel mai mărunț și cel mai batjocorit dintre ei, fiindcă nu-și avea între strămoși nici un coborâtor din sacra linie solomonică, și fiindcă se râdea mult de zvonul că mama lui vânduse în tinerețe kosso, un leac pentru limbrici, dar în cele din urmă, printr-un fel de miracol de hotărâre și bravură, își distrusese dușmanii și-și croise drum către tron, devenind primul negus ce întrerupea dinastia lui Solomon și Menelik, veche de milenii.”

relationship between what is majority and what is minority, but constitutes precisely the term of “becoming”, hence the minority presupposes the existence of the majority in order to be observed in its becoming:

“There is a majority ‘fact’, but it is the analytical fact of No One, which opposes the becoming-minority of everyone. This is why we must distinguish: the majority as a homogeneous and constant system, minorities as subsystems, and the minority as potential and created, creative becoming. The problem is never acquiring the majority, even by establishing a new constant. There is no becoming-majority; majority is never a becoming. There is only becoming-minority.”¹⁴

We refer to Deleuze and Guattari's theory in the configuration of the character Theodoros, because we consider that, independently of his archetypal construction, confirmed by the author himself, the protagonist of the Balkan novel is ultimately a much deeper literary product, embodying a complexity that goes beyond the typology of the tyrant, in which he establishes himself by fighting for the supremacy of power. This complexity is also due to the fact that, in certain narrative episodes, the protagonist is surprised in his deeply human side, sensitive to feelings, but also ironized for his own choices. Furthermore, his typology is built in a world seen as “peripheral” through the prism of certain stereotypes (even *minor* through association with Western powers, representative of *the major*), which allows us to observe the character Theodoros is his *becoming-minority*, having on his side the *individualization* in a minor language:

“There is a restraint and a variation that are like a minor treatment of the standard language, a becoming-minor of the major language. The problem is not one of a distinction between major and minor language, but one of becoming.”¹⁵

Considering this aspect, we propose to analyze the main character Theodoros from the perspective of writing in a minor language, in a culture perceived as “peripheral,” in which the overall vision is characterized by *freedom, essence, excesses, contrastive states*, in Mircea Muthu's terms, and, at the same time, by a significant religious influence. As a consequence, Cărtărescu chooses the Romanian language considering not only the narrative construction, but also the content's essence, making it a symbol of vulnerability because, in intimacy, Theodoros always uses

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux [A Thousand Plateaus]* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980), 134: “Il y a un ‘fait’ majoritaire, mais c'est le fait analytique de Personne, qui s'oppose au devenir-minoritaire de tout le monde. C'est pourquoi nous devons distinguer: le majoritaire comme système homogène et constant, les minorités comme soussystèmes, et le minoritaire comme devenir potentiel et créé, créatif. Le problème n'est jamais d'acquérir la majorité, même en instaurant une nouvelle constante. Il n'y a pas de devenir majoritaire, majorité n'est jamais un devenir. Il n'y a de devenir que minoritaire” [here and below, unless otherwise specified, the translation is ours].

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13: “il y a une sobriété et une variation qui sont comme un traitement mineur de la langue standard, un devenir-mineur de la langue majeure. Le problème n'est pas celui d'une distinction entre langue majeure et langue mineure, mais celui d'un devenir.”

Romanian, the language of his childhood: “From the first moments with her, you called her, in Romanian, ‘Porumbița’ [The Little Dove], and that’s how her name remained.”¹⁶ Therefore, we propose to demonstrate that precisely this choice of the minor language is the only way to access the path of *becoming-minority* and to undermine the supremacy of the majority, because literature escapes the system¹⁷, as Gayatri Spivak memorably states, and the author is the only one who has the mechanism to turn a minor language into a major one:

“Minor languages do not exist in and of themselves: existing only in relation to a major language, they are also investments made by that major language to make it itself minor. Each person must find the minor language, dialect, or rather idiolect, from which they will make their own major language minor.”¹⁸

The choice of writing in a minor language, such as Romanian, and, moreover, the use of a specific idiolect, made up of allogenuous lexical areas, such as Slavic, Greek, Turkish, is similar to Kafka’s choice to write in a dialect of German, with the aim of deterritorializing the major language: “The issue is not about re-territorializing oneself through a dialect or patois, but about deterritorializing the dominant language.”¹⁹ Therefore, in our study, we propose to overcome the framing of the main character in a pre-established concept by outlining it as a complex portrayal of the *Levantine*, which, captured in several geographical and cultural areas and placed in relation to the Western environment, maintains its power as a minor culture. This *becoming-minority* allows the character to maintain his own control even in the interaction with empires (implicitly, majoritarians), but he cracks this stability on his own due to choosing the villainy, a behavior confirmed by the author himself:

“Theodoros is ambitious. In fact, that is his essential definition. He is a man who could have been a very good man. He is a man who has many qualities, of all kinds, but who from the beginning made a choice.”²⁰

¹⁶ Cărtărescu, *Theodoros*, 424: “Din primele clipe cu ea i-ai zis, pe rumânește, «Porumbița», și așa i-a rămas numele.”

¹⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 52 (“Literature is what escapes the system; you cannot speed read it. The figure ‘is’ irreducible”).

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux [A Thousand Plateaus]*, 132-133: “Les langues mineures n’existent pas en soi: n’existant que par rapport à une langue majeure, ce sont aussi des investissements de cette langue pour qu’elle devienne elle-même mineure. Chacun doit trouver la langue mineure, dialecte ou plutôt idiolecte, à partir de laquelle il rendra mineure sa propre langue majeure.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 132: “La question n’est pas de se reterritorialiser sur un dialecte ou un patois, mais de déterritorialiser la langue majeure.”

²⁰ Cărtărescu, interview: “Theodoros este un ambițios. De fapt, asta este definiția lui esențială. Este un om care ar fi putut fi un om foarte bun. E un om care are multe calități, de toate felurile, dar care încă de la început a făcut o alegere.”

The choice invoked by Cărtărescu constitutes an important element of our analysis regarding the eponymous character Theodoros. It is a choice for which the author is criticized²¹ because he maintains the conventional conflict *faith vs. free will*, making the narrative slide (only in appearance) right towards the clichéd delimitation of *good vs. bad*:

“He made a choice that was not favourable to him, but which was probably inevitable, because otherwise the book could not have been written. Namely, he chose between will and faith. He chose between will and faith, believing that they were one and the same thing, believing that by his own will he would be able to make the fig tree uproot itself and plant itself in the sea, as an evangelical parable shows.”²²

However, regardless of the author's attempts to lead the interpretation towards an archetype of Theodoros, his hero exposes from the very beginning, during his childhood in Wallachia, the problematic *vanity* and the *typical Levantine* spirit, because the first words ever spoken are “I want!”²³, the choice of becoming the *dominus* defining his complex life, driven by the force of “I want”. Placing his entire existence under the umbrella of “I want”, the novel depicts, throughout the narrative, Theodoros' vanity and his obsessive desire to have *the everything*, to find the whole of the word *SAVAOTH*, to seize the highest point of power, to rise to extreme hedonism, to dominate and, last but not least, to possess another soul, something that is always denied to him, as seen in the rejection by Stamatina and in the death of Porumbița [The Little Dove], his first wife during his reign in Ethiopia: “For the world will not end with you, no matter how great you become.”²⁴

Upon closer inspection, we notice that the narrator admonishes Theodoros for his own arrogance by paraphrasing biblical verses, which attribute only to God all “endless” gifts, the “endless world”, and the power to end even the world itself: “For Christ is the end of the Law” (*Romans 10:4*). A discreet theological dimension is noticeable in the Balkan stylistics, because Theodoros wants to be (as) God, so he speaks of himself as a God, and the Archangels admonish him during the narrative, ironically suggesting that the divine being is unique and unrepeatable,

²¹ Bâlici, “Ted”: “In *Theodoros*, Christian cosmology overlaps the book's narratology. It will turn out that the second-person narrators are, in fact, the Archangels in heaven themselves. Of course, it is not a purist religiosity: even Solomon is a womanizer who tries to seduce Queen Makeda into bed. At the same time, there is no space for representation for life outside Judeo-Christian mythology, let alone life outside mythology, period” (“In *Theodoros*, cosmologia creștină se suprapune peste naratologia cărții. Se va dovedi că povestitorii la persoana a II-a sunt, de fapt, înșiși Arhanghelii din ceruri. Sigur, nu este o religiozitate puristă: până și Solomon este un afemeiat care încearcă s-o ademenească pe regina Makeda în pat. În același timp, nu există niciun spațiu de reprezentare pentru viața din afara mitologiei iudeo-creștine, darămite pentru viața din afara mitologiei și punct”).

²² Cărtărescu, interview: “A făcut o alegere care nu i-a fost favorabilă, dar care probabil că era inevitabilă, pentru că altfel cartea nu s-ar mai fi putut scrie. Și anume, el a ales între voință și credință. A ales între voință și credință, crezând că sunt unul și același lucru, crezând că prin voință proprie el va putea face ca smochinul să se smulgă din rădăcinile sale și să se sădească în mare, așa cum arată o parabolă evanghelică.”

²³ Cărtărescu, *Theodoros*, 65: “Vleau!”

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 466: “Căci lumea nu se va sfârși cu tine, oricât de mare o să ajungi.”

and Theodoros' own "deification" path only creates a ridiculous situation. What surprises us, from a linguistic point of view, is the fact that the narrator, namely the Archangels, uses the same "Balkan" language, with frequent lexemes from other Slavic languages, expressions and idioms from the Balkan universe, expressed through parables or even through biblical phrases, rewritten in a remarkable *minor language game*. In order to briefly observe such lexemes, we offer the original Romanian quote:

"Dar tu știai prea bine, Theodoros. Fără să-l rețeze nimeni în cubea de sticlă, fără sânge și fără buruieni de leac, capul tău se odihnea deja pe umerii săi, iar capul său pe umerii tăi, și erai de-acum Kassa Haile Giorgis din Kwara, războinic etiop sărac și cu faimă rea, căci maica ta vindea kosso pentru limbrici."²⁵

The so-called Balkan language is depicted through the noun "cubea," from Turkish *kubbe*, which means "dome," the noun "sticlă," which is an archaic form of the modern "sticlă" [glass], and the noun "buruieni," plural form of "buruiană," which refers to a parasitic plant that grows everywhere and is not intentionally cultivated. This lexem has roots in Slavic **burĭjanŭ*, in Bulgarian *bŭren*, and in Russian and Ukrainian, *bur'ján*. The narrative discourse is rich in such particular linguistic choices, suggestively reinforcing the idea of *minor culture* that becomes *major* with the use of a *minor language*.

Escaping the Archetype

Symptomatic to the Balkan writing, Theodoros' destiny is filled with symbolic objects, whose subversive meanings reveal that his suffering does not focus on the loss of *the otherness*, but on *the loss of a possession*, showing the ultimate torture: the impossibility of supreme control over *the everything*. In addition to all the wealth and goods that he acquires, most often by physical force, rebellion and violence or crimes, Theodoros' wealth is paradoxically reduced to that small symbolic object "taken from his chest, next to the consecrated wooden cross, the oval icon that you never parted with."²⁶ This object is, however, not a religious relic, but the photograph of Stamatina, his lover from Wallachia, to whom he is bound by an oath of love. The figure and name of that lost lover are the only indicators of weakness in Theodoros, the feared beast of the Balkans: "You added nothing more to this word, you quickly tucked the icon into your bosom, as if you were ashamed to show it so easily to a stranger."²⁷ Thus, Theodoros is configured as a complex character, and it would be wrong to assume that he only represents *the dehumanized*, because the novel manages to avoid this simplistic logic in various other ways, especially through

²⁵ Ibid., 207: "But you knew too well, Theodoros. Without anyone cutting him in the glass dome, without blood and without medicinal parasitic plants, your head was already resting on his shoulders, and his head on your shoulders, and you were now Kassa Haile Giorgis of Kwara, a poor Ethiopian warrior with a bad reputation, because your mother sold kosso for worms."

²⁶ Ibid., 110: "scos din sân, de lângă crucea de lemn sfințit, icoana ovală de care nu te despărțai niciodată."

²⁷ Ibid., 111: "N-ai mai adăugat nimic la cuvântul acesta, și-ai vârât repede icoana în sân, de parcă te-ai fi rușinat c-ai arătat-o așa de ușor unui strain."

Theodoros's idyll with Stamatina, as a result of which the character reveals his own weakness. Cărtărescu himself states that his efforts in writing the novel were focused on avoiding both judging Theodoros on the basis of *good vs. bad*, as I have already stated, as well as its perception in Manicheist logic:

“one of our greatest writers today, told me the following: what I appreciated most in *Theodoros* is his lack of Manichaeism, his lack of black and white thinking. And I was very grateful for that, because all my effort went there.”²⁸

In many other key moments of the novel, the protagonist is, in fact, emblematic of the generic type of man guided by weaknesses. His deeply human side and the lack of absolute control give us the opportunity to talk about a possible *homo duplex*:

“So here I wanted to make not a tyrant per se, but a much more complex character, a man who loved only one woman his whole life, although he had countless others, a man who loved the idea of divinity very much [...], but a man who above them, in fact, loved his own destruction. Or, as it is also said in an evangelical parable, he gave his own soul to gain the world.”²⁹

In this case, who is Theodoros, in fact? An archetypal character or a materialization of the Southeastern cultural and mental space in a complex destiny, capable of overcoming the archetypal limit?

In the universe of Wallachia, the main character is born as Tudor, the child of servants, who gradually reveals his power of domination, eventually moving towards the status of *the robber* and *leader*, Theodoros, then to the one of *the tyrant king*, Tewodros II. The capacity of persuasion and domination make him a self-proclaimed leader, capable of revealing the limited human nature in the episodic characters, who are, most of the time, the masses. They choose him as the leader of the flock and reveal, through this gesture, that they need Theodoros as a harsh and evil guide, ironically depicted by the narrator:

“Then your wild nature as a tyrant would show itself, for you were the leader of all the mischief in every madness you committed, and the other children feared you more than their fathers, for you punished them more severely. But they also loved you, because without you they would not have known what to do all day.”³⁰

²⁸ Adela Greceanu, “Timpul prezent în literatură: Mașinăria narativă a lui Mircea Cărtărescu” [“The Present Time in Literature: The Narrative Machinery of Mircea Cărtărescu”], *Radio România Cultural*, November 25, 2022, <https://www.radioromaniacultural.ro/emisiuni/timpul-prezent/timpul-prezent-in-literatura-masinaria-narativa-a-lui-mircea-cartaescu-id35146.html>, accessed 08.05.2026: “unul dintre cei mai mari scriitori ai noștri de astăzi, mi-a spus următorul lucru: ce am apreciat cel mai tare în *Theodoros* este lipsa lui de maniheism, lipsa de gândire în alb și negru. Și am fost foarte recunoscător pentru asta, pentru că tot efortul meu s-a dus acolo” [here and below, unless otherwise specified, the translation is ours].

²⁹ Cărtărescu, interview: “ea într-o parabolă evanghelică, și-a dat propriul suflet ca să câștige lumea”.

³⁰ Cărtărescu, *Theodoros*, 118: „Atunci se-arăta firea ta sălbatică de tiran, căci erai capul răutăților în fiecare

Therefore, Theodoros becomes the symbol of the “minority” in the Southeastern European space, but, at the same time, he represents the major force for his minor culture: “The majority presupposes a state of power and domination, not the other way around. It presupposes the standard of measurement, not the other way around.”³¹ When we choose to associate the expression “necessary evil” with the protagonist, we are not referring to that conventional evil, which is an external stimulus for the good, like any negative character in the Balkan fairy tales. What we talk about, in exchange, is that the evil here acts according to the ancient principle *divide and impera*. This is Theodoros, as he dreamed of since childhood, becoming “Alexander the Great,”³² the leader who everyone wants and who climbs directly into dictatorship, despite his tyrannical character greater than evil.

Moreover, the portrait of the protagonist is achieved through a strong, visible and intentional irony throughout the entire novel, sensed through the rhetorical questions: “Where has the son of a servant ever been seen beating a master's offspring?”³³ Although, he manages to defy death and even proclaim himself *master* through the identity theft of Kassa Haile Georgis, taking possession of the throne of Ethiopia, Theodoros will be considered nothing more than a servant's son, his humble origin always being invoked along with the lack of a descendant of “Solomonic bone.” Theodoros' sensitivity regarding his own origin and the perpetuation of his blood after death creates a *closed circle* in his destiny. This could be seen as a downright moralizing option, supported by the fact that the entire narrative is told through the voice of the Archangels, because the tyrant and upstart character is denied perpetuation and continuity even in the *earthly* world: “The will of man stops at the borders of his skin.”³⁴ As a result, moral and ethical ambiguity become some of the most important characteristics of the Balkan mental geography of the novel.

The ironic tone can be considered another element specific to Balkanism, which Cărtărescu abundantly makes use of, recalling Mircea Muthu's perspective on this: “seen through the lens of history, Balkanism does not mean only artifice, decorativism or suburbanite elements, but a drama with its parodic reverse, which has received the tragic accent more than once.”³⁵ In such situations, Ioana Bot believes that irony can express a form of commitment with a double interpretation, ethical and poetic: “Subversion, irony, the play with the forms of realistic, and journalistic prose, lead, in fact, to the expression of a defining commitment: as an ethical attitude,

nebuie pe care-o făceați, și copiii ceilalți se temeau de tine mai tare decât de tătâni lor, căci tu-i pedepseai mai rău. Dar te și iubeau, fiindcă fără tine n-ar fi știut ce să facă toată ziua”.

³¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux [A Thousand Plateaus]*, 133: “La majorité suppose un état de pouvoir et de domination, et non l'inverse. Elle suppose le mètre-étalon et non l'inverse.”

³² Cărtărescu, *Theodoros*, 115: “Alixandru Machidon.”

³³ *Ibid.*, 118: “Unde s-a mai văzut fiu de slugă să-l bată pe-un cocon de boier?”

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 123: “Voia omului se oprește la fruntariile pielii sale.”

³⁵ Muthu, *Balkanismul literar românesc [Romanian Literary Balkanism]*, vol. I, 10: “privit prin lentila istoriei, balcanismul nu înseamnă doar artificiu, decorativism sau mahalagism, ci o dramă cu reversul său parodic și care a primit nu o dată accentul tragic.”

but also as *poetic option*.³⁶ In the case of *Theodoros*, the stakes of this engagement are precisely in establishing the balance between “aesthetic achievement and moral sanction.”³⁷ Authorial irony is visible in the Solomon's judgment regarding the true mother of a stolen baby, an episode through which the narrator projects his moral sanction obliquely onto Theodoros, who is the antipode of the wise man: “For it was not the soulless laws that killed or spared, as it was written in the book, but the deep knowledge of the human soul that had shown the king his wonderful judgment.”³⁸ Also, through irony, Theodoros is sanctioned for choosing the villainy because he is denied any attempt to have an heir to the throne born of “Solomon's bone” and, moreover, he has neither the wisdom nor the appreciation that Solomon enjoyed as king, these shortcomings producing within him the permanent feeling of *deficiency*.

One of the narrator's sarcastic comments suggests that, no matter how many titles he arrogates to himself when he becomes king in Ethiopia, Theodoros remains a small earthling in the middle of the Southeastern world, ignored, in the end, by both the great powers and by his beloved: “the last titles of the twenty or so of the official imperial nomenclature had been written very small, to fit on the envelope.”³⁹ The only absolute is in the divine, which leads us to believe that Theodoros is the one being constantly ironized in the second-person speech of the Archangels, whose mission is to remind him that he *is not* and *he will never be* God. The will of “deification” is therefore a *hubris* for Theodoros, expressing the immeasurable pride of an individual in the confrontation with destiny, considered sources of tragedy in ancient Greek theater. This idea connects him to another character of Mihai Eminescu's literature, Dionis, who becomes Dan after he is doubled, believing himself, for a moment, God. He is punished by falling from Heaven, a moment also experienced by Theodoros in the climax of the novel:

“That's the question, Dan said slowly, the enigma that penetrated my being. Don't they sing what I think?... Doesn't the world move as I want? Am I not, without knowing it, G[od]...’ Vum! The sound of a giant bell – the death of the sea, the fall of the sky – the vaults were breaking, their blue half was splitting, and Dan felt himself giddy and immersed in infinity. Rivers of lightning followed him, crowds of ancient thunder, the roar of infinity that trembled in motion... Oh, unhappy thought! he mumbled.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Ioana Bot, *Icoane și privazuri [Icons and Windowsills]* (Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2021), 11: “Subversiunea, ironia, jocul cu formele prozei realiste, jurnalistice, conduc, de fapt, spre expresia unei angajări definitorii: ca atitudine etică, dar și ca *opțiune poetică*” [here and below, unless otherwise specified, the translation is ours].

³⁷ Muthu, *Balkanismul literar românesc [Romanian Literary Balkanism]*, vol. I, 236: “realizarea estetică și sancțiunea morală.”

³⁸ Cărtărescu, *Theodoros*, 237: “Căci nu legile fără suflet, ce omorau sau cruțau, după cum scria-n carte, ci adâncă știință a sufletului omenesc îi arătase regelui minunata judecată.”

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 85: “ultimele titluri dintre cele vreo douăzeci ale nomenclaturii imperiale oficiale fuseseră scrise foarte mărunț, ca să încapă pe plic.”

⁴⁰ Mihai Eminescu, *Opere [Works]*, vol. VII: *Proza literară [Literary Prose]* (București: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1977), 107: “‘Asta-i întrebarea, zise Dan încet, enigma ce pătrundea ființa mea. Oare nu cântă ei ceea ce gândesc eu?... Oare nu se mișcă lumea cum voi eu? El strânse c-o întunecată durere

The influence of Eminescu's romanticism, an important component revived by Cărtărescu at every opportunity, is felt even in the mental foundation of his villain character Theodoros. However, in this case, the irony of the Archangels becomes a main technique in the act of narration, which sanctions the protagonist until the end of the novel. We admit that, under the aspect of the hubris of the “deification” of one's own being, the archetypal character desired by Cărtărescu is reproduced, and identified in all eras, even in Eminescu's work, and it will be captured, this time, in the Levantine type, created through a Balkan aesthetic and mental imaginary.

Last, but not least, the irony in *Theodoros* is projected not only to the main character, but also to the divine narrator, the Archangels, who borrow the epicurean feelings of human beings in a rare the thirst for pleasure:

“How many times have we prayed to have the burden of eternity lifted from our shoulders, how many times have we wished we were just flesh and blood, so that we too could feel, like stupid and ordinary people, the wild taste of happiness!”⁴¹

Worth noting in this case is the projection of an earthly life from the angelic narrators when they address Theodoros directly, built on the same Balkan mental foundation, with the same language and with similar temptations as human characters. At a deeper interpretation, applying a “wild taste of happiness” to Archangels suggests the impossibility of “deification” and absolute control, regardless of the status held because not even the divine forces could be as strong as the Divine. From a compositional point of view, we can distinguish a tone similar to Hyperion from Eminescu's *Lucașfărușul* [*The Star*]: “Restore to me the halo of immortality/ And the fire in your gaze,/ And for everything give me in return/ An hour of love,”⁴² which becomes, in *Theodoros*: “Then our wings fluttered more loudly, and the halos illuminated us more palely, and the longing for mortal life overwhelmed us like a great love that we could no longer understand.”⁴³ Therefore, in Cărtărescu's Balkan narrative, the Archangels, symbols of purity and goodness, are transformed into *people of the Heavens*, with human temptations. They seem to descend from the absolute

pe Maria la inima lui. Hurmuzul pământului ardea în salba ei de mărgăritare... *Oare fără s-o știu nu sunt eu însumi Dumne...!* Vum! Sunetul unui clopot urieșesc – moartea mării, căderea cerului – bolțile se rupeau, jumalțul lor albastru se despica, și Dan se simți trăsnet și afundat în nemărginire. Râuri de fulgere îl urmăreau, popoare de tunete bătrâne, viurea nemărginirii ce tremura mișcată... O, gând nefericit! aiuri el” [here and below, unless otherwise specified, the translation is ours].

⁴¹ Cărtărescu, *Theodoros*, 174: “De câte ori nu ne-am rugat să ni se ia de pe umeri povara vecinicii, de câte ori n-am fi vrut să fim doar cărnuri și sânziuri, ca să putem și noi simți, ca oamenii proști și de rând, gustul sălbatec al fericirii!”

⁴² Eminescu, *Opere* [Works], vol. I (Bucharest: Fundația pentru literatură și artă „Regele Carol I”, 1939), 177: “Reia-mi al nemuririi nimb/ Și focul din privire,/ Și pentru toate dă-mi în schimb/ O oră de iubire” [here, the translation is ours].

⁴³ Cărtărescu, *Theodoros*, 394: “Atunci aripele ni se-nfoiau mai tare, și nimburile ne luminau mai pal, și dorul de viață muritoare ne copleșea ca o mare dragoste ce n-o mai puteam pricepe.”

high, in order to express the fact that the Divine is singular and everything else can be subjected to temptation. But the ultimate sin is committed by Theodoros, who, although he knows his human limits, falls into the temptation of absolute, hence the novel itself becomes a mockery of his own naive character who is unable to perceive the true power and essence of the world.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, although the main character's life has a perpetual *deficiency* due to his impossibility to achieve the absolute, the narrative construction could be an antithesis because the novel offers the feeling of *overflow*, collecting a variety of literary symbols, subversive meanings and lavish images, which complete the atmosphere of a true *Balkan odyssey*, and remarkably revitalizes this literary concept in current Romanian literature. Furthermore, Theodoros, *the Balkan character* that memorably depicts the process of *becoming-minority*, on the one hand, emerges from the archetype and overcomes the authorial intention, but, on the other hand, is constantly punished for his obsessions and for his will to “deify,” ultimately being forced to endure the entire novel as an irony to his doomed destiny.