

Is there “sincerity” in the literary imagery of Mircea Cărtărescu’s novel *Solenoid*?

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Mircea Cărtărescu. *Solenoid*. Sincerity. Authenticity. Postmodernism.

Sincerity is a highly esteemed ethical value in contemporary societies. However, it is not to be confused with authenticity, as both have different ethical premises, artistic performances, and social implications. In this article, I try to outline the difference between the categories of “sincerity” and “authenticity” and, on this basis, to present their literary representation in the novel *Solenoid* by the contemporary Romanian author Mircea Cărtărescu. His work, although largely reflexive, is characterized by an immense imaginative, surrealistic interweaving of dream and reality, expressed through an almost “baroque” imagery and a language rich in metaphors. To what extent and in what ways can such a stylized mode of writing express sincerity? In seeking an answer to this question, I also take into account different types of epitexts (the author’s diaries, essays and interviews).

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The Romanian poet and novelist Mircea Cărtărescu, a representative of the Generation '80 and of the literary "Optecism" derived from it, i.e., the Romanian version of literary postmodernism, is the benchmark of this creative modality for Romanian literature. According to literary historians and theorists (Manolescu 2008; Lefter 2000; Iovănel 2021; Terian 2020; Vajdová, Páleníková, and Kenderessy 2017), this is evidenced in particular by his interdiscursive textualist works, in which questions of literariness – "rhetorical sophistication" (van Alphen and Bal 2009, 2) – and the search for the aesthetic as well as epistemological value of literature play an important role. Therefore, the question of why I ask about "sincerity" as depicted in the literary work of this author in the title of the present study is relevant.

I chose Cărtărescu's novel *Solenoid* (2015) for several reasons. The first reason is literary-social, as the novel enjoys popularity in Romania; internationally, it has gained considerable prominence, especially through its Spanish and English translations and their awards.¹ The second reason involves a poetic nature: the novel has a special place in Cărtărescu's work precisely because it renders the subject's rejection of literature as "artifice" and illusion at the expense of an unstylized, authentic (or sincere?) performance of the self; but, paradoxically, this is done through literature. The third motif, then, is implicitly philosophical: among many other aspects, the novel *Solenoid* represents an existential, ontological stance of rejection of literature as an autonomous work of art, for which, so it seems to me, the author has chosen, among other mechanisms, the rhetoric of sincerity.² I will attempt to describe the latter in what follows, once I have outlined the concept of sincerity and its literary representations which form the basis of my approach.

CONCEPTS OF SINCERITY AND ITS LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS

Sincerity is an ethical value or moral ideal that has accompanied, at least, European civilization as a philosophical or theological axiom for a long time, though at different times and in different places with different emphases. Contemporary Western thinking on sincerity, as expressed in literature, however, most often repeats its frequently cited definition – "the congruence between avowal and actual feeling" – by the American literary historian Lionel Trilling, who in his work *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972, 2) described the dynamics of these concepts, especially in literature and philosophy, from the 16th to the first half of the 20th centuries. According to him, while sincerity has grown in value since Shakespeare's time, it was authenticity that rose to prominence with the emergence of the modern subject in the 18th century and onward. This paradigm shift, according to Trilling, was related first to the development of the idea of "self-truthfulness", and later in the 20th century to the existentialist rejection of sincerity.

Although sincerity – whether as a theoretical frame or its artistic representations – has been supplanted by modernist conceptions of subjectivity that emphasize authenticity and personal drama, as well as by postmodernist concepts that relativize

or treat it with irony, literature and its contemporary scholarly reflections demonstrate that it still appears to have persisted and continues to persist in different discourses (van Alphen and Bal 2008, 4ff; Rutten 2017; Kelly 2024).

In literature, modernism, according to Trilling, as well as postmodernism, according to Adam Kelly (2024), increased the distance between artistic and social realities, between authorship and readership with an “aesthetics of impersonality” and, to quote David Foster Wallace, “elevated aesthetics to the level of ethics” (as cited in Kelly 2024, 8). In his book *New Sincerity: American Fiction in the Neoliberal Age* (2024), Kelly describes the turn to the “new sincerity” since the 1990s in the US literature as a reaction to the earlier literature of modernism and postmodernism (but also as a politically engaged stance towards neoliberalism), and he argues that the literature of the “new sincerity” aims not only to establish a relationship of truthfulness to the subject, but is also a way of being true to others, thus having the reader, amongst others, in mind. Sincerity, he argues, has a public moral goal, “as a fundamentally social practice, [...] is not only other-directed but depends for its very possibility on acknowledgment by another, acknowledgment that is in significant part an act of trust” (2024, 3). Thus, in the act of sincerity, the writer’s offer meets the reader’s expectation. And Kelly adds: “‘Real lived life’ is understood to be what the reader wants from fiction, and it is incumbent on authors to cast aside elitist pretensions and meet their reader halfway” (8).

To conclude, I add the view of sincerity and authenticity as philosophical and ethical categories presented by the Romanian philosopher Daniel Nica, who, despite the similarities – as he writes “[t]ransparency, openness, self-knowledge, direct expression, the struggle against artificialized language and the acceptance of the self, [...] here is a linguistic arsenal that can claim to be both a vocabulary of sincerity and authenticity”³ (2018, 522) –, considers the main difference in their social implications. Following Trilling’s approach, Nica finds a distinctive feature between authenticity and sincerity precisely in social conventionality – while authenticity described by modernist (and also postmodernist, in my opinion) literature is, in his view, a polemical and critical concept toward the society which highlights individual desires, pre-modernist literary sincerity, and I would add, in consonance with the “new sincerity” poetics and rhetoric theorists, seeks to remain in a relationship (not only positive) with society’s – and thus implicitly also with the readership’s – values and expectations.

However, I do not want this theoretical basis to imply an evaluative, let alone binary, understanding of the concepts of authenticity and sincerity. I treat them as axiologically complementary categories. As stated above, both can manifest only through self-knowledge and are performatively very similar; what distinguishes them, though, is the degree of the need for social recognition or engagement, which also implies social control: “the moral ideal of sincerity becomes a means by which the community, on the one hand, controls the consistency between our statements and actions and, on the other hand, the alignment between our actions and dominant values” (Nica 2018, 523). A situation may thus arise in which the desire or need for sincerity leads the subject to inauthenticity.

NOVEL SOLENOID: THE PROTAGONIST AND HIS AUTHENTICITY

The genre-ambiguous 850-page labyrinthine novel *Solenoid*, which according to several critics, “does not excel in construction” (Crețu 2016, n.p.; Manolescu 2016, n.p.), is, as Andrei Terian puts it, “combining biographical elements with encyclopaedic depth, hyperrealist scenarios with dreamlike imagery, intertextual wit with metaphysical strands – and, taking this into consideration, legitimately classifiable as a maximalist novel” (2022, 327). In line with the classification of *Solenoid* as a post-modern maximalist novel and part of the “maximalist autofiction” subgenre (Mironescu and Mironescu 2021, 68), it can also be described as a philosophical parable, resembling both a Bildungsroman and a psychological drama up to its first quarter, conveyed entirely through the introspection of an autodiegetic, internally focalized narrator. Gradually, epic narratives from the hero’s life, historical digressions, both with elements of fantasy and science fiction, as well as romantic and erotic passages, are added. The construction of a novel of 51 chapters is challenging – the narrator’s recounting often slides into analepses and prolepses, the stories in each chapter weaving in and out of each other through the mechanisms of association. In term of narrative, although the novel resembles a diary – it is a personal notebook –, its content does not reflect the daily routine; moreover, the individual chapters do not even homogeneously describe coherent stories.

The nameless narrator, a young primary school teacher on the outskirts of Bucharest, according to social and material references sometime in the 1980s, and also the main character of the novel *Solenoid* “want[s] to write a report of [his] anomalies” (Cărtărescu 2022, 70). However, he does not intend to use any of the conventional literary genres because “a novel would muddy the facts, would make them ambiguous” (54), and he no longer believes in poetry or other fictional literature because:

The only text that should ever be read are the unartistic and unliterary ones, bitter and incomprehensible books that their authors were crazy to write, but which flowed from their dementia, sadness, and despair like springs of holy water. Issachar. Hermann. Le Horla. Malte. And hundreds of faceless voices whose every page is written with the only word that matters: me. Never him, never her, never you. Me, the section through time of the impossible fourth person. (209)

He thus keeps notes in four notebooks – corresponding to the four parts of the novel – which are not intended for publication because, as the narrator states, “No book has any meaning if it is not a Gospel” (211). He writes something that is not meant to be an ordinary literary work, but an authentic description of subjective reality as perceived and experienced by the protagonist’s self during approximately six years in “his” city called Bucharest, and as it intertwines with the world of his reflections, memories, and with the “reality” of dreams – transcriptions of dreams from earlier diaries that “relate to my nocturnal or phantasmatic or hallucinatory life – [...] more real, however, than reality” (215). In addition to reflective musings, mostly on the subject of literature and the narrator’s role in it, readers learn about his childhood, the loss of his brother Victor, his twin, his fear of doctors and ambulances, his youth, his military service, his time at school, in short, about his

“anomalies”, as Mircea Cărtărescu planned to title this book, according to his diary *Un om care scrie: Jurnal 2011–2017* (A man who writes: Diary 2018, 337, 347, 362, 385), and about Bucharest, a city that “appeared all at once, already ruined” (2022, 25).

The narrator reserves for himself the role of both writer and sole reader of his work:

I will be the only writer/reader of this story, the purpose of which, I'll say for the tenth time, is nonaesthetic and nonliterary. I have no other pretension than being the writer/reader/liver of my own life. It could be the biography of a louse or a mite, but it would still be just as important as my own skin, because I am that obscure creature, the tunnels where I swarm are my own, the excrements: mine, the sensations: mine, the turpitude: all mine. Even if I am no one, I feel pain if I prick my hand, and the pain I feel is mine and mine alone. Even if no one else cares, I do. (116)

In this way, Cărtărescu creates in the opening of *Solenoid* the type of the egocentric or solipsistic hero, for whom the world is constituted only on the basis of his own perception, and mainly through literature and dreams, and for whom the physical and social environment is only a backdrop built exclusively for him, not a reality. His egocentric attitude is disturbed only by an awareness of transcendence – that he is part of something greater he cannot comprehend –, by a fear of failing to grasp the meaning of life and of not finding a way out, an “escape”, as well as by a consciousness of anxiety about his human condition, suffering, and death.

Thus, in this part of the novel, Cărtărescu has brought into existence, so to speak, an “anti-hero”, not in the sense of a negative character with morally reprehensible traits, but in the sense of a negation of the conventional semantic form of a literary hero as the bearer of socially shared, beneficial, and valued ideals or the “morally regulated deviance” (Bröckling 2019, 39). By obscuring the composition and attempting to create a work that does not conform to the conventions of any genre – that is to say, an “anti-novel” – the author in turn tries to achieve a semblance of autonomy from the reader. Based on Trilling’s findings, it could be said that Cărtărescu has succeeded in creating an authentic anti-hero who remains true to himself and embodies the ideal of modernist existential individualism. Indeed, the reader is guided toward this interpretive path also by the paratexts (Genette [1987] 1997) – two mot-tos in the book’s introduction, both drawn from key figures of modernist literature. The first is an excerpt from the Romanian author Tudor Arghezi’s poem “Ex libris”, which metonymically relativizes the epistemic, ethical, and social possibilities of literature.⁴ The second quotes a passage from *The Diaries* (*Tagebücher 1910–1923*) of Franz Kafka: “A fragment of his eye socket was removed. The sun and everyone could see inside. It angered him and distracted him from his work; he was furious that he in particular could not see this marvel” (7). The diary entry, considered by its very epitextual nature to be authentic and perhaps even sincere, is positioned by Cărtărescu in an interpretatively determining role: it suggests to the reader how unreliable the portrayal of the subject proves to be when it comes to the authentic performance through literature.

THE PROTAGONIST'S SELF-REFERENTIALITY AND SELF-DENIAL

If the protagonist, or more accurately the anti-hero of *Solenoid*, is contoured against the background of Cărtărescu's previous works, his diaries and extra-literary statements (e.g., Greceanu and Martin 2025), the reader can perceive him in a strongly self-referential way – he spends his childhood in the same house on the same street, several motifs from his childhood and youth recur, and so on. One could say, as Radu Vancu points out, that self-referentiality in the novel *Solenoid* is a continuation of Cărtărescu's poetics, but only up to the point of the “self-denial”⁵ turn (2016, n.p.). This moment is the narrator's recollection of the trauma of reading his poem “The Fall” in the university literary Circle of the Moon (Cenaclul Lunii), its failure and his rejection from the structures of the literary world by the “Great Critic”:

In that hour of not even ferocious slaughter – offhand slaughter, scornful and smiling – the coin fell on the wrong side, I drew the short straw, and my career as a writer continued, perhaps, within another possible world, wrapped in glory and splendor (but also in conformism, falseness, self-deception, superbia, disappointment), but here all that was left was an unfulfilled promise. (Cărtărescu 2022, 37)

However, as connoisseurs of extra-literary reality, some readers know that Cărtărescu himself succeeded in the literary Monday Circle (Cenaclul de Luni) with his poem of the same name, “The Fall”, which became a stepping stone for him into the literary world.

Narratively, through this denial of his hero's self-referentiality, enacted through both metaleptic intervention and withdrawal from the plot, Cărtărescu relieves the narrator of the burden of a realistic frame of reference, thus essentially giving him the status of an autonomous literary character. As the narrator himself expresses, his story can therefore, through this act of fictionalization (Iser [1991] 2017), leap to the level of “falseness” or of staging the anti-hero's subjectivity uncontaminated by autobiography. After all, even the narrator himself confesses at some point: “I don't want to mystify anything: I remember everything, although it could be a false memory, but I cannot write about it here or now. I have never promised to be completely truthful”⁶ (Cărtărescu 2022, 214).

This Cărtărescu's metaleptic and intertextual “montage” trick clearly belongs to the arsenal of postmodern poetics (Lefter 2000), which he, however, abandons (surely not entirely) at this point in order to play out the narrator's multilayered interdiscursive and surreal narrative of social and historical life. But, at the same time, it provides the key to re-evaluating the self-referential interpretation of the novel's opening section. It thus frees the reader from a single frame of reference that could unnecessarily “contaminate” an overly fictional work that no longer relies on the self-referential nature of the narrative up to that point, linked to Cărtărescu's other literary texts or authorial epitexts (Genette 1997, 351ff).

THE ROLE OF THE FEMALE CHARACTER: THE REQUEST FOR SINCERITY

What has been said so far essentially denies the existence of the category and rhetoric of sincerity in Cărtărescu's novel *Solenoid*. We only arrive at its explicit man-

ifestation through the entry of a female character into the narrator's story. In addition to the figures of other women and their roles – such as the mother, colleagues from the school, shop assistants, nurses, dream creatures from the underbelly of the housing estate, the statue of Damnation (in Romanian it is feminine: “*Damnarea*”) – we also encounter a female partner or, more aptly, a female lover, Irina, in the novel.

Sexuality plays an important role in almost all of Cărtărescu's works. In his poetic volumes and his debut collection of short stories, *Nostalgia* ([1989] 1993), sexuality and the sexual act bring the characters knowledge as essential and transcendent as that of the mind. The difference, however, is that while in the other works sexuality often has (self-)destructive effects on the hero, in *Solenoid* it becomes productive, a driving force not only towards his own pleasure, but also for social and humanistic engagement: towards the subject's relationship to his surroundings, to other beings (manifested even at the micro-level, and thus could be the subject of ecocritical reflection as well) which changes his solipsistic self toward a more empathetic and social personality. *Solenoid*'s narrator places the rational and sexual modes of acquiring subjective experience on the same level, for example, when he describes a human being “with our sex organs that knew as much as our brain” (2022, 176).

It is the narrator's lover, Irina, who reveals in the novel the possibilities of a device – the solenoid – under the narrator's house for levitation during lovemaking, which metaphorically transforms the erotic act into a metaphysical dimension of knowledge, for it is at this point that the narrator comes very close to feeling an “escape” from the limitations of human existence and the human condition, which is in fact a fundamental theme of his anti-literature:

When Irina and I turn toward each other's stomachs, feeding there like lotus eaters with our eyes half-closed, letting the waves of pleasure flow slowly; like thick honey, between us, floating with each other's hips held tightly between our hands, forming a ring of melted gold, a knot of arms and thighs of melted gold glowing in the dark room, I feel so good that the rest of the world becomes nothing but wind and dreams; I feel that escape – our lives' only goal – is near, is at the door, is here. (428)

About a quarter of the way through the novel, Irina asks the hero existential questions, including the well-known ethical paradox of what he would save from a burning house – a work of art or a child. And she asks him in a suggestive way: “you just have to answer honestly⁷...” (254). This question and request may seem almost naïve within the broader epic and ideological narrative up to that point (and all the more so in Cărtărescu's entire oeuvre), and yet they redirect the narrator's thinking towards sensitizing himself to the same authentic being and the fate of others (again, on various micro-, macro-, and trans-levels of not only human existence), who has nothing in common with the arts, but with the “real” social life of the hero. And this knowledge Cărtărescu's narrator does not reserve for literati and artists, but, on the contrary, for common people and so-called “dilettantes”:

Only the amateur, who doesn't even know what he will do with his manuscript, who doesn't even know if it really exists [...]; all these nutcases, who can't put a sentence together, who are ignorant of high culture, who make art out of patches, trash, and nothing, only they know the best-kept secret of any art: the blind man's battle and the lame man's

ters and the fictional world, the narrator also includes the writer and the reader in the enumeration, thus indicating an extraliterary ethical stance toward the social acknowledgment of his gesture.

It is also noteworthy that the author later returns to this passage in his diary *Șapte ani straniu: 2018–2024* (Seven strange years, 2025), writing: “That cry for help, spanning ten pages – my most hallucinatory and truthful pages [...] [w]as not a literary cry, but my physical cry for help, emerging from my throat, shaped by my tongue and lips. Not a single person who has read this book said anything to me about this message, about the true message of the book and of my life”⁸ (2025, 120–121). Even though Cărtărescu has repeatedly expressed rejection of a self-referential reading of his works (for example, Kasarda and Cărtărescu 2020) – even his own diaries, which he nevertheless writes with the awareness they will be published – in this way he “metatextually” (Genette 1997) encourages the reception of the novel *Solenoid* in the spirit of the rhetoric of sincerity. However, it also demonstrates a lack of perceptiveness, or perhaps the readers’ bewilderment, regarding the author’s shift in rhetorical register, as they had long been accustomed to his “rhetorical sophistication” and the performance of an untrustworthy postmodern and rather authentic than sincere subject.

The uniqueness of the novel *Solenoid* within Cărtărescu’s body of literary works is demonstrated, for example, by another text, this time poetic, a collection of poems with the telling title *Nu striga niciodată ajutor* (Never cry for help, 2020): from the projected perspective, it appears to be an obvious expression of this dissatisfaction, with the poetic subject presenting him/her/itself in philosophical and ethical contrast to the narrator of *Solenoid*, again in his/her/its supremely authentic, and solitary role as a solipsist who is convinced that his call to “the other”, i.e., society or simply “no one”, will not be heard (5).

CONCLUSION

Based on Trilling’s diachronic perspective on the moral ideals of “sincerity” and “authenticity” as depicted in literature, and inspired by the current discourse on sincerity and its rhetoric, this study sought to highlight the portrayal of this subject and its development in Mircea Cărtărescu’s novel *Solenoid*. Compared to the author’s previous works, the protagonist can be seen as a denial of the preceding, often self-referential narrator, who rejects the role of literature at the expense of (societal) life. Within *Solenoid*, there is thus a noticeable shift from writing about oneself solely through the lens of self-knowledge to writing about oneself through the prism of a shared condition, whether in a broader existential sense, not limited to the human, or in a narrower local historical context. It can be said that the novel *Solenoid* combines the postmodernist aesthetics of authenticity with the ethics and rhetoric of sincerity. Although, on the basis of the reception of this novel and the author’s later epitext, one might doubt whether the protagonist’s sincerity was described with sufficient and convincing authenticity, I agree with Radu Vancu (2016, n.p.), a Romanian literary theorist and historian, who wrote of *Solenoid* as not only Cărtărescu’s most humanistic work, but one of the most humanistic works he knows.⁹

NOTES

- ¹ In addition to the FIL Prize from the 2022 Guadalajara International Book Fair, Cărtărescu, together with the English translator Sean Cotter, won the Dublin Literary Prize in 2024, and in 2025, *Solenoid* was on the longlist of the International Booker Prize.
- ² This motivation resonates with the author's later statement, which presented the inspirational background of the novel *Solenoid* to the worldwide audience of The Booker Prize as follows: "*Solenoid* is also my human and literary testament: everything I have ever wanted to say to my fellow human beings. [...] It is not only an aesthetic writing, but also an ethical one, because it shows my love for people, for truth and social justice" (Cărtărescu and Cotter 2025, n.p.). As I will discuss later, it is specifically this ethical dimension and the social implications or empathy present in a literary work that prove decisive for understanding it in terms of "sincerity". The fourth reason I chose the novel *Solenoid* as the object of the analysis is personal: I translated this novel into Slovak (Cărtărescu 2020a).
- ³ Unless otherwise stated, all translations into English are by the present author.
- ⁴ The original Romanian version: "Un om de sânge ia din pisc noroi / Și zămislește marea lui fantomă / De reverie, umbră și aromă, / Și o pogoară vie printre noi. // Dar jertfa lui zadarnică se pare, / Pe cât e ghiersul cărții de frumos. / Carte iubită, fără de folos, / Tu nu răspunzi la nici o întrebare" (Cărtărescu 2015, 7). The English translation: "A man of blood takes clay from the peak / And creates his own ghost / From dreams, scents, and shadows / And bring it living down to us. // But his sacrifice is pointless, / However charming the book's speech. / Beloved book and useless, / You will answer no question" (Cărtărescu 2022, 7).
- ⁵ Vancu uses the Romanian term "negarea eului" and also the theological term "kenosis".
- ⁶ However, the word "truthful" in the Romanian original is "sinceritate", i.e. sincerity.
- ⁷ Again, in the Romanian original, Cărtărescu uses the word "sincer".
- ⁸ "Acel strigăt de ajutor, întins pe zece pagini, cele mai halucinant de adevărate pagini ale mele [...] [n]u era un strigăt literar, ci strigătul meu fizic de ajutor, ieșit din laringele meu, modelat de limba și de buzele mele. Nici un singur om care-a citit cartea asta nu mi-a spus ceva despre acest mesaj, mesajul adevărat al cărții și-al vieții mele."
- ⁹ I want to express my sincere gratitude to the colleagues at the Institute of World Literature (Slovak Academy of Sciences), especially Jana Cviková, Judit Görözdí, and Ján Živčák, for fruitful discussions on the topic, Adam Škrovan for his help with the language aspects of the study, the editors of this issue for their support, and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

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