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## A Distant Reading of Two ‘Distant Writings’ by Istrati and Cartarescu: Penchant for a Chronotopic Construct in *Mediterranean and The Levant*

**Abstract:** As distinct from a ‘close reading’ that has long become a core value in literary studies, ‘distant reading’ has been proposed by Franco Moretti (2000) to overcome the obstacles faced by comparative literature, and to counterweigh the disadvantages of distant reading. Relying on my past work in Mediterranean and Black Sea Studies, I attempt an interpretive ‘distant reading’ of the two fiction works that were written from a meaningful distance, that is, approaching the Mediterranean and/or the Levant from the Black Sea point of view. In keeping with his literary style, Cartarescu himself referred to Istrati in his fiction. (*The Levant* 102, 136) This intertextuality invites a reconsideration of how he echoed his predecessor, just as the Levant in the title did the Mediterranean. I argue that the representation of the pre-World War I Mediterranean in Istrati’s *Mediterranean (Sunrise)* (1934) and (*Sunset*) (1935), posthumously available in a single volume (2018) is ‘impression-istic’ and informed by modern social and poetic realism. It differs from Cartarescu’s postmodern reworking of this geography as a film-set with a distinct background, by recourse to the repertoire of conventions and clichés constitutive of the Levant literature. I relate this basic difference to the writers’ *space/time* specifications, as well as the *literary space*, or alternatively literary geography, within which they positioned themselves. The present study is devoted to the evaluation of the intertextual connection between the two books and its overall representational consequences.

**Keywords:** *distant reading; space; time; Mediterranean Levant; Mircea Cartarescu; Panait Istrati.*



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## Introduction

This article takes the concept of ‘distant reading’, first coined in 2000 by Franco Moretti (2013) as its point of departure for a specific pursuit in comparative literature. The original concept refers to reading texts from a distance. This was something avoided for a long time, when academic specialization manifest in linguistic and technical expertise ruled supreme and ‘close reading’ of texts were highly valued. While acknowledging advantages of close reading for the ‘insider academics’ that discouraged the less qualified outsider from stepping into this textual territory, Moretti’s ‘distant reading’ also had attractions of its own such as opening new vistas for large-scale comparatist scholarship. I take a further step in this direction, not of the data-driven diagrammatic ‘mapping’ kind Moretti had in mind as constitutive of a ‘literary geography’ (Hones 6), but of the ‘cosmopolitan-sensitive’ approach in the spirit of Goethe (Pizer 7-8; Thomsen 136-37) improved by postcolonial criticism.

While so doing, I wish to benefit from a parallel concept that I paraphrase as ‘distant writing’, to do more with authorship than readership, hence with the pre-text rather than the post-publication phase, when authors write about faraway places either from a physical or a cultural distance. Overseas travel and observation are not precluded as long as pivotal viewpoints and gaze continue to be rooted in the author’s homeland, like with exiles and immigrants forever belonging to here as well as there (Westphal 11). This kind of writing can be useful for casting a different light on those very places as well as on the homeland, thereby subverting institutionalized orientalism in the service of imperialistic agendas that Edward Said (1978) rightly criticized.

I explore the Mediterranean Levant in select fiction literature as both a representation of a particular geography as well as a purposeful (re)construction of it. To this effect, I focus here on *Mediterranean* (in two volumes, 1934-1935, first single-volume edition in 2018) and *The Levant* (first published in 1990, with a French translation as *Le Levant* dated 2014) by Panait Istrati and Mircea Cartarescu. I am in a position much like that of the two authors whose work I approach, insofar as I read them from a distance by benefitting from my own past work in Mediterranean and Black Sea studies. This provides me with a novel perspective and a continuously shifting comparatist viewpoint. The two texts I concentrate on reflect a multiplicity of viewpoints including Romanian, Pontic, Mediterranean, and cosmopolitan ones, whether with or without authorial intention. Romania has been an exceptional Mediterranean-looking Black Sea country with a strong historical and linguistic Latin connection. Romania sent many people for either making a better living or escaping from what was once labelled as ‘tyranny’ to the Mediterranean with its thriving cosmopolitan port cities and beyond (Cartarescu 189; Baratin 230; Istrati 127). Association with the Mediterranean and the world served the country well in its international relations to resist pressures from its immediate neighbourhood as well as from the North, and maintain a relatively independent foreign policy protective of its cultural self-identification. Romanian literature offers an opportunity for scholars to explore how the in-between ‘borderland’

situation, much alike that of the exile or migrant, works.

### **Of biographies, viewpoints, and literary styles**

A brief reminder on the relevant aspects of the two author's biographies is in order here. Istrati was born in Braila in 1884. His mother was a laundress (Istrati 164), and his father a tobacco smuggler or trader from Cephalonia, depending on how you look at it, who was killed in a skirmish when he was still a baby. He suffered from poor health and tuberculosis throughout his life and died in Bucharest in 1935. He became first an apprentice to a tavern keeper, then a pastry cook, and afterwards a peddler. He spoke Greek, Albanian, Turkish, and wrote in Romanian and French. He travelled all along the Mediterranean and beyond and intermingled with people from all walks of life. He led a vagabond life among common folks (Istrati 114, 135; Baratin, 233) and adventurers with stopovers in Bucharest, Istanbul, Cairo, Naples, Paris, Switzerland, Nice (1921), and the USSR (1927, 1928-1929). He stood up against Stalinism long before others dared suspect it. Rejected by both communists (for betrayal) and fascists (for being a 'cosmopolitan'), he was forgotten, and then revived in two successive waves in the 1960s and 1990s.

Cartarescu was born in 1956 in Bucharest where he was educated and later taught. He is considered a leading name in the Generation of the 1980s, as well as inheriting the legacy of oneiric aesthetics of his literary predecessors. A prolific poet, novelist, short-story writer, literary critic, as well as a journalist, he is good in various genres and crisscrossing them. He wrote his doctoral thesis on Romanian Postmodernism and is open to influences from global literary trends as manifest in *The Levant*, in which a gravestone inscription is also included, noting that he wrote it when he was thirty-one years old (Cartarescu 164). Even so, he can convincingly be considered as true heir to "radical modernists" (Ungureanu 55), just as it is not farfetched to understand why another critic may contemplate that he is an "unreconstructed postmodernist" (Esposito n. pg.). He is the author of numerous novels that made him widely translated and world famous and the winner of many awards.

We can make an introductory generalization here. On the one side, Istrati casts a 'humanist' viewpoint on the Mediterranean at large (Aboucaya 12), with the author-as-narrator adopting 'invisible writing' of a ship's logbook, yet also with a live 'oral' presentation (Baratin 228), as if he is a guide standing beside us, as we, the readers, travel in his company. He immerses himself in the Mediterranean, makes of it a character and a title, and appeals to it every now and then. By so doing, Istrati forces upon his text a unifying principle and purpose, without which the text's centre could not hold. This attests the potentially strong 'centrifugal' quality of his text that is considerably held in check by its temporal and spatial boundaries. On the other side, Cartarescu (76) casts a de-centred (from Bucharest) viewpoint on the 'Levant'-ine Mediterranean with a gap between the narrator's field of vision and conventional authorial omniscience that he defies when he as the poet-cum-author also did not understand how something could happen in a previously described scene that begged for an explanation. Being less than

omniscient and omnipresent, he nevertheless promises that no loose ends will remain by the end of the story. (Cartarescu 56, 58) Confessing his postmodernist style (Cartarescu 71), he immerses, in turns, into the Levant in his mind, and lets it proliferate in keeping with an equally postmodern dynamic rich in details, though the text is characterized by a dominant ‘centripetal’ axis dictated by the narrative line.

The lexicon of such characterizations, heavily dependent on centres, lines, and circles, inevitably leads us to geometry and space on the one hand and geography on the other. Minimally, literary space and literary geography are to do with the space that takes shape through literary representation so as to become ‘place(s)’ with a certain distinct feel, with relational roots across space quite possibly not only in our times but long before (Massey n. pg.), thus envisioning “a ‘global’, rather than a bordered and parochial, ‘sense of place’” ready for mapping in a cartographic project. In addition, if text is conceived as something that happens (Hones 57, 60, 137-38), i.e. an event, much like the colonization of a frontier, then there exists a further parallel space where writers, publishers, critics, scholars, and readers at large of published texts are distributed. When the two do not fully overlap, they enable us a larger spatial or geographic field of vision that I wish not to overlook. Here I concentrate more on detailing the former aspect without losing sight of the latter. After all, institutions of literature have undergone important changes between the early and late twentieth century. Whereas original readers of *Istrati* in early twentieth century were clustered around French as the literary lingua franca of the time, with translations becoming more and more available, his work crossed language barriers and reached a wider readership extending well beyond the Mediterranean. By contrast, postmodernism, which Cartarescu has raised to new heights, is a contemporary literary game, with rules of its own (like chess) that authors and readers play, and has been global all along.<sup>1</sup>

### **Literary geography, literary space, and the chronotope**

In Anglo-American cultural and literary studies, the term literary geography is widely used because there has in fact been about a century-long tradition of literary geography as a subfield of geography in the USA as well as in England, with Thomas Hardy’s Wessex and William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County<sup>2</sup> as intriguing “invented and fictional” locations (Hones 23-43, 46), whereas French scholarship has worked largely with the concept of ‘literary space’ as in Maurice Blanchot (1988) and Alexis

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<sup>1</sup> When Cartarescu’s *Yaourta*, the pirate, opines that the world is nothing but a brothel and tavern, his educated son *Zotalis* insists that it is a chess game where the wise man moves his pieces so as to encircle and take the king. (Cartarescu 154)

<sup>2</sup> An appealing source for a subset of geographers who looked to literary ‘descriptions’ as either material or supporting evidence for their work. They were primarily interested in the representations of landscapes and natural environment.

Nusolevici (2019)<sup>3</sup>. Partly to do with the strong transnational influence of French literary theories, there has nevertheless emerged a ‘spatial’ literary studies approach in the USA, independently of indigenous literary geography. Their ongoing rapprochement and exchanges are further evidence that literary geography and literary space are far from irreconcilable. They have much in common, with literary space having the added advantage of also bringing in the place where literature ‘happens’, especially in the post-text process that introduces publishers, critics, and readers at large into the picture, an important aspect of the French approach since Blanchot first used the concept (Nusolevici 17).

I make use of both the geographical territoriality depicted in texts as well as the space where they are conceived and circulate in relation to the author as well as the reader. Literary space is greater than geography because it also involves an imaginary geography – which is either described in fiction besides the territory concerned, or emerges by virtue of the space where the text moves. We need a parallel notion of ‘literary time’, to do with the time in the text as well as the time where the author, book, and readers exist, that is more comprehensive than mere time. It is thought-provoking that this natural corollary to the concept of ‘literary space’ has so far gone unnoticed.

We should also take note of the fact that this omission occurred despite time in general being more emphasized than space, especially when the scholarly focus has been on the novel as an expression of the representative genre of modernity. Because modernity has been associated with the idea of progress, with time’s arrow being foregrounded, historicity gains a further specific importance, and it is no coincidence that throughout the nineteenth century and after, within the adventure genre, the ‘historical novel’ spearheaded by Sir Walter Scott<sup>4</sup> and Alexander Dumas overwhelmingly prevailed as norm over the ‘geographical novel’ of Jules Verne. In general, novel as a genre mimicked the flow of time until twentieth-century experiments challenged this truth long taken for granted.

Mikhail Bakhtin, who differentiated the novel from the epic genre, with its characteristic epic time as “absolute past” (Bakhtin 218), turned his attention to time in a path-breaking essay he authored as early as 1937-1938, with *Concluding Remarks* added in 1973. Bakhtin defines chronotope, i.e., the ‘time space’, as the unit of temporal and spatial relationships in literature: “Time as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible, likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (Bakhtin 84). In this formulation, time is the active agency and space the passive recipient.<sup>5</sup> In his *Concluding Remarks*, first, he generalized the

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<sup>3</sup> Except ‘geocritical’ put forth by Bertrand Westphal (2007).

<sup>4</sup> While Scott’s novels are full of local color and feel for country, the topographical novel, represented by Thomas Hardy, became the regional novel in England. (Hones 115)

<sup>5</sup> He adds: “in literature, the primary category in the chronotope is time”, time is “the dominant principle in the chronotope”, and “literature’s primary mode of representation is temporal” (Bakhtin 85-86, 146).

importance of the chronotope: “every entry into the sphere of meaning is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope” (Bakhtin 256). Secondly, he highlighted the temporal bias of his original project, with temporal relationships having been studied “in isolation from the spatial relationships indissolubly tied up with them” (Bakhtin 258). After the late twentieth-century cultural and spatial turns in the humanities, this has been proven as sound advice (Hones 16-17; Tally 16, 58).

It is to Bakhtin’s credit that, already in the main body of his essay, he took a strong position on ‘literary space’, combining both the represented space in the text and the post-text spatial advent, starting already with his discussion of antiquity (Bakhtin 131). He has in mind a chronotopic multi-layered space where chronotopes to do with the same text interact dialogically, “yet this dialogue cannot enter into the world represented in the work, nor into any of the chronotopes represented in it; it is outside the world represented, although not outside the world as a whole. It [this dialogue] enters the world of the author, of the performer, and the world of the listeners and readers.” Because “[w]e are presented with a text occupying a certain specific place in space, that is, it is localized, our creation of it, our acquaintance with it occurs through time. The text as such never appears as a dead thing” as “every literary work *faces outward away from itself*, toward the listener-reader” (Bakhtin 252, 257), in other words, it is a continuous ‘happening’.

For Bakhtin, every text lends itself to a chronotopic treatment thanks to its very constitution. However, I believe, in some cases, the application of a chronotopic analysis can be more fruitful than in others. What I find particularly promising in Bakhtin is his recognition of the simultaneity of qualitatively different types of time at work in given composite chronotopic contexts. The time characteristic of agricultural society, i.e., folkloric time, is “*profoundly spatial and concrete*. It is not separated from the earth or nature. [...] Time here is sunk deeply in the earth, implanted in it and ripening in it. Such time is fleshed-out, irreversible (within the limits of the cycle), realistic” (Bakhtin 208). This resonates later in the idyllic chronotope where time has a special relationship to space: “An organic fastening down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks and crannies, its familiar mountains, valleys, fields, rivers and forests, and one’s own home. Idyllic life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world”, furthermore, “[t]his blurring of all the temporal boundaries made possible by a unity of place also contributes in an essential way to the creation of the cyclical rhythmicalness of time so characteristic of the idyll.” (Bakhtin 225) One step removed from the idyll is the provincial novel where a hero leaves his place only to return, and where every ‘provincial’ town is where hardly anything happens unless a real event, like the plague spreading in Oran, in colonial Algeria in Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (1947), takes place and disrupts the “cyclical everyday life” (Bakhtin 247). Next comes the family novel where the bourgeois individual is cultivated within a safe home before the next stage when s/he loses himself/herself in the abstract world of urban modernity, where the time’s arrow has already taken its overwhelmingly



linear course.<sup>6</sup> These stages come with relative spatial centrality and fixity.

By contrast, the ‘chronotope of the encounter’ finds its successor in the ‘chronotope of the *road*’<sup>7</sup>, where ‘social and spatial distances’ collapse and people from all walks of life meet, as in the deterritorialization and nomadology discussed by Gilles Deleuze – “arguably twentieth century’s most spatial philosopher” (Tally 139) – at least for extended periods of time, if not for good, the examples of which abound in the two texts I take up in this study. “The chronotope of the road is both a point of new departures and a place for events to find their denouement. Time, as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road)” (Bakhtin 243-44):

Thus the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for *materializing time in space*, emerges as a centre for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel. All the novel’s abstract elements – philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect – gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work. Such is the representational significance of the chronotope. (Bakhtin 250)

Bakhtin is insightfully aware of the situation where the combination of space and time is pushed to the extreme so that time literally disappears, and finds its ultimate expression in space. This seemingly simplified image in the horizon is also an invitation to turn the tables around and think of the universe at large as space.<sup>8</sup>

### **Intertextuality under the lens**

The choice for this comparatist study of the two authors belonging to different generations within the historical narrative of a developing national literature that opens up to global currents is self-evident. Yet the question “Why the two books?” remains with us. Given our choice for subject, it would have sufficed to single out these two books by virtue of their titles. With one written in early twentieth and the other in late same century, they bear the mark of different epochs in their constitution. Even so, especially Istrati’s entire oeuvre has many Mediterranean orientations and ‘crossings,’ of which this particular finally unified book is an obvious candidate, because we are interested in

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<sup>6</sup> There is an affinity between Bakhtin’s treatment of time as a combination of cyclical and linear times and that of Krzysztof Pomian (1984) who worked out ‘chronosophies’, i.e., philosophies of time, and their patterns. For him, time itself was time-bound as a social construct, thereby contesting the idea of an independent ‘abstract’ universal and time.

<sup>7</sup> There is a further variant of this chronotope as the ‘chronotope of the *threshold*’ when the travel encounter coincides with a moment of “a *crisis and break* in a life.” (Bakhtin 248)

<sup>8</sup> Compare with the two-legged characterization of postmodernity as the simultaneous shrinking of space with the shortening of time as “time-space compression” (Harvey 284-307).

comparing texts rather than authors. If it is difficult to single out this book because of ongoing intertextualities within Istrati's oeuvre, it is also impossible to overlook its outward-looking intertextual resonances. Gilles Aboucaya (9) highlights its similarity with Voltaire's *Candide*, and Ulysse Baratin (229) emphasizes its affinities with *The Thousand and One Nights* and Nikos Kazantzakis.

As far as Cartarescu's *The Levant* is concerned, we have, however, a further reason for our choice. In this book, consistently with his postmodern literary style, he referred to Istrati, among others including the eminent poet Mihai Eminescu (Cartarescu 102, 136), and made an ethical point, established a literary lineage, and thereby a strong connection between himself and Istrati. This intertextuality begs for an investigation of how, firstly, his text relates to that of his predecessor, and secondly, *Levant* in his title echoed the Mediterranean in Istrati's. There exist two such references some thirty pages apart in the strategic midpoint of Cartarescu's fiction that bridges the two texts. This connection provides us with an extraordinary example of transgression where "the sharp and categorical boundary line" which however is far from absolute, as the "real and the represented world" are "indissolubly tied up with each other and find themselves in continual interaction; uninterrupted exchange goes on between them" (Bakhtin 253-54). Between the represented world in fiction and the real world of the author, book, and readers<sup>9</sup>, intertextuality establishes a connectivity enabling this kind of traffic and penetration.

The first intertextual reference occurs when a character, Zoe, though professing commitment to republicanism and democracy, fears that their common dream might end in vain. Entertaining a serious doubt about the present state of the maturity of their people, she notes that the worst people still come on top; whereas those who hide their craving for power and pretend to act nobly and sing revolutionary songs, a good and honest person shies away in a corner because he is ashamed to make a big fuss about how much he actually loves his people. In politics, true dreamers are quickly sacrificed, the naive who stick to humanist principles are soon looked down on. This present tense description serves the author to draw a universal lesson of history with a double contemporaneity, first to do with the character's time, and second with the author's present. Istrati is listed among a cohort of victimized heroes starting with Patrice Lumumba, and including Antonio Gramsci, along with Nicolae Balcescu, leader of the 1848 Wallachian Revolution who died in exile, and Lucretiu Patrascanu, a persecuted communist who was executed and then posthumously rehabilitated, in other words, all mocked in their own times. (Cartarescu 101-02) This fragment is important not only for its simultaneous reference to two different, chronotopically 'threshold' periods, but also for indicating how the author's 'conventional' omniscience comes above his female character's limited point of view voicing the monologue just as she, with her angelic

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<sup>9</sup> Meaning 'context' in structuralist parlance. The umbrella concept of transtextuality was elaborated by Gérard Genette (1982), with differentiated subcategories including intertextuality, for a panoramic survey of which see Allen (2022).



simile looks down upon “poor Manoil”. There is no way a conventional character speaking out then could have mentioned twentieth-century figures like Gramsci and Lumumba and drawn parallels between then and future. The deliberate violation of the order of history as a general principle as well as in the details (such as Lumumba coming before Gramsci in the list) attests the conviction that there exists a universal temporality as a space for ‘simultaneous’ eternity, beyond the simple chronological flow of history that is taken for granted.

The second intertextual reference comes in a passage notable for its combination of nocturnal dream with diurnal reality, baroque description and an omniscient treatment of the contemporary reader’s present as if it were the past. Unaware of the approaching confrontation between the pirates as freedom fighters and the Ottoman forces dispatched by the Pasha of Vidin, both sides dream their own dreams. It is when describing Ottoman soldiers dreaming of Romanian angels and boys, that the author refers the reader to Istrati as an authoritative source for the authentication of this Orientalist colouring that excessively ornaments his text. This second reference, while authorizing Istrati by chronological precedence, also implies an oblique potential criticism of him, who inadvertently served as bearer of an outdated discriminating genre of once popular travel and fiction literature. Though bridging the two texts at first sight, by pretending to mimic its predecessor, this intertextuality makes their contrast all the more pointed. As if to forcefully drive this point home, what follows is an outburst of the intentionally exaggerated description of the harm inflicted by the Ottomans on the Romanian countryside. The vocabulary used in depicting this effect is rich with Turkish words, including ‘*yatağan*’, a type of sword that also appears in Istrati (24).<sup>10</sup> These words found their way into the Romanian language, a living reminder of the penetration that inflicted the damage, almost the aural equivalent of an inscription in stone of a text that Bakhtin (253) noted for its deadly visibility.<sup>11</sup> Far too many Ottoman Turkish words to do with the military vernacular and costume diffuse into the description, where they are interspersed with Romanian words. This level of intermingling implies the impossibility of undoing the past, i.e., the irreversibility of time’s arrow. The result is that the Ottomans have effectively transformed Wallachia into a sort of Bangladesh (Cartarescu 135-36)<sup>12</sup>.

Here again, there exists a transcendental violation of the chronological order of history. Unlike antiquity that treated time in literature with great respect (Bakhtin 155),

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<sup>10</sup> It is thus a ‘postcolonial’ version of the experiment with language that James Joyce made especially in *Finnegan’s Wake*, most challenging for the reader, who must have felt like being caught in a hostile landscape riddled with obstacles. By the way, the style of Joyce’s 14<sup>th</sup> ‘Oxen of the Sun’ episode in *Ulysses* inspired *The Levant*.

<sup>11</sup> This kind of visible writing is placed on either the landscape (as large page numbers spread on the territory) or the pages of the book (Cartarescu 116, 164-65, 229, 214-15).

<sup>12</sup> This statement should not be taken at its face value as a categorical condemnation of Orientalist sort. Compare with the author’s consistent positive characterization of Nasreddin Hodja, the Turk symbolical of folkloric comic resistance and laughter, as well as of wisdom, a citizen of the universe. (Cartarescu 161)

Cartarescu takes up the opportunity to violate its status and bring it down to earth and therefore space. Bangladesh is not a mere geographical expression (like Bengal) but a reality of the post-Second World War international order, i.e., the partition of Indian subcontinent among the ‘Midnight’s Children’ as Salman Rushdie dubbed them, taken one step further by the subsequent partition of the Greater Pakistan, consisting of two segments of ‘India’, out of which the ‘oriental’ one emerged as the new ‘nation-state’ of Bangladesh. This latter is now unfortunately associated in the minds of readers with contemporary photographic imagery that bespeaks of misery, chaotic movement, and insurmountable cultural difference. It is in the extremity of this kind of literary no-man’s borderland that temporal and spatial negotiations constitutive of the Mediterranean Levant take place. As for the Mediterranean Levant of chronotope-friendly roads and encounters awaiting writers, paraphrasing Bakhtin, it will be “*familiar territory*” with well-worn roads that pass “not through some exotic *alien world*” (Bakhtin 245). In order to make it seem alien in spite of it all, Cartarescu will have to make a special effort to repopulate it with unlikely fantastic creatures and objects!

### Space-making cartographic projects

In both texts literary space emerges as a consequence of cartographic activity. In Istrati, it is Adrien’s travels by sea that shape the map and articulate the otherwise loosely-related and supposedly hastily assembled chapters of the book as a travelogue (Jutrin 226). In Cartarescu, it is the travel by sea and by air of main characters, i.e., the rebels that delineate the Levant and connect it with the author’s home in Bucharest. These insurgents planned to make their final assault on Bucharest where the tyrant reigned, by, call it what you will, balloon, zeppelin, Montgolfier, *machine aero-volante* (Cartarescu 85, 159, 233), a further salute to space-minded Jules Verne in this ‘anti-epic’ that had all the necessary ingredients to become a chronotopic period novel of the historical type but took a different turn to parody it.

The storyline of *Mediterranean* is mostly linear and draws a map which expands in successive concentric circles. Istrati’s hero, the 22 year-old Braila-born Adrien Zograffi, on 12 December 1906, embarks on the steamship *Dacia* from Constanta to Alexandria. On board he meets Moussa, some sixty-year old Jew, actually Moritz Feldmann from Bucharest (Istrati 32), travelling to Alexandria to collect his daughter Sarah and return but in vain, only to become “wondering Jew!” soon (Istrati 64), and they become travel companions. The ship passes through Istanbul, Piraeus, Izmir, and then the Archipelago and by Crete (Istrati 20-2). From Alexandria, Adrien and Moussa go at various times to Cairo, Port Said, Beirut, and Damascus. Upon returning to Beirut, Adrien takes a Russian ship to Romania because Romanian ships did not call there, only to find out that it will stop at Mount Athos in Greece before reaching Istanbul, where the passengers changed to a Romanian ship that took them to Constanta (Istrati 74, 153, 160). The circle, counter-clockwise tracing the Eastern Mediterranean is thus completed with the return to the homeland.

There and then occurs an abrupt narrative ‘jump cut’ from the Galata district of Istanbul (Istrati 162-16) to Salt Lake, near Braila, where one of the first popular beach resorts in the country flourished. What connects this episode with the one before is neither the contiguity of space nor smooth travel in between, as is usually the case in travel literature, but the common literary genre rich in drama, comedy, vaudeville, farce and burlesque that the two episodes share, and the climax of which is reached when Adrien cannot recall the name of the author of *Hamlet* whom no one in Damascus knew, and finding this too much, he decides to leave the Levant in company of a simple Moldovan that he met and who gave him the right answer (Istrati 88, 103, 124, 141-52, 193-98). In addition, a retreat from the present by recourse to fond memories of times spent with Mikhail Kazansky, his lifelong friend and companion as well as philosophical mentor, a Russian exile (Aboucaya 10), whom he met time and again throughout the Mediterranean episodes serves to reinforce the connection. Adrien and Mikhail separate in Braila in August 1909, never to meet again, because Mikhail either commits suicide or dies on the boat to Odessa. Adrien puts it as “now resting at the bottom of the Black Sea” (Istrati 197). Adrien does not dare come to terms with his loss and seeks consolation by speculating perhaps he had to rush because of possible delays on the sea to barely catch the departing train from Odessa to his ancestral Kazan, and hence did not have time to send him a letter as he had promised in their last meeting (Istrati 199).

This cartographic projection makes of Istanbul and to a lesser extent Braila gateways at the crossroads of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Whereas Adrien, a proxy character for Istrati, remains within the limits of the Mediterranean world at large, Mikhail ventures into the inhospitable Black Sea world where he meets his end. The Mediterranean, so strongly identified with the sun that warmed and filled the place with life, sharply contrasts with the Black Sea off its limits, where darkness, danger, and freezing cold, along with the death awaiting Mikhail prevail. There exist other imagined territories that lie beyond the borders of Istrati’s Mediterranean world. There is Khartoum in the Sudan, way south from Egypt where Sarah, the daughter of Moussa, after having lied that she ran a bar in Alexandria, and before presumably having run one in Port-Said, dreamed of setting up a bar, just like everyone else caught in a helpless situation and thus saving herself from being prostituted by her lover-cum-pimp (Baratin 234; Istrati 37, 41, 55). There is also the Mediterranean port Marseilles and even Paris as dreamed by Adrien (Istrati 65) who aspires to become a writer, but momentarily contemplates testing his fortune by taking a ship to Bombay, a plan he abandons already when he was in Port Said (Istrati 68-9), the newly set up gateway to India via the Suez Canal. In Istrati, the expansion of the fiction’s geography owes its driving force to the mostly maritime travels of Adrien, the ‘dream spaces’ of various characters, and Adrien’s ultimate taking up a literary career that leads him to France, itself incorporated into the narrative. This provides us with a rare case where the fiction’s geography is conjoined with the literary space occupied by the author-cum-character of *Mediterranean*.

Cartarescu’s Levant is smaller than Istrati’s as well as that of conventional travel literature. Adventurous events unfold on a seaborne curvature that connects the islands of

Corfu and Zante in the Ionian Sea with Romania. This is where the Greek independence was first rooted in the nineteenth century. The origin of this geography reminds the reader of Odysseus' return voyage to Ithaca before it was delayed by multiple interventions that threw him and his crew off their track into less known frontiers of Homer's world. Cartarescu's description, lyrical when not baroquely ornate, leads the crew along with the readers through places that take on a surreal quality that estranges and reminds one of spaces depicted in the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico, Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, and Max Ernst, but also of Chaim Soutine and by implication Vincent Van Gogh before him, because of their inclination to use bright colours and distortion of vision (Cartarescu 23, 37-38, 94, 180). Space thereby becomes 'deep space,' to do with 'geological space,' as well as approaching the abstract spaces of the epic genre, but with an important resilience. An example of this phenomenon relates to the excursion on the island leading to a descent into a geological cave where time is seen as petrified in the rocks. This microcosm suggests a microcosm-macrocosm equivalence as an underlying motive of the narrative, further reinforced by the artificial division between the Sixth and the Seventh Cantos overrun by the very narration (Cartarescu 109-11, 182-83).

Although Istrati incorporates the biographical development of Adrien as a self-made writer into *Mediterranean*, Cartarescu's text is much more self-reflexive about its own production as where he states that his grand poem is also a 'montage', and every text has its preconditions for publication as well as circulation subject to limits, as for example when a censoring authority comes into the very literary space as either directly by taking part within the story in the text itself, or by implication as when the author invites his reader to read between the lines (Cartarescu 42, 44-5, 181). The author, a master of ceremonies in this respect, addresses the Levant, but also as a poet, introduces himself as a professor who frequented no Schools and followed no Master, though well-informed of literary scholars George Steiner and Ihab Hassan, and teaching Romanian in a high school, hardly able to decipher Greek, and not much involved in the art of translation. Furthermore, as a professor who read Bakhtin, among others, standing on one foot in the tramway to his work, he silences the author as well as ordering him to resume his story when he digresses, without sparing the critique. (Cartarescu 13, 21, 32, 52, 55, 56, 92, 95, 135, 144, 164, 181, 185, 193, 196, 205, 226-27) The author also interrupts the "effendi narrator" for going too far and fast, and then at one point the narrator promises not to reappear until the very end, a promise hard to keep indeed (Cartarescu 9, 95).<sup>13</sup> Manoil, the pirate or corsair depending on how one looks at it again, but also Cambridge-educated, addresses the Levant in his repeated soliloquy on behalf of the author, and writes poetry titled "Ode to the poor Wallachia pillaged by the Wolf-Voivode" (Cartarescu 7, 10, 131, 150). The final touch in this respect occurs in the author's address to Manoil: "If only you could learn that your destiny is nothing but of paper. Odysseus once overlooked that it was not him, but instead Homer, who designed his smart tricks,

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<sup>13</sup> Down the line, Manoil will introduce him in turn as "effendi author" to a mixed crowd of nobles and gypsies. (Cartarescu 172)

sent pretenders to his wife who spoke with his words [...] I can make anything I want from you, I can raise you to new heights or destroy you, because one is never the master of his own truth” (Cartarescu 18; see also for the reiteration of the same address, 162). Manoil, in his turn, reciprocates by casually waking Mircea up from his deep daydream, where he was troubled to suspect that his epic was writing itself out towards its end, and he, the author, was only a character of little importance. Even so, anxious to know what will happen to them, assuming him to be omniscient, begs him to say what he knows, only to hear that as mere fiction characters they have nothing to be afraid of, even if an enemy kills them in what follows, because they will come back to life as soon as a future reader opens this book (Cartarescu 166, 193-94). We, the readers, even come across a Remington typewriter in the text that practices ‘automatic writing’, a favourite literary objective of the original surrealists! (Cartarescu 94)

Cartarescu’s story ends in the enclosed space of his apartment in Bucharest, though there exists a character who confuses Bucharest with Budapest (Cartarescu 80), and by so doing, challenges the very exact specification, and by further implication, the nature of space in general. As a matter of fact, imaginary spaces are quite common in literature and some come with an ambiguity that defies exact mapping, as is the case with Franz Kafka’s castle(s). Moreover, ambiguity is more often than not associated with alien landscapes as well as frontiers and borderlands extending outwards and escaping the eye. Cartarescu, on the contrary, situates his ultimate ambiguity in the heart of the Aegean Sea, the so-called cradle of Western Civilization, the best known, charted and documented sea known to mankind since time immemorial. The fabulous island where the excursion, inevitably bringing to the mind of the reader Jules Verne’s *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864), took place, is characterized by Cartarescu as “the island that was in no map,” and is populated by unbelievable mythological yet almost touchable Picasso-esque life forms walking upside-down with a look reminding one of cubist constructs (Cartarescu 77-8).

The narration depending on the use of the clause ‘meanwhile’ (Cartarescu 99) progresses with parallel actions taking place in different locations during the very same time period. The careful reader will notice here this typically Dickensian-Griffithian technique of cross-cutting between alternating spaces (Eisenstein 195-205), a favourite gimmick of classical filmmaking. It should by now be no surprise that Cartarescu insists on suggesting the artificiality of the Levant, intensely lyrical in his description, but also at times so naively manmade, as much as the ‘paper moon’ in a famous song. Art does not measure up to life, though it is worthwhile; a favourite theme of the author serving as a connecting-thread between his successive fictions. This becomes most manifest when the author steps in to assume the role of stage director, and instructs technicians to change the scene: “Machinists, turn the crank! Roll out a new setting” (Cartarescu 53).<sup>14</sup> Space thus

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<sup>14</sup> Compare this metonymic account with the description that introduces the Eleventh Canto. This aspect is echoed in the appearance in present-day Bucharest of characters the people take for actors stepping out from a period film-set, with their costumes still on (Cartarescu 195, 225).

rid of time becomes synonymous with a spectacle stage.

### **Time makes a spatialized comeback**

Istrati condenses six years of ‘Homeric’ travels (1907-1913) in his episodic *Mediterranean*. Adrien serves him as the author’s ‘literary double’ (Aboucaya 9) and lead character in the book. The names of its two parts, ‘Sunrise’ (1934) and ‘Sunset’ (1935) resonate temporality with a feel of impressionistic watercolour paintings attuned to the variations of light within the very moment. Yet in this narrative, initiated by voluntary escape, as if in a rush (Istrati 18) with no apparent reason and a quick rhythm in subsequent travels, passage of time can mark overnight shifts between climate zones. Some twelve hours after leaving Constanta in December, Adrien and his friend Moussa find themselves in pleasant May weather in Istanbul. Moreover, it is already early summer in Piraeus and Smyrna further south. Fortunate are the mortals who are spared from hunger and heavy clothing for the most part of the year (Istrati 23-5), as Goethe also once observed in Naples. Time-difference can also become a marker of progress, as Adrien is surprised to observe in Alexandria, by comparison to his economically backward homeland (Istrati 34). On the other hand, in *The Levant*, we meet Leonidas, who readily dismisses the information procured from a spy that the tyrant will confront them in the air before they can make their assault as planned, simply because it is impossible to imagine there can be Mongolfiers in Wallachia, which is some hundred years behind the rest of the world, something as ridiculous as goats playing chess on the prairie (Cartarescu 200-01).

Istrati’s narration is mostly linear and flows naturally with time. Yet there is a critical moment, typically chronotopic, when Part I ends with a leap in time, practically a flash forward that is then narrated in the past tense as *déjà vu* from the viewpoint of the mature author’s present. This is when five years later, in 1911, with his mind full of sad memories of his deceased friend Moussa, Adrien steps into a rundown bar in the Fort Napoleon district in Alexandria, where he catches a glimpse of Moussa’s daughter Sarah in a miserable state sitting in a corner. When Adrien and Moussa first searched for Sarah and her bar in Alexandria, they were directed with contempt by a denizen to go look in this notorious district (Istrati 31). Despite hearing Adrien ordering a vermouth, she shows no sign on her face signalling she recognized him, though he was sure she did. He paid his bill and left (Istrati 114-15). This is one meeting (that does not fully occur) as substitute for another, one that was once imagined but not realized in an entirely different place. This equation links the unattained frontier on the very edge of space with the inner ‘margin’ of an Alexandrine quarter.

There exists one other flashback important for us, where Mikhail returned one last time to Egypt, in 1908-1909, after leaving the hotel at Salt Lake with Adrien in his company (Istrati 205). They were late in departing, and further delayed by notorious Black Sea storms. Terminally ill, Mikhail wished to live two years and no more, spending



winters in Cairo and summers in Alexandria. He was tricked, for the sake of tuberculosis treatment in Switzerland, by a Romanian swindler in Egypt, and left penniless (Istrati 207-12). At this point, the narrative returns to the departure scene in Braila where Mikhail spoke to Adrien of the deadly complete rest, i.e., repetition with a difference, in keeping with the irreversibility of real time's arrow, that awaited him in the far north (Istrati 204-5). Adrien spent three more winters in Egypt with stops in Turkey, Greece, and Italy, before the Balkan War interrupted his travel plan in 1913, and blocked him in Bucharest, where he heard the call of the West<sup>15</sup>. He headed for Paris to become a writer (Istrati 216). Adrien started writing when he was almost thirty, by making full use of his six years of travelling around the Mediterranean. This experience reduced his original 'distance' from the Mediterranean, but did not eradicate it completely. All the better, since he could see from within as well as from without, benefiting from the privilege of the peripatetic, neither alien nor local.

Although Cartarescu's *Levant* takes place when the world at large was caught in the turmoil and aftershocks of what the eminent historian Eric Hobsbawm (1962) called the Age of Revolution (1789-1848), with its epic style and periodical poetic pastiches, it harks back to mythical times even before. At one point, the text brings up a natural consequence of this underlying "deep time" perspective of the geologists and palaeontologists, as it was termed by Stephen Jay Gould (1987), which invites the reader to contemplate transcendental eternity amidst the flow of time. If everything is eternal, then there would be nothing of value. Our universe becomes a point among millions like it in a state of formation from fire, while appearing, from such a great distance, as mere pieces of crystal and copper, seashells, etc. In reverse, our universe is also reduced to an atom within the big picture (Cartarescu 39-40). Anachronisms abound in this Borgesian eternity with Jorge Luis Borges himself earlier directly addressed: maze was in Romania before Columbus discovered America, a revolutionary poet in jail calls Che Guevara a brother long before he was born, a French spy emerges from a gramophone before Edison invented it, and children find Toblerone chocolates in their shoes as gifts from Saint-Nicholas (Cartarescu 21, 28, 48, 87, 152).

Within this eternity-ridden geological time perspective, we need only to take further note of the fact that the human bias of history is thereby eliminated by upgrading the pre-human dimension. The posthuman perspective subverts the text via the thoughts of Hyacinthe, the fairy, who asks Manoil if he knows what this century means for her, only to respond herself that it is only a hardly noticeable small point in the cosmos, and if humans suffer, are oppressed and humiliated, so do oaks, trilobites, and the stars transformed into supernovas in the sky. This is followed up by Manoil, some forty pages later, bringing to the author's attention that there are stars in the sky that are born, couple, die and think, some crying and others dancing, and whole continents of stars in the course

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<sup>15</sup> For a similar fictional justification dated from 1929, see de Chirico, where Hebdomeros the hero advises his crew to go north or west: "I advise you to be careful of the south and the east because they are destructive and corrosive countries" (76).

of conquering other continents of stars (Cartarescu 112, 167). Yet we are not left there, but brought back to our senses and contemporaneous chronological time by the dating of Cartarescu's writerly activity. He is typing his fiction on his *Erika* typewriter in the kitchen of his apartment in Bucharest on the very April 1<sup>st</sup> of 1988! We then see him working in the same place on October 30<sup>th</sup> when the bell rings and his favourite rebel characters arrive. They go over their story all together. When the author wishes to ask his wife, Christina to serve them coffee, but not the industrially-produced ersatz coffee of the Ceausescu period, *nechezol* but Nescafe, he pronounces only the first syllable of it, by habitual auto-censorship, thus making us feel the dark shadow of the dictator cast over this private place. His expanding *Erika* typewriter of German origin destroys the apartment, takes in Bucharest, and raises its chariot among the stars becoming ultimately as large as our universe, while a gigantic Elohim (an all-powerful composite god of gods) with fingers as big as comets and supernovas starts typing letters as one fiction character, Zenaide, fears that the end of their world is fast approaching (Cartarescu 155, 229-38).

### **Conclusion: chronotope as composite construct**

All things considered, Istrati's *Mediterranean* is not about an adventure unfolding with the Mediterranean as its backdrop. It is first and foremost about the Mediterranean, and more specifically the 'spirit' of the Mediterranean. It renders this spirit of place so successfully that it more than deserves its concise title. No wonder it has outperformed all its rivals in its persistently wide popularity within the Mediterranean world. It holds a mirror up, showing numerous nations what they have in common, i.e., their shared 'spirit' as manifestation of a way of life. Istrati achieved this success by deploying a cartographic strategy with a point of departure in Romania, where the Mediterranean and Black Sea worlds overlapped, thereby providing him with a depth of field and a corresponding perspective on the Mediterranean. In other words, because Istrati was one step removed from the Mediterranean thanks to his original homeland, he could see it for what it was. Istrati described the pre-war Mediterranean as placed within a conventional time-space unit that was certainly bigger than that of his homeland during the same period, as well as that of the Black Sea, and smaller than that of the fin-de-siècle world at large. As such, his work reveals a meso-level chronotope with its corresponding temporal and spatial coordinates, in keeping with Bakhtin's usage of chronotope as a literary device for analysis.

The representation of the Mediterranean in Istrati's *Mediterranean* informed by modern social and poetic realism is 'impressionistic'. Moreover, it is not magnified, but real, in fact, corporeal and tangible (Aboucaya 10). In contrast, Cartarescu reworks geography as if it were a stage with a distinct setting, by using the conventions and clichés of the Levant literature. His lyrical-cum-artificial reconstruction of the Levant is intentionally exaggerated, distorted, and obviously post-impressionistic, occasionally expressionistic and surrealistic. All the better for his reconstruction of the Levant, which is a further step removed from the geographic reality. In this way, he serves to appropriate

the Mediterranean Levant into the re-imagined literary space of his homeland. His work thereby becomes homage to his literary ancestors who paved his way, as well as attaining its deserved fame by providing us with an example of the literary inventiveness of the periphery that compensates for its 'historic' failure during the Age of Revolutions.

The above difference is related to two writers' space and time preferences and specifications, as well as the literary space within which they positioned themselves as they incorporated it into the body and soul of their two texts. To his credit, Istrati's text is loosely connected and with gaps, and quite casual in relation to the literary conventions of the time it was conceived in. This provides the reader unintentionally with room to take part individually in suturing the text so as to realize her/his own 'impression' of the Mediterranean. Otherwise, Istrati maintains a neatly drawn divide between the author and the text on one side and the readers on the other. By contrast, Cartarescu's postmodern text is playfully interactive. At one point, the author invites his reader to keep only what s/he wishes to from his text, and discard the rest. The ending even takes this a step further. The book itself, where automatic writing had already been implied, becomes visually auto-destructive. There have been precedents of self-destructive texts in Borges, but also, for example, in the case of the author, alongside the character, in Malcolm Bradbury's *My Strange Quest for Mensonge* (1987). However, we are faced here with a truly original 'literary space' phenomenon when Manoil picks by chance a copy of *The Levant* and starts reading it. As he reads, the lines start being erased to give the last word to the reader by actually creating space thanks to now-blank lines and presumably soon-pages of the book. Put differently, literary space occupied by the book is gradually rescinded so that the readers at large can proceed in this emerging 'commons' to produce their own version(s) of the Levant.

Finally, to let the cat out of the bag, in the beginning of the Tenth Canto in *The Levant* there exists a tirade paying tribute to Bakhtin's analytical concept. Before associating the Levant with the last link in the chain, the author goes through a series of fantasies, including one of an inhumation disguised in "carnavalesque colours". There then occurs something "as if a ruler is liquidated and a setsquare loses its right angle under the sun" (much like in Dali's *Persistence of Memory*, where the clocks melt because of the heat), the end result of which is the "transform[ation of] infinity into a drop of water, into a sphere of quartz, or into the egg of the future universes to come, i.e., a chronotope!" (Cartarescu 177) The chronotope as an egg or a seed, where the microcosm is securely deposited for the time being, is precisely a potential "gateway," in Bakhtinian terms, situated on the threshold of the shifting horizon for a possible future world and a universe yet to come. This formulation defies the conventional chronotope that Istrati represented and Bakhtin conceived as a unit of analysis. What Cartarescu achieves here is not only to acknowledge it, but to bestow upon the chronotope an immense elasticity by pushing time out of the picture as it expands to eternity, while space remains with us irrespectively of its changing size, as characteristic of this limit situation.

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