

Max Blecher's Symbolic Embodiments of Textual Identity

Daniela MOLDOVEANU

Academia Tehnică Militară „Ferdinand I”, București
Ferdinand I Military Technical Academy, Bucharest
Personal e-mail: danamoldoveanu84@gmail.com

Max Blecher's Symbolic Embodiments of Textual Identity

When *Adventures in Immediate Unreality* was written, Blecher had already been sick for years; however there is no evident personal reference throughout the book to the physical ailment captured in detail as a chronic manifestation. The reading from the disease perspective turns *Adventures* into a novel of evasion, of repression ruled by anamnesis, melancholy and permeable blackouts to the spiritually sick space, impregnated with the germs of absurdity and nothingness to which the narrator abandons himself, with a strong need of erase from the landscape, as the above-mentioned also find their correspondent linguistically in oxymoronic phrases. If we add the description of “cursed spaces” as bodies decomposing – the riverbank thus had some “badly scarred wounds”, we will understand that it is not at all advisable to dispose from the start of the author's subtle psy-chology mechanism, as we intend to prove in this paper. The narrator of *Adventures* smoothly removes the author from the deceiving, anonymous silence background crowded with symbols, transferring the act of discourse and character decodification into the infinitely germinating ineffability of speculation about ipseity.

Keywords: Max Blecher, *Adventures in Immediate Unreality*, writing as evasion, anamnesis, melancholy, the author's mirrored psychology, textual ipseity



Scriptural Disembodiments

In referring to Max Blecher's writings, the literary critic I. Negoitescu speaks of a “literature of suffering – in the existential sense”¹, hence the plot is claimed from the tragic fate of the author stigmatized by the morbus of decomposition, and immersed directly in the ontological sphere to later bring to the surface, in an original manner, forever-haunting themes such as identity, illness, death, meaning of life and the unreality of the world.

The contemplating-contemplated subject dives into the “unreality” of digressions about hidden thoughts, evanescence, pain intensity, identity diffusion, anxiety, depression and gestures originating in the disagreeable status of body and spirit of the author who connects

the narrator-character to himself by the accuracy with which he dissects the state of blackout and reverie induced by a room, a “bad place”, a memory or an object.

Loneliness represents, in the logic of the previous sequence, the Aleph of temporal expansion and synaesthesia; here will take place the meeting with textual ipseity that (en)lightens the “burrow”, filtrating and unrealizing the world, in the first phase, to be able, afterwards, to rewrite it: “*It is then a solitude purer and more pathetic than before. The sensation of world's alienation is clearer and more intimate: a lucid and gentle melancholy, like a dream that we remember in the depth of the night*”. Therefore, to employ a genuine postmodern truism, we note that fiction serves as a substitute for reality, but not without risks, as the narrator of *The Lit-*



Up Burrow remarks: “*Things happen in the world in this moment I write*”.

Indeed, writing makes living almost bearable only if the narrative ipseity saves as much as possible as compensation. It is also a symbolic death (pending and mimicking the other) that wipes its performer from the world. What this might have meant to Blecher we can infer by reading a page from Mihail Sebastian’s *Diary* in which he renders several confessions of the agonizing young writer: “Look, I started writing a novel. But I do not necessarily intend to finish it. If I die before I don’t think I’ll regret that I haven’t finished it. How little does literature mean to me and how little time I spend on it. It has crossed my mind lately, to kill myself.”²

This is because death is never final in literature (on the contrary) and lasts as long as the passing from one pain/state to another; “real” death appears infinitely offering from Blecher’s perspective. Through this confession, Blecher does nothing but reaffirm that one cannot die on paper, one never dies enough and to the end when the entire being wishes to finish, even though one never lives to the end either, but survives between phrases, in an aestheticizing, delirious scriptural disembodiment.

Writing mostly isolates Blecher from the ego that is defined in and through disease with the entire attribute of its sphere, depicting the “self-contradiction” Buber speaks of: “A hope unfulfilled took refuge in the absurd appearance of accomplishment; now he fumbles through mazes in which he gets more and more clogged.”³ Like in a maze, the narrator is lost inside the landscape of his own body that becomes writing i.e. the consciousness, as well as the conscience of life: “*The moment I write, on small obscure channels, in lively*

meandering rivers, through dark recesses carved into the flesh, with a small rhythmic gurgling of pulse it is pouring out in the night of the body [...] my blood.”

The blood (of ink), the primordial matter of the world and text, brings purification by descent into the “oneiric house” (“*It’s dark and I’ve been locked up into the rumble and fumes of my own blood*”) of absolute intimacy with a self released from flesh (“*[...] maintaining the exact shape of the body disappeared, but only them remaining, like fine, red networks of people and animals [...] instead of filled-up flesh*”). In this respect, Bachelard⁴ states that the “endosmosis between reverie and memories occurs and the dreamer [...], ready for the farthest identifications”, creates an “archaic dream” of what reality provides to him, but also by making an insight into the unconscious.

Reduced to essence, to the mental map of corporality, the fantastic image of inner microcosm is translated in the macrocosm, so that the walls of the “cavern” visited expand uncontrollably by gradual increase, and thus, “*[...] the commotion of blood is lost in the commotion of wind [...]. And lost in this rumble, the pulse of my blood! Completely lost, completely insignificant!*” Interiority become exteriority gets lost, cancelled in an immensity impossible to control, hence the exit from self is equal to the loss of the meaning of identity: “*[...] my life lost in the adventures of the world, everything I do, everything I write seems futile to me, and the visions illuminating me [...] seem as phosphorescence [...] lost forever in the night, and my lines are meaningless too [...].*”

Adventures, from beginning to end, are an expansion on unfamiliar outlines (“*Between me and the world there is no separation*”), disbandment which, eventually, from the perspective of *Scarred Hearts*, for instance, turns out to be even a capacity. The coalescence with the world breaks the shell of identity with self, as after taking blood or opening an abscess, the patient feels somewhat liberated, although only for that single second when the exchange happens. The lack of significance is equal, therefore, at that moment, to numbness: “*[...] a total lack of significance could be linked so deeply with my intimate substance*”.

The writing itself, refusing its unity, seems an epiphany only at the level of the descent into the unconscious where ordinary words, “*are not valid at certain depths of the soul*”. The word must embody what it loses through incomplete or poor expression; it becomes an image, a metaphor of being in unstable equilibrium – between “to be” and “not to be”, according to Ricoeur⁵ – standing for the alchemy from essences of the senses, this independent, profoundly sensory and unique entity: “*to borrow something from the essences of other sensitivities of life, distilling from them like a new smell [...]*”. The complexity of the word thus addresses the escapist need of the author; it is a

vehicle of penetration both into fiction and reality that bears hedonistic, decadent, opiate meanings, as well as divination clarities: “[...] amazement [...] when I watch a person in reality and then follow [...] his gestures in a mirror [...] the imbalance of falls into dream [...] something in the fog and transparency [...] in crystal bubbles”.

Aestheticized, Blecher’s world claims itself in language, “literature is nothing but language”⁶, as Barthes notes, consequently naturalist-expressionist descriptions, dreams, feelings and perceptions diffuse; but rendered with accuracy in their confused atmosphere, the above large spider web covers Blecherian fictions always reversing plans, cleaving identity and reducing feelings to twitching gestures, to obsessions swallowed with knots, and to a pathological, psychologically determined perception of exteriority. So, the novelistic discourse always seeks to take down masks in a space of clarity and purity of the immanence released from the dominance of physical degradation.

The Reappraisal of Kitsch

One of the significant paradoxes for Blecher is that, as exasperated as his narrators or his characters seem to be by the “tyranny” of objects, they have a hedonistic approach towards them (“*I started to ecstatically caress the arms of the armchair. I would have wished the situation I found myself in to sink in deeper, to weight as heavily as it could, to enter every fiber of my body so that I could feel its genuineness*”). Therefore, as Moles observes: “There is a joy things produce, there is the pleasure of holding a beautiful object in one’s hand, of caressing it, of loving it, there is an object-related sensuality, which is part of the general sensuality”⁷.

In my book *The Identity of Metaphor – The Metaphor of Identity: Discourse and Portrait*⁸, I underline that the desire of Blecher’s characters to look at or touch things is mostly related to those which are extremely artificial and colourful, because it is the alienation from the dangerous centres of the fragile humanity that conveys the “wax figures” an aura of idealism, that of a surreal life for the panopticon which has become an Eden for the senses, senses which no longer have anything to do with the flesh and its decay, but with the exacerbation of some images: “*The wax characters were the only genuine thing in the world; they alone would falsify life in an ostentatious manner [...]. All these have emigrated in life from the panopticon [...] all of them, gathered together make up the very essence of life*”.

And because they imitate life ostensibly, the kitsch of the things is more diluted, in some way even aristocratic, it does not equal the lamentable kitsch reserved for crippled or immobilized patients who have fallen prey to schizophrenia and illusion like in Blecher’s novel *Scarred Hearts*. The alterity of factual materiality

becomes an aspect of a desirable, mesmerizing kitsch, which is also self-assumed and perfectly serene.

There is not one of the faces evoked in *Adventures* that has not been compared to an object or defined according to one: Clara resembles a postcard (“*She completely resembled a half-naked woman [...] on a pornographic postcard [...]*”), Edda herself enters the personal imaginary museum like “[...] another object, a simple object whose existence tortured and irritated me”. Even her death would represent “a succession of objects”, as she herself predicts, and during her life, her tutelary image always appears surrounded by things, she throws away or purchases “soft carpets” or is wearing “a blue robe [...] slippers whose heels would clack at every step”. Likewise, the old man, Weber, refurbishes himself by buying “a new cap and gold framed glasses”; the pockets of the child that was the narrator give out with coloured rubble, etc. Even during the young man’s erotic dream, Edda is depicted through her personal objects; moreover, the woman’s proximity increases the narrator’s perception, filling it with material details: “*I would see the design of the carpet near the bed, where her shoes were, and her half-opened purse on the table, with a piece of a handkerchief hanging out [...] the painted flowers on the walls*”.

The entire universe will be composed out of an infinity of obsessive Eddas; she is now the image in the centre of the labyrinth, the one around whom the pantomime of life, and especially death, is being acted: “*In the warm and soft desert, I used to reflect on Edda’s image, sometimes multiplied in dozens of copies, in tens, hundreds, thousands of Eddas [...] statutory, identical*”.

The object outlives its holder by exteriorizing its intimacy and placing the individual in the world. Thus objectified, Blecher’s characters manage to keep their identity intact, masters of the space they occupy; and suddenly the instincts stop devouring their originators in the steams of flesh and disease. The transformation of spectacular things in a sculpture workshop described in *Adventures* is a metaphor that mirrors the scripturality process, as it represents the birth of narrative ipseity. The latter brings on the stage magnetic shapes in a body that feels nothing, but can have a major, intense impact on the reader or watcher.

At the antipodes, raw matter symbolizes the living death: “*Everywhere, she had infested the air, breaking out, filling it with the secluded abscesses of the rocks, with the wounded hollows of the trees*.” The apparition and appearance of the object is related to the viewer’s state of mind, the state of the retina, and it does not touch the referent, contrary to the pain which infiltrates and determines the implosion, leaving the patient in a continuous decline.

The more broken, decayed, mismatched things are the more interesting and ideal they appear, for if their life is elsewhere, they expose their decrepitude

nonchalantly. Therefore, miniatures, cheap artefacts emanate a strong, magnetic charm, they irritate the senses and carry their contemplator to parallel worlds – here lies the very border between the real and the imaginary.

The gypsy ring, for example, induces a state of extreme excitement in the viewer lost in the mixture of its lens (“a piece of fused glass [...] the artist [...] forged it from panoptical visions, as well”). A ring for decadent collectors, the likes of Huysmans’ *Des Esseintes*, or containing the baroque, psychedelic clusters (“The purple of corpses, dead by asphyxia, alongside the pornographic red of women’s garters; the lead-like pallor of infuriated waves in a macabre light, like in half-lit tombs with glass covers [...] Hallucinating”) like in the apartments of Mateiu Caragiale’s philanderers. This “marvelous, fine, grotesque and hideous tin object” is the metaphor of the Blecherian world, a composite realm of paradox, inner ambiguity and ambivalence. In Blecher’s works, statements are not contrapuntally negated, as in Kafka’s works, for instance, but cohabit, transforming the universe into something uncertain, chaotic and random, of an aestheticized absurdity.

We see another fetish in the piece of black silk which the adolescent in *Adventures* gloats over as if it were a living being, sexualized to the extreme: “I have always had a bizarre attraction for the feminine ridiculous clothing”. The worn-out object, torn from who knows what ball gown, as the young man surmises, causes him to have the “black shock”, which, according to Bachelard represents “profound emotional states”. Now we remark the exacerbation (in retrospect) of the senses in a hedonist sense, the seeking of sexual, visual, olfactory and aural pleasure with the same organ which is later to be subjected to an ample process of torture and morbidification. The melancholy of “unrealities” manages to “guess” the world “by the means of the obscure but very sharp instinct of extreme pleasure.”

In the same manner, the amulet in *The Lit-Up Burrow* introduces another opportunity for dreaming, for escaping the contingency: “For a few days, the jade amulet remained in my room, near me and when I would sometimes wake up at night, I would look at it and, by doing so, I would discover in every moment new kaleidoscope designs and unreal images in its translucence.” All these miniature universes, thoroughly examined, hide the vision of the childhood the narrator of *Adventures* accesses through memory, especially since for him “the evolution from childhood to adolescence has meant a continuous decline of the world.” The ineffable aspect of things from back then will fall under the influence of disease and pain, and it is for this reason that Blecher sees the dream as a new museal space.

Here the second attitude of the narrator toward things is defined, the so-called “surrealist attitude”

indicated by Moles¹⁰; it exploits the “bizarre factor” of the associations between objects. Or of the ideal aspects in which the narrator confesses to have imagined himself in, more precisely, the desire to embody a tree (“Quiet and gorgeous, like a tree [...]”) or to be a part of those “heedless and mechanic buffoons”, which are in perfect harmony with the “glass case” allotted to them.

The reign of artificial objects starts at the first floor of the Weber house – a nest of withered, stale beings, but who regain their “life” during the night, because it is then that they come across the gestures made during the day by the masters of the house – and ends with the cathartic burning of the panopticon. The flame which would melt the sex of the wax bride together with the shoulder boards of the general wounded in the war, comes from the narrator’s desire to purify life in a symbolic manner, from all its tragic exaggerations, from the madness of irritating the sensors to the point of their rejection, from the “sin” of the flesh to exist in order to suffer: “What remains for me in my life is one single and supreme wish: to witness the burning of a panopticon, to see the slow and scabrous melting of wax figures.” Thus, the narrator jubilates from the perspective of that moist hole, which “absorbs the dead in coolness and darkness, as he is enveloped, of course, in supreme bliss.”

One of the defining and symbolically regenerative gestures is, of course, the imaginary bathing in Edda’s blood (“[...] a formidable gushing of blood from her chest [...] slowly filling the chamber [...] as the blood reaches my mouth and its salty and pleasant taste be let to drown me [...]”); thus the lover is scripturally purified, the vital substance of his world becomes ink, whereas Edda, drained of her blood, remains an object of memory, delivered to the collective subconscious, therefore immortalized.

The hesitations of the melancholic young man in *Adventures* (“[...] in the world, the distances were not simply those which the eyes could see [...] but others, invisible, populated by monsters and fearfulness [...]”) actually take place between his condition of (mediated) character of the narrator’s memory and his own autonomy which is looking for itself beyond the text, inverting the timeline. Each of these escapist means sustains an entire alternative world and is transformed in the “lit-up burrow” of ipseity, for Blecher builds up with thorough lucidity “[...] a scaffolding of inconsistent objects, balanced by a conjurer on one point.”

Max Blecher’s need to define himself primarily in writing in the world in which he never fully lives is, undoubtedly, vouched ontologically. Sebastian confesses at one point in his *Diary* (March 25, 1937) that Blecher “was [...] firm about killing himself, he has torn all his papers, all his manuscripts: 80 pages of his new novel which he has just started, 70 pages from a diary”¹¹. Thus, we see that death sets itself first by

destroying the text, the narrative ipseity i.e. the “real” person in spirit. Once the paper alternative has been eradicated, it seems that the one outside will perish by default, on its own. Because Blecher’s pleasure of writing articles, letters, etc. is notorious as the only available means to accede to a minimal social existence, this way placing him in relation to the world, the exteriority. It goes without saying that it also places him in relation to his own frustrations, disabilities, fears and ghosts.

Blecher’s character and the schizoid state of his world come also from the author’s habit of having masks on paper, writing under a pseudonym. This somehow absolves of the responsibility of the flawed self, gangrened by disease, offering him the possibility to fall back to an aestheticizing and objectified distance from the self, from the height of authorial omniscience. Even if he makes use of that only in the novel *Scarred Hearts*, the other two being written in the first person, the coalescence with the experiences and his characters’ vision cannot truly fulfil the passing to a heterodiegetic narration. Hence the scriptural conscience takes the aspect of a lyrical ego which holds together the divagations, the splitting, the reveries and dreams, making them a part of life.

In one of his published articles titled: *The concept of iteration at Kierkegaard*, Blecher writes about the individual’s desire to live once again a past moment “in the fullness of its quality”¹². *Adventures* are such an endeavour – from the perspective of anamnesis, the narrator returns following the time line, living past experiences in a double way: nostalgically and textually recomposed – as they are thus reintegrated in the order of a present of the hand writing. Thus, the author, much like the melancholic young man of the “unrealities”, turns back in time, walking back in his own footsteps, so as not to be caught in the symbolic and reductive loop of immediate reality. The only means for Max Blecher to “cheat” death and the platitude of existence of the being crushed and immobilized in plaster case is the writing-a-life game.

Note :

1. I. Negoïtescu, *Istoria literaturii române (1800-1945)*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 2002, p. 431.
2. Mihail Sebastian, *Jurnal. 1935-1944*, București, Humanitas, 2002, p. 102.
3. Martin Buber, *Eu și Tu*, București, Humanitas, 1992, p. 98.
4. Gaston Bachelard, *Pământul și reveriile odihnei*, București, Univers, 1999, p. 81-82.
5. Paul Ricoeur, *Metafora vie*, București, Univers, 1984.
6. Roland Barthes, *Le bruissement de la langue*, Paris, Seuil, 1984, p. 106.
7. Abraham Moles, *Psihologia kitsch-ului. Arta fericirii*,

București, Meridiane, 1980, p. 26.

8. Daniela Moldoveanu, *The Identity of Metaphor – The Metaphor of Identity. Discourse and Portrait*, Frankfurt am Main; New York, Peter Lang, 2017.

9. Gaston Bachelard, *Psihanaliza focului*, București, Univers, 1989, p. 65.

10. Abraham Moles, op. cit.

11. Mihail Sebastian, op. cit., p. 120.

12. Max Blecher, *Conceptul repetiției la Kierkegaard*, în *Vreame*, 29 octombrie 1933, București.

Bibliography:

Bachelard, Gaston, *Pământul și reveriile odihnei / The Earth and the Reveries of Rest*, Bucharest, Univers, 1999.

Bachelard, Gaston, *Psihanaliza focului / The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Bucharest, Univers, 1989.

Blecher, Max, *Întâmplări în irealitatea imediată. Inimi cicatrizate. Vizuina luminată.*

Corp transparent. Corespondență / Occurrences in the Immediate Unreality. Scarred Hearts. The Lighted Burrow. Transparent Body. Correspondence, Craiova, Aius Publishing House/ Bucharest, Vinea Publishing House, 1999.

Blecher, Max, *Conceptul repetiției la Kierkegaard / The Concept of Repetition in Kirkegaard*. În: *Vreame*, 29 octombrie 1933.

Barthes, Roland, *Le bruissement de la langue*, Paris, Seuil, 1984.

Buber, Martin, *Eu și Tu / Me and You*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 1992.

Moldoveanu, Daniela, *The Identity of Metaphor – The Metaphor of Identity. Discourse and Portrait*, Frankfurt am Main; New York, Peter Lang, 2017.

Moles, Abraham, *Psihologia kitsch-ului. Arta fericirii / The Psychology of Kitsch. The Art of Happiness*, Bucharest, Meridiane, 1980.

Negoïtescu, I., *Istoria literaturii române (1800-1945) / The History of Romanian Literature (1800-1945)*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 2002.

Ricoeur, Paul, *Metafora vie / The Live Metaphor*, Bucharest, Univers, 1984.

Sebastian, Mihail, *Jurnal. 1935-1944 / Diary 1935-1944*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2002.

