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SOLENOID AS WORLD LITERATURE

Abstract. This study proposes an analysis of the novel *Solenoid* from the point of view of world literature theories. The aim of the article is to demonstrate how this contemporary type of discourse contributes to a reevaluation of Cărtărescu's writing in the national sphere, where world literature theories have not been widely explored yet and where Cărtărescu's novels have sometimes received divergent opinions. First, we will situate our discourse in the context of world literature current debates. Second, Cărtărescu's novel will be placed in a network of world writers we consider he belongs to. The third part is dedicated to the way in which the image of Bucharest is constructed in the novel. The closing section will clarify the reasons why Cărtărescu's novel sets into motion but, at the same time, challenges world literature's network of writers that it establishes strong connections with.

Keywords: world literature, international public, Bucharest, networks, surrealism

1. World literature and its contemporary debates

The present article puts forward a reinterpretation of Mircea Cărtărescu's novel *Solenoid* through the filter of world literature theories, still considered a state-of-the-art discipline in comparative studies, continuously inciting debates in the academic communities. The paper is part of an extended investigation designed to formulate how the Romanian writer's style changed once his literature entered a large international context and how the circulation and the international recognition of his literature

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impacted the national perception of Cărtărescu's works. The aim of this research is to demonstrate that although the Romanian writer's literature impacts, challenges, and contributes to world literature's most fervent intertextual networks of writers, in the national context he is disregarded and even denigrated. It is a paradox which needs to be closely analyzed and deconstructed in the form of a case study on world literature.

Among Cărtărescu's novels, *Solenoid* is still the one which has the widest circulation on the international book market, as it was translated in many more languages than the trilogy *Orbitor* [*Blinding*], for example. In the summer of 2022, it was awarded the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction, which confirmed once more how important and valued Cărtărescu's voice is in the American literary space. The award becomes even more significant when we acknowledge that, unlike the first part of the 20th century, for which comparatists such as Pascale Casanova considered Paris the cultural centre of world literature – or, in Casanova's words, the “capital of the literary world” (Casanova 2004: 24), nowadays we see how this centre has shifted to the American space.

Furthermore, it is in the American cultural space where world literature theories found a very solid ground and where they flourished the most. The activity of the Institute for World Literature (IWL) associated to Harvard University has confirmed this fact, since it was created in order to encourage the study of literature in the context of a globalizing world. Thus, world literature has become, in the last decades, more and more important in areas such as the study of literature's role in “helping all of us to think more deeply and to envision ways the world could be remade” (Damrosch 2020a: 4), as David Damrosch notes, or in the study of the national literatures, not to mention the methods we use when we study or compare literatures. Also, globalization brings a lot of changes which, in the Damrosch's words, “require us to rethink the ways we read, the ways we organize our programs, and the ways we carry on virtually every aspect of our scholarly life and work” (Damrosch 2020a: 5). Naturally, central issues in comparative studies, related to the literary canon, the circulation of texts, or translation are reevaluated by world literature theories.

Consequently, world literature, as a concept, encompasses several debates originated from the phenomenon of globalization. However, the

discipline reunites diverse, sometimes conflicting, positions. If David Damrosch argues for a transnational model (Damrosch 2003: 4) stemming from the circulation of texts, other researchers criticize this view. More exactly, Damrosch claims that “world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading” (Damrosch 2003: 5). While this transnational model is fuelled by the circulation of texts and implicitly by their translation in as many literary spaces as possible, Emily Apter proposes the theory of the untranslatable, arguing for “an approach to literary comparatism that recognizes the importance of non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability and untranslatability” (Apter 2013: 4). Additionally, she does not approve of the tendencies “toward reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability” (Apter 2013: 2), in their ambition to investigate national literatures by assigning them labels and by trying to cover as many literatures as possible. From her point of view, this ambition “to zoom over the speed bumps of untranslatability in the rush to cover ground” (Apter 2013: 3) tends to become reductionist, if not superficial (especially because of its imperialist agenda). We won’t delve into similar critiques, like the one formulated by Pheng Cheah: “Instead of exploring what literature can contribute to an understanding of the world and its possible role in contemporary globalization, theories of world literature have focused on the implications of global circulation for the study of literature” (Cheah 2016: 5). In exchange, we will approve the rather “pluralistic” model proposed by Damrosch: “What we need are pluralistic studies that admit materials which challenge and modify the aesthetic, political, and historiographic frameworks we bring to them.” (Damrosch 2020a: 333). This approach is not only more balanced and comprehensive in trying to combine the history of literature with the discipline’s history and methods, but it also encourages an attentive and informed reading of a literary text. As a result, the national context in which a text is produced is not ignored, and close reading practices don’t fall under rigid theories.

In the case of a well-established author, whether a novel is written or not for an international audience, it will be rapidly brought on the international market and it will be assigned a certain label. Cărtărescu has been read as a “peripheral” writer (Damrosch 2020b: 177), for instance.

David Damrosch (2020b: 177) and Delia Ungureanu (2020: 257) analysed his position as a “peripheral” writer and his relation to other writers. Placing Cărtărescu in a grouping of writers alongside Kafka and Borges, Damrosch notes that the Romanian writer “purposefully overlaps the local and the universal outline” (Damrosch 2020b: 181). As a result, whether he is read by a Romanian or by a foreign reader, an informed reading will take into account both the local and the “universal” aspects that compose the image of Bucharest, for instance. Nonetheless, given the complex architecture of his novels, there is no wonder they circulate on international book markets and are well received, while “at home” they still incite controversies. In the Romanian literary space, there were some public debates regarding the relation between his international prestige and the funding he received from the state. The issue was clarified by Professor Mircea Vasilescu in 2018.

But before looking closer into Mircea Vasilescu’s analysis, we need to clarify what we consider Cărtărescu’s position is into the world literature’s larger network. We have already clarified our position towards him as a writer when we stated he is a well-established international cultural personality. It is not only due to the numerous prestigious awards he received, but, equally important, because his works are translated into twenty-three languages. Currently, there are three translations in progress for *Theodoros*, his latest novel, all of them announced for the fall of 2024, in German, Spanish, and French. On the one hand, the fact that his latest novel has been proposed for translation in several languages immediately after publication is a proof that *Solenoid* represents a turning point in the Romanian writer’s career: it both confirmed his place alongside important or “canonical” writers (such as Kafka, Borges or Marquez) and helped him strengthen his status (since the trilogy *Orbitor* [*Blinding*] was rather hard to translate entirely). On the other hand, there are clues in the novel, as well as in the published diary of the author, which point that *Solenoid* was written for an international public.

In a novel written for an international readership, certain themes are treated specifically. For example, the city’s image does not abound, necessarily, in details regarding the general history of the place (since they won’t be recognizable for foreign readers). Instead, it can draw

more on surreal images, for example. It is only one of the techniques the author uses in order to inscribe his texts in a grouping of writers alongside Borges and Marquez. Nevertheless, when we interpret Cărtărescu's novel from this point of view, not only do we obtain a very dynamic and almost new investigation, since the relation between his works and world literature has barely been explored so far, but we also touch the problematic interaction between his literature and the Romanian cultural space. We will try to elaborate a case study on world literature and its implications in the contemporary Romanian literary space.

2. Cărtărescu as a world literature writer

A special case in the contemporary Romanian literature, Mircea Cărtărescu faces a paradox: his works are praised by a wide international public and by researchers, but at the same time he was derogated by some media and cultural actors inside the national sphere. The controversies are detailed, and the prejudices are demystified by Mircea Vasilescu in his study about Romanian culture (2018). For instance, he analyzes a couple of press articles written with the intention of manipulating the public into thinking that Cărtărescu's texts were translated abroad with the Romanian state's funding. Besides, they insinuated that the value of his writings hardly justifies the amount of the funding. Vasilescu shows that the first text written by Cărtărescu and translated abroad was *Visul* [*Le rêve*], translated into French in 1992, when there wasn't any legislation regulating the possibility of funding. The translations that followed have been put into motion by the initiative of other foreign publishing houses:

“Between 1992-2005, 25 books were translated in the following countries: France (5), Hungary (3), Italy (3), Germany, Norway, USA, Sweden, Bulgaria (2 each), Spain, Netherlands, Ireland, and Slovenia (1 each). Without any financial support from the ICR², as

² Romanian Cultural Institute.

the *Translation and Publication Support Program* only started working in 2006; the books appeared «on the open market», because that is what the publishers in the respective countries decided. And here one more thing should be mentioned: sometimes, the translations were started by the initiative of translators from Western European countries, who were familiar with the Romanian language and literature, and who put their competence, connections and enthusiasm at the service of our literature, more than we do it ourselves. [...] In 2005, with 25 volumes published in 12 countries, Mircea Cărtărescu was already the most translated contemporary Romanian writer. From 2006 to June 2018, with or without ICR financial support, other 70 books appeared. In total, for now, there are 95 volumes [...]. According to the data on the website of the National Book Center, only 32 titles appeared with funding from ICR [...]. A third from the total."³ (Vasilescu 2018: 195-196).

Mircea Vasilescu's investigation is important because it unveils the scepticism and distrust that a part of the Romanian public and even intellectuals projected upon Cărtărescu's name. In spite of the national ambition for validation on the international scene, when aspirations became reality, they were considered false and misleading.

Furthermore, this investigation helps us correlate the unfavourable attitude of those public actors with the bleak atmosphere hovering over the city of Bucharest, both in *Solenoid* and in the published diary that the author wrote between 2011 and 2017. The city is sometimes a distressful and hostile space, deeply ingrained in his being (especially in his mind), a kind of creature with which the narrator shares a symbiotic relationship, but by which he sometimes feels rejected or in which he cannot fit anymore. In the first pages of his diary, *Un om care scrie*, which he had been writing almost at the same time with *Solenoid* (and therefore represents the "poetics" of the novel, describing the process of writing *Solenoid*), he

³ All quotes from the Romanian language are provided in my translation. All quotes from *Solenoid* (Cărtărescu 2022a) are provided from the English translation of the novel, made by Sean Cotter.

writes about his disappointments. He confesses about all the “misery [...] and problems without end [...], here in this country, among these people who have been eating me alive, as well as my soul and everything else good inside me. Another outburst of hate and frustration that I don’t want to write here about” (Cărtărescu 2018: 12). A day later he noted down: “I have written so many books in order to be loved by other people. Of course, the result was the opposite” (Cărtărescu 2018: 14). Obviously, the author’s disappointment is related to the hostility he is treated with in Romania, despite his international success. However, we cannot overlook the highly subjective component of this diary and therefore we consider the strong manner in which the diary’s author expresses his disappointment as a metaphor for how the hypersensitive mind of the narrator in *Solenoid* is created.

Alongside the dense and hallucinatory sadness that wires his diary and his novel, the use of obsessive repetitions represents a stylistic feature that makes Cărtărescu’s works recognizable (see, for instance, the narrator’s recurring dreams, or the sunlight of a certain quality reappearing and reverberating in a certain state of mind, in *Solenoid*). All these occurrences form the universe of a fluid character who seems, at the same time, accepted and rejected by the space he lives in. Travelling by tram a long way, in order to teach in a remote school, starts as a torture and later transforms into a surreal experience, when the teacher miraculously finds a way to enter the old factory. The more he tries to escape from his city, the deeper he enters into Bucharest’s secluded areas.

Cărtărescu overtly denies any intention to represent his country in his novels. The question is if his writings confirm his statement (since he tries to “escape” from the “obligation” to represent his natal place, but at the same time he writes about the capital of his country). In his 2004 essay, “Europe has the shape of my brain”, he clearly asserts his position: “I do not intend to [...] turn into the ‘duty-Romanian’, who represents his country at conferences with monotonous regularity. I have no one and nothing to represent except myself and my books. My writing is my only motherland” (Cărtărescu 2004: 64).

But, although the writer refuses to represent his country, a considerable part of his work is filled with the image of Bucharest. David Damrosch also noticed that only “few writers identify so perfectly with their natal

city [...]. It is impossible to separate his work from the strong autobiographic component. However, Cărtărescu was never happy with the role of a local writer" (Damrosch 2020b: 198). The close relation between his ambition to write for an international public and the continuous revaluation of his native city is a research topic requiring special attention, as noted by Damrosch.

All literary works are created within what we call national literature and bear the imprint of the literature in which they are produced throughout all the spaces in which they circulate. Moreover, when circulating, a work gains in translation, in the sense that certain of its elements can vary more than others, and it is the translator's responsibility to determine which elements need to be rendered as accurately as possible. In a valuable translation, the result is not a lessening of the original version, but, according to David Damrosch, a "heightening of the natural creative interaction of reader and text" (Damrosch 2003: 292). From the perspective of world literature theories, writers can be studied individually or investigated in different intertextual networks⁴.

For example, we could read Mircea Cărtărescu as part of the same literary network that includes Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. As the writer himself confesses in his diary, he saw *Solenoid*, from the beginning, as a Kafkaesque novel: "As an atmosphere, it will be a somber book, a Kafkaesque book [...] of fear and despair, a protest against the dying of consciousness" (Cărtărescu 2018: 49). Therefore, the novel published in 2015 is rather closer to Kafka's diary, which is visible right from the first pages of the book. One of the novel's mottos quotes a fragment from Kafka's *Journal*. Moreover, the narrator obsessively returns to a certain paragraph about dreams from the same source, a fragment that can be considered a metaphor for the entire novel. In the same novel, one can find a suite of surrealist symbols (different colours, crimson doors, various objects that become portals to other worlds, childhood games as a source of access to higher knowledge), as well as

⁴ Delia Ungureanu comments Cărtărescu's works as nodes in a larger intertextual network of writers in her article, "Forța revoluționară a periferiei: *Levantul*, *Nostalgia* și literatura mondială" [The revolutionary force of the periphery: *The Levant*, *Nostalgia*, and world literature"] (Ungureanu 2020: 259).

an intertextual allusion to Garcia Marquez's novel *One hundred years of solitude* (the city of Bucharest is raised to the sky at the end of the novel like Macondo in Marquez's book; the writer himself confesses in an interview that *Solenoid* represents a "reversed" history of Marquez's story) (Cărtărescu 2022b). Last but not least, at the end of the novel, after the city is raised by the force of those solenoids spread over its entire surface, the survivors can see what was hidden underneath: Dante's Inferno.

3. Building *Solenoid*, rebuilding Bucharest

Cărtărescu built Bucharest's image as an immense intertext which brings together important nodes of world literature, finding a common trait in the importance that all these writers (Kafka, the surrealists, Marquez) ascribe to memory. Not coincidentally, then, the novel begins with an exercise in transcribing dreams from the narrator's diary into his manuscript. Moreover, Cărtărescu intended the dream journal to form the core of the novel, whose initial title was planned to be *Anomaliile mele* [*My Anomalies*]. In his *Journal*, Cărtărescu refers to *Solenoid* using the title *Anomaliile mele* almost until the moment of publication. Thus, the city itself becomes, in the novel *Solenoid*, an extended diary that hides, at every step, general and personal histories, revealing stories, and a traumatic childhood ("Has anyone else described childhood as a torture chamber?", wonders the narrator – Cărtărescu 2022a: 124); in short, the architecture of a hyperlucid mind for which the exercise of remembering and writing represents the only escape from one's own inferno. The only possible escape seems to be towards the "Other" (since the narrator finally chooses to remain with his family). "In the end, it's about solidarity between people. I would say that this is the last word of this novel", confesses the writer in an interview (Cărtărescu 2022b). After he chooses to stay with his family, the narrator confesses: "I have so often felt – in those moments I never thought I would experience – that I did escape in the end, that I flew through all dimensions in an unexpected escape from self" (Cărtărescu 2022a: 627). To reach such a conclusion and to accept it with serenity, the narrator needs to go through inner torments, through the labyrinths of memory:

"My teeth, my pigtails, my old pictures, these are strange phantoms spilling out of the crypt of memory, incarnate, hardened memories, shining, concrete. Not evidence of your youth's reality, or the body in which your being once lived as a child, but evidence of the unreal nature of time itself, of the coexistence and interpenetration of ages, eras, bodies, within the unanimous hallucination of the mind and world." (Cărtărescu: 2022a: 196).

Thus, the protest against the "dying of consciousness" (Cărtărescu 2022a: 601), one of the novel's metaphors, refers to the perseverance to explore the memory's depths in the most profound way possible, even if sometimes, during the process, the narrator almost enters the uncertain territory of hallucination. In fact, only this breaking through the barriers of the "reality" or the "possible" are proof that the individual has reached the limit of its human being, that he has descended as low as he could, questioned as much as he could, and engaged in this search all the dimensions accessible to him. Meditating on the act of writing and the literature's ability to break through the limits of the real, the narrator confesses: "that's what literature must be, in order to mean something: an act of levitation over the page, a pneumatic text without any point of contact with the material world. I knew that I would never write anything that could burrow into the page [...]. I knew that you shouldn't really write anything but Bibles, anything but Gospels." (Cărtărescu 2022a: 317). Metatextual comments of this kind show that the novel is also a meditation on the role of literature.

In the ambition to create a prophetic text, the boundaries between memory and imagination are blurred, as well as the boundaries between the "psychological realm", as the narrator calls it, and the material space: "Nothing was sculpted in material, rather in feelings: in fear, in joy, heartache, appetite, and curiosity. I lived in a mental landscape, I was still developing inside a uterus, but the uterus of my own head, which I needed to crack like an egg to extend my bones, awkwardly, into that which I would soon call reality" (Cărtărescu: 2022a: 149). We could say, therefore, that in *Solenoid* the city is, first of all, a mental landscape: "For a while, the city was gentle and familiar, I knew the streets and buildings around our house [...]. After purring lazily for a

while, the city began to growl like an irritated animal" (Cărtărescu 2022a: 149). The city becomes an expression of the narrator's disturbed consciousness. The architecture of emotions and feelings that the writer projects on the space shows how in the image of Bucharest the local and the universal plans overlap, as noted by David Damrosch in the essay dedicated to Cărtărescu:

"Cărtărescu chose a path different both from Joyce and Pamuk's local specifics, common for realism, and also from the complete absence of localization, with a symbolic effect, from Kafka or Borges. [...] Mircea Cărtărescu does not choose one of these possibilities, but makes use of both, in a deliberate overlapping of the local plan with the universal one [...]." (Damrosch 2020b: 181).

On a huge canvas filled with emotions, by superimposing the local dimension (Bucharest with its streets and eclectic architecture, its ruins, misery, and desolate areas) on the universal plan (the limit being the cosmos, as in *Blinding*), Cărtărescu intends to create his own city, as he confesses in an interview:

"When I was a young writer, I was jealous of the writers who had their own cities. Of Jorge Luis Borges who had Buenos Aires and always wrote about this fabulous city. Of Fyodor Dostoevsky who had Sankt Petersburg. Of Lawrence Durrell who had Alexandria. Of course, James Joyce invented, in a way, a fabulous Dublin. I had in mind, by writing, to appropriate my own city. If I couldn't find an interesting real city, I should invent it. So, in a way, I recreated Bucharest, and, in another way, I invented it. If you come to Bucharest, you will very soon realize that it has little to do with its image in my novels. I've invented much of it. I tried to create a coherent image of, as I call it in my novel, 'the saddest city in the world', a city full of ruins, a city full of images of the old glory which is no more. I made Bucharest in my own image, in my own personality. I tried to transform it into some sort of alter ego or a twin brother. I projected myself on the very eclectic architecture of

this city, which has several layers of history and architecture.” (Cărtărescu 2022b).

The city’s architecture reveals the intention to produce a text that not only fits into the world literature’s landscape, but also challenges it, through its eclecticism, and, because none of its features is fully explored, the text resists any labelling. The image of the city is composed of the Kafkaesque atmosphere, of sadness and dense nostalgia, of surreal symbols that the narrator discovers everywhere, all absorbed by the unexpected ending, in which one can read the intertextual allusion to Garcia Marquez’s novel, with the entire edifice built in the more than 800 pages being torn down, and with the final image of the city raised to the sky.

4. Local and universal perspectives

Throughout the novel *Solenoid*, Bucharest is referred to several times as the “saddest city in the world”, and the phrase also appears in the writer’s diary. The old factory is one of the monuments of sadness: “like all of Bucharest, the saddest city on the face of the earth, the factory had been designed as a ruin from the start, [...] as a silent, submissive, masochistic bowing of the head in the face of the destruction of all things and the pointlessness of all activity” (Cărtărescu 2022a: 98). To some extent, the protest against the “dying of consciousness” is a protest against disregarding the ephemeral character of the world and of life. Here, the Kafkaesque atmosphere is not fully assumed because, as Damrosch also observes, while Kafka “radically delocalizes his writings” and places them “in a strange no-man’s land” (Damrosch 2020b: 178), for Cărtărescu the location and the relationship with the material space are very important, even crucial we could say, since he admits that he intended to create in writing a city that would represent his alter-ego.

Another layer of the impressive architecture consists of the surrealistic symbols: the colours (crimson, olive), the special light at an exact moment of the twilight, the very dense substance which composes the dreams, so impenetrable that almost suffocates the narrator’s reality, the different objects that become portals to other dimensions (objects that remind us of

magic realism) and, last but not least, the fluid character of Bucharest's buildings (the narrator's house, the morgue, the old factory). "The house in *Solenoid* is strangely fluid, with a variable number of doors and corridors that sometimes appear only once", notes Delia Ungureanu (2018: 305) in her study dedicated to surrealism and world literature. Also, she reveals the close connection between surrealists and Cărtărescu's novel, which is visible, for example, in how the Romanian writer constructs the setting, reminding us of Breton's novel *Nadja*: "In a décor borrowed almost directly from Breton's *Nadja*, Cărtărescu makes us travel in his paradise of traps, opened by secret buttons like the one in his room that makes us levitate with him every night, as he dreams his Kafkaesque dreams" (Ungureanu 2018: 306). Not coincidentally, the Kafkaesque imaginary represented an important source of inspiration for the dreamlike and hallucinatory atmosphere of surrealist works.

The blurred boundaries between dream and reality and the insertion of magic-realist episodes into the narrative are not a coincidence either. Recalling a childhood memory, the narrator describes the fright he experienced when he got lost in the block of flats on Ștefan cel Mare: "I had already been climbing down the stairs for hours and still the landings did not end. Terrified, I tried to go back up more than once, but there was no point: my parent's door had totally disappeared" (Cărtărescu 2022a: 250). In the old factory or in the morgue, where statues come to life and murder people, in his own home, where he sleeps levitating above his bed after activating the magnetic force of the solenoid, or in the apartment where he grew up, the narrator is constantly having experiences that create not only a surrealist atmosphere, but also a magic-realist scenery, culminating with the book's end, where Bucharest is dislodged from the earth and rises above the ground. The intertexts with the above-mentioned world authors highlight, as Delia Ungureanu notes (2018: 304), the dream-fiction-reality continuum, a constant in Mircea Cărtărescu's writing.

Finally, the eclecticism of his novel proves once again that one of the ways in which the writer challenges world literature theories is through its resistance to any label, stylistic or other. Can we say that *Solenoid* represents one of the most complex contemporary surrealist novels (since it abounds in surrealist symbols)? Rather not, because it is

not only a surrealist text, and this label disregards the influx of scientific theories that play an important role in defining the solenoid and other technological metaphors, throughout the novel.

5. Conclusions

Mircea Cărtărescu does not only belong to the grouping of world writers also comprising Kafka and Marquez, but his literature also fuels it with redefined elements of world culture, such as surrealist symbols mingled with scientific theories, a rare association in contemporary literature. The question is how the filter of world literature theories influences Cărtărescu's work. In the first place, this filter changes the Romanian writer's national reception – proved by the recent publication of critical studies dedicated to his work, to which leading researchers such as David Damrosch contributed, alongside some of the most influential Romanian literary critics. Second, texts gain in translation and their circulation produces new interpretive perspectives – a gain made visible even in public readings. During the reading and conversation with Sean Cotter (the American translator of his novels) in Dallas, Cărtărescu received revealing questions, inviting a fresh reading of the novel's structure, for example (Cărtărescu & Cotter 2023).

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, in the labyrinthine intertextual game and dialogue engaged with works of other prominent world writers, the Romanian author succeeds to bring together local and universal components. The dynamic relation between the national and the global, in his massive narrative construction, reshapes the network of world writers Mircea Cărtărescu belongs to.

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All links were verified by the editors and found to be functioning before the publication of this text in 2024.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

FUNDING

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this review/paper.

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