

THE ROMANIAN SIDE(S) OF POSTMODERNISM

Stefania Mihalache

Mircea Cristea Technical College, Brasov

And still... postmodernism at the gates of the Orient. How beautiful it sounds! What a remote, what an impossible story. Frankness is sad, hélas, and I haven't read all the books!

(Alexandru Musina)

Postmodernism in literature started around the 60's with names such as Beckett, Nabokov, Calvino, Saul Bellow, but also *Le nouveau roman français*, *Tel Quel*, *TxT*. It seems like its signs emerged both in the States and in Western Europe. One work that has been extensively quoted in reference to postmodernism is John Barth's *The Literature of Exhaustion*, an essay that pretty much suggested a crisis of the "real," a crisis in representation, a crisis in the relationship between self and object, or a stronger necessity to motivate the construction of the narrative, and to rethink the ontology of the act of narration. At the same time, France was talking about the death of literature.

Postmodernism happened in several waves. It happened with the Beat Generation and the "language poetry," with Poststructuralism. New Historicism, feminism, metafiction, surfiction. It all had to do with the distrust in the text, in the narrative, in the discourse. The manipulation through media added a lot to the problem; the capitalization of the text brought literature and arts into a different era. Raymond Federman draws attention to the scene behind postmodernism in the States:

Thus when Kennedy smiled it meant that he was happy, and America was happy. When he spoke in a grave tone of voice and announced that the country could be destroyed by an atomic blast coming from Cuba, the

entire nation changed mood. There existed at the time an element of trust on the part of the readers for the fiction written at that time. That discourse presented itself as a personal friend. This is why the assassination of John F. Kennedy (public and televised as it were) had such a traumatic impact on the American consciousness (...). Suddenly there was a general distrust of the official discourse whether spoken, written or televised. For indeed, if the content of history can be manipulated by mass-media, or by literature, if television and the press can falsify historical facts, then the unequivocal relation between the real and the imaginary becomes blurred. (Federman 1993: 61)

In Stuttgart in 1991, postmodernism was declared dead. Some of its younger creators gathered there to bury it. There exist written records from the seminar: people talking about what postmodernism meant for them, why it was important, why it died, and they even tried to foresee what its legacy might be. The stars were: John Barth, Malcolm Bradbury, Raymond Federman, William H. Gass, Ihab Hassan, but also a few prominent Eastern European intellectuals, among them a few distinguished names from Romania: Ion Bogdan Lefter, Mircea Cartarescu, Florin Berindeanu, Pia Brînzeu, Tiberiu Paskuy.

Ion Bogdan Lefter and Mircea Cartarescu are the founding and loving fathers of Romanian postmodernism. They both wrote books on the subject. Being there in Stuttgart with postmodern figures of a more recent wave, they were absorbedly interested in what the

distinguished guests had to say. Moreover, Bogdan Lefter decided to make several interviews with them in order to get a clearer view.

Ihab Hassan declared that he was not that much interested in postmodernism any longer; Malcom Bradbury said it is just a name for certain aesthetic happenings and that other aesthetic changes are about to come. Both Hassan and Bradbury prefer to draw more on the content of literature, on its substance rather than on its varied forms and faces.

However, in the written interview (Lefter 2002), Bogdan Lefter proudly announced his personal interpretation of the conclusion from the seminar that "postmodernism is fully alive" and that, at the end of the meeting, everybody praised the Romanian postmodernism which was to them brand new, two weeks old (which is to say, they only found out about it at the beginning of the seminar).

The question I will address in this article is: why are some of the post-1989 Romanian intellectuals so fond of postmodernism? Why can't they accept its death even when looking at its dead body (as the Stuttgart seminar was called to pronounce it dead)?

To answer this question one needs first to see why postmodernism died in the first place. Let us not leave the Stuttgart seminar just yet. Raymond Federman (1993) had quite a few reasonable answers:

Postmodernism was an exercise in discontinuity, rupture, break, mutation, transformation, therefore doomed from the beginning... (154)

When something completes its intellectual and moral journey it is enshrined within sealed cases in the various Sorbonne, like the relics of saints, and is venerated in much the same way (...) and so it is with Postmodernism... (155)

Now that the effects of Postmodernism are evident in sectors as diverse as dress, food and lodging,

and are in those forms understood the end is not so far. (155)

His summing up is even more enlightening:

The general sense one gets from these replies (some quite fascinating, I think) is that Postmodernism is indeed dead, finished, on the one hand because it was swallowed and digested by the economy and eventually excreted and disseminated into the culture, on the other hand because it was stifled by academic bickering and consequently turned into a futile debate (especially in America). (Federman, 1993: 157)

Under these circumstances, one wonders why postmodernism is still fully alive in Eastern Europe, in Romania for example, and what kind of postmodernism that can be.

The answer is not easy because postmodernism occupied a big part of the scene of post-1989 literary debates and was extremely controversial. The toughest question that was asked was whether Romanian postmodernism is possible or not; could it be authentic? Many voices rejected it as an imported concept; still others drew many similarities in the themes and literary experiments that were, after 1989, more obvious than ever. The debate became painful because it was very soon read as but a form of the well known, haunting complex of the *retardedness* of Romanian literature, its need for synchronization with Western literatures. Throughout the history of Romanian literature, this dilemma divided the critics into "moderns" and "traditionalists," those who embraced new literary trends and those who opposed them as unspecific, superficial, and alien to the "true" spirit of Romanian culture. The debate around postmodernism had to follow a similar route even if spiced with more complications, because after 1989, Romanian culture was in an unmediated relation to the "free world." The spicy bits – concepts like *democracy*, *pluralism*, *liberalism*, *transition*, *human subject* were

sprinkled all along the way to make the discussion about postmodernism really hot.

To make things clearer, it is perhaps necessary to elucidate how the concept got into Romanian literature in the first place. Talk about postmodernism was possible first of all because the interwar avant-garde (Tzara, Barbu, de Trost, Ionesco) left a legacy in terms of experimentation with the language, while modernism before communism refined the possibilities of the language. Romanian literature froze under communism and *socialist realism* very nearly paralyzed it. It was not until the late 1970s when *glasnost* allowed for moderate visibility of the young generation of literary theoreticians inspired by the school of poststructuralism (Mircea Mihaies, Ioan Buduca, Radu G. Teposu, Ioan Holban).¹

Postmodern inspiration is said to be, in poetry, the anti-lyricism of N. Stanesco, M. Invanescu, Ileana Malancioiu, Dorin Tudoran, or the oneiric prose of the *Targoviste school* (highly influenced by Borges and Cortázar). Needless to say, these artistic languages were merely underground impulses in a still harsh and cold communist cultural landscape.

Much closer to postmodern concerns is *the generation of the 1980s*, by far the most intense and coherent underground literary movement in the Socialist Republic of Romania. Textualism was one of the main theoretical standpoints for the generation of the 1980's while "Tel Quel," "TxT," Russian formalism, R. Barthes, R. Jakobson, and N. Chomsky were among the father figures for these restless intellectuals. Of special importance was the overlap of two kinds of readings that they performed on the Western texts that nourished postmodernism. On the one hand, the realization that signs and discourses are arbitrary, that they are constructed systems, providers of false realities, was naturally connected to the discursive power of the socialist regime: a narrative experiment would mean "articulating kinds of social consciousness

other than authoritarian ones" (Clowes, W. Edith, cited in Cornis-Pope, 1996: 9). On the other hand, it inferred with the occidental critique of the system of knowledge (Foucauldian style) and of the "coercive" inner nature of capitalist political liberalism. This double reading made it possible for the Romanian "textualist" authority, Gheorghe Iova, to write:

To read means to know you are being ruled. The citizen must be a reader, he must know he is being ruled, that is not a secret, he is being ruled in his name for his own wellbeing, he must participate in this ruling. (Iova 1999: 293)

Reality cannot be found in the sign, in the language; on the contrary, textuality represents the site of power. In communist Romania, however, theory about text and power could not exist without subtle reference to dictatorship, censorship, and distortion of reality through discursive powers of totalitarianism.

Therefore, the circulation of "postmodern" themes and concerns is clearly discernible, and maybe even an authentic experiment with the narrative. Still, if this is to be called postmodernism one needs to acknowledge that the meaning of the term was changed: coming from the West, postmodernism is seen as the very symbol of a freed cultural space, the freedom of expression, the freedom of the creative spirit, the freedom that every artist longs for. Moreover, read in this key, the postmodern experiment is no longer a movement that problematizes the possibilities of knowing the real, but is instead the very guarantee for it: for the real is the freedom of the free world, the freedom of liberal capitalism and liberal democracy. Marcel Cornis-Pope (1996: 10) reads Romanian postmodernism along similar lines:

Many of the ideas which animated the 1989 revolutions (cultural pluralism, "civic society", a democracy of participation) had been prepared over the years in the theoretical laboratory of dissident thinkers and writers from

¹ See Cornis-Pope 1996.

the best Western and Eastern traditions. The postmodern grafts have been useful to a number of intellectual and artistic groups involved in articulating an alternative model of intellectual interaction, tolerant, pluralistic, reformulative.

Adding to this postmodern sense of Romanian underground cultural production were the works of philosophers like Noica and his followers (Liiceanu and Plesu) to produce what is called the "cultural resistance" or "ethical engagement." Postmodern theories were (not necessarily uncritically) imported as novelties from the West; however, the sense of postmodernism was altered. Ironically, it became the symbol of pluralism and democracy while in the West, it was permeated with distrust in precisely the mechanisms of Western liberalism, and born out of fear that the real is being manipulated, albeit in different ways and for different reasons than in Eastern Europe.

However, it was only after 1989 that postmodernism could come out in the open, meeting different challenges and dressed in new clothes. After the revolution, there were massive translations of Western books, a beginning of a cultural revival and revision, and a direct dialog with the Western world. Ex-socialist Eastern European countries were (and still are) undergoing transition against an uneasy backdrop of the remnants of socialism and reemerging nationalisms. Under these circumstances the voices of literary critics were polarized in reference to postmodernism; each side came up with its own distortion, or reinvention, of the concept. To a great majority that equated it with dissidence under communism, postmodernism is a solution for the transition too; it is no less than the most effective pill, the infusion of democracy and market economy:

The input of a critical intelligentsia is especially needed in such periods of transition, torn between transformative and restorative trends. Innovative literature and criticism can now play the role of a "democratic

laboratory": rethinking divisive sociocultural issues and exposing the vestiges of totalitarianism in whatever guise they may appear. (...). The process of post-totalitarian restructuring must begin, in Cristian Moraru's suggestive phrase, with a theoretical-deconstructive "reeducation", "a flight from red." (Cornis-Pope 1996: 10)

In the teleological thinking of these voices, *flight from red* clearly means getting closer to western capitalist liberalism. To this end, postmodernism can be a great tool. To reiterate, there is a fault in this type of reasoning, however, for in the Western world postmodernism meant an avant-garde movement which had its roots in doubt and dissatisfaction with the capitalization of language, the turning of culture into commodity, the standardization of the narrative, and so on. Postmodernism emerged as a distrust within societies that had been liberal democracies for a long time, therefore it could not stand for the glorification of its object of distrust.

For Ion Bogdan Lefter, however, postmodernism is synonymous with a western style of life all the way down to rock music and jeans:

(...) portions of our lives, areas of our societies became postmodern as early as communism! Remember that at the end of the 1970s, forms of Western civilization in its way to postmodernism would reach us too: books, rock, movies of a certain kind, forms of culture in the largest sense, behaviors and mentalities (...) even the jeans and other goods sold in the black market (...) or brought by our more evolved relatives from the free world. (Lefter 2002: 320)

This quote should be contrasted with Raymond Federman's (1993:168) statement:

Though no one ever felt really comfortable with the term

postmodern, nonetheless for several decades it served to define a certain avant-garde activity played out on a high intellectual and artistic level, at times even accused of being elitist, until that activity was absorbed into mainstream culture by the economy and quickly turned into Pop-Art. And so now it is time perhaps to abandon the term postmodern.

This is how far apart the two images of postmodernism really were. There is both a time gap, and a content gap between the two. It is important to note, however, that both these statements coexisted at the same time and place, that is, at the Stuttgart seminar.

Lefter's concept of postmodernism is heavily politicized and his arguments immersed in old fashioned evolutionism which is displayed in his favorite dichotomies: the pair modernism/postmodernism equates with the pair communism/postcommunism; Western world means evolution, Eastern world means retardation, a state of semi-barbarism from which we slowly emerge, postmodern fashion. Other labels dear to Bogdan Lefter are: *traditionalism, eurocentrism, phalocratic power vs. multiculturalism, tolerance, anti-canonical society* (Lefter, 2002: 324). His distinctions between the old and the new, the strong dichotomization of his argumentation, and the passionate air of his language read as an inverted discourse of the *proletkult*. His dogmatic approach inscribes the future in the same manner the promoters of socialist realism used to do:

What would be our general orientation? We could briefly describe it in terms such as *postmodernism, poststructuralism and cultural studies, europeanism, pro-americanism, anti-nationalism, anti-fundamentalism and anti-ortodoxism, liberalism and multiculturalism, pro-democracy and political correctness*. (Lefter 2002: 125)

Indeed, *flying from the red* on the carpet of postmodernism is easy once we master the

game of *anti* and *pro*. Lefter is a good representative of pro-postmodernism in the latest debates in Romanian cultural space after 1989.

The other stream distorts postmodernism in a different way. These are the voices who consider that there cannot be a Romanian postmodernism. I selected only the strongest in the choir. This perspective may or may not be accurate, but it is certainly charmingly argued. The voice is that of the promoter of the 1980's generation, a prominent poet and intellectual, Alexandru Musina.

The problem for us would be whether (and to what extent) our society has entered postindustrialism. I think we still have a long way to get there. What of it? Should we fear that we are not within the Occidental time? Well, how can we be when we are not? (...) For us, postmodernism cannot be anything else but a "digression", a beautiful, far away story. (Musina, 1999: 436-7)

As it can be understood from the broader context of his theoretical approach, postmodernism is equated with the product of consumerist, highly technologized society, characterized by a certain lack of spirituality and authenticity, thus allowing for postmodern games, artifacts, the simulacra.

The eclectic manner, the skepticism towards "simple" communication, the return to the past, the attempt to charm the public through "simulation", the borrowing and, ultimately, acceptance of the "forms" (and rules) of consumerist literature are (the talent of the writers notwithstanding) signs of a certain spiritual exhaustion. (Musina, 1999: 437)

Again, this perception is explained with the fact that Romanians had a more clear view of postmodernism when it was already digested by the economy of consumerism; that is to say, as Raymond Federman puts it, when it was at its very end. Postmodernism died when

clothes, department stores, buildings etc. became postmodern. It is this phenomenon that Musina calls spiritual exhaustion; it is not, however, postmodernism itself.

Interestingly, Musina's perception leads him to a speculation that is perhaps unexpected and slightly polemic: since Western culture seems to have lost a certain sense of the real, it is perhaps Eastern Europe - with its enthusiasm stemming from recent liberation - that will be the agency to switch the pendulum (in Foucauldian sense) towards a new humanism:

My conviction is that, after modernism, we should be witnessing a return to the things "humane"- as modernism was a "de-humanization"- to a new classicism, a new anthropocentrism. The obsession with the language, with secondary worlds, has reached a dead end; furthermore, the humanities are now scattered in a multitude of languages and specialized approaches which atomize and alienate the human subject. (Musina 1999: 439)

It is therefore the East that needs to re-evaluate the human subject and the path to reality while the Western world lost the power of representation and took refuge in cyberfiction and other literary enterprises that are the very proof of the definitive alienation of the human being. Of course, Eastern postmodern reality is but partial and localized; nevertheless it may be the place for re-shaping and re-framing the real, on the grounds of the preserved human authenticity.

Having presented these perspectives on postmodernism with brief reference to the circumstances before and after 1989, it is still difficult to say whether a distinct Romanian postmodernism is possible or not. There might be similarities in the narrative experiments, but caution is needed when cultural concepts are transplanted from one cultural context to another. There is much room for misunderstanding, as it seems that at a closer

look, what was thought to be a clone is merely a half-brother.

It is clear, however, that postmodernism is a concept with a range of different meanings and interpretations, a looking glass for different cultural agencies. It is for this reason that, in a former socialist country such as Romania, postmodernism can be a story of transition, a story of evolution, a story of the real, a story of a new humanism, and a story of former resistance. A buzz word, a concept, a belief, a nuisance, a career, all at once: how postmodern indeed.

References cited:

Cornis-Pope, Marcel. 1996. *The Unfinished Battles, Romanian Postmodernism Before and After 1989*, Iasi: Polirom.

Craciun, Gheorghe. 1999. *Competitia continua, Generatia '80 in texte teoretice*, Pitesti: Paralela 45.

Federman, Raymond. 1993. *Before Postmodernism and After in Ziegler, Heide, 1993, The End of Postmodernism: New Directions; proceedings of the first Stuttgart Seminar in Cultural Studies. 04.08-18.08.1991, M und P, Verl. für Wiss. und Forschung.*

Iova, Gheorghe. 1999. *Cititorul*, in Craciun, Gheorghe, 1999, *Competitia continua, Generatia '80 in texte teoretice*, Pitesti: Ed. Paralela 45.

Lefter, Ion Bogdan. 2002. *Postmodernism, Din dosarul unei "batalii" culturale*, Pitesti: Paralela 45.

Musina, Alexandru. 1999. *Postmodernismul, o frumoasa poveste* in Craciun, Gheorghe, 1999, *Competitia continua, Generatia '80 in texte teoretice*, Pitesti, Ed. Paralela 45.

Ziegler, Heide. 1993. *The End of Postmodernism: New Directions; proceedings of the first Stuttgart Seminar in Cultural Studies, 04.08-18.08.1991, M und P, Verl. für Wiss. Und Forschung.*