

Postmodernism is Grunge, the Aftermath is Vintage

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The border is but the man's interior dimension,
which, once lost, is unrecoverable.

Mircea Nedelciu et. al., *Woman in Red*

Cet ouvrage se donne pour but d'explorer deux moments – faudrait-il dire plutôt deux tendances? – dans la littérature roumaine contemporaine: d'une part la fiction postmoderniste des années 80-90 (en nous centrant sur leurs rebondissements ultérieurs), d'autre part, la tournure narrative qui se manifeste depuis 2000. Le point central de notre argumentation est le suivant: la fiction postmoderniste ne fait que continuer la littérature moderniste antérieure dans ce qu'elle a comme prémices majeures alors que la tournure narrative installée dans la dernière décennie entraîne un déplacement significatif de l'attention vers un complexe différent d'intérêts, valeurs et stratégies.

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In the good old tradition of New Historicism, I would like to begin with a short biographically-flavored account of my encounter with literary postmodernism and the subsequent relationship we established, which eventually proved to be rather troubled. While this account is by no means interesting or humorous, it may in turn shed a proper light on the standpoint to be detailed further on, and it goes like this:

Some ten years ago, when the postmodernism-related debate was still topical in Romanian academe, as well as in cultural magazines, and was getting ready to creep out of the high-brow institutions only to reemerge *sur le parvis*, I succumbed to the temptation of considering it a breaking off with modernity's major premises. Such a fact was undoubtedly due to the postmodern rejection of what had come to be seen as modern literature's major claim: its all-inclusive tentative representation of a multi-layered, secretly symbolic world, together with the consciousness- (or self-)based correspondence between its numerous strata. This totalizing ambition, whose discursive shape is either the theoretical "grand narrative" or the joycean "all-round" fiction, rapidly became the focal point of the postmodern challenge.

But, however substantial it may seem, the postmodern challenge is but a mere *effet de discours*. Or, to put it differently, the practice bullies once again what the ideology struggles to defend. At a first glance, as it had been repeatedly pointed out during the lengthy discussions devoted to the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, the former's

epistemological ambitions are utterly contradicted from the latter's reality-suspicious, convention-aware position. Postmodern relativism, together with a strong political agenda and a "historically effective consciousness", was probably among the chief means of asserting the (radical) difference between modernism and its aftermath, and it thus served as a clever device meant to legitimize postmodernism as a cultural orientation in its own right, rather than one of the many (possible) "faces of modernity".

However, if we consider postmodernism in terms of literary practices as such, it soon becomes obvious that it tackles the very same issues at the crux of modernism as a whole: the relationship between reality and fiction and the problem of language. From such a perspective, it is considerably less important if reality itself is perceived as continuous or fragmented, given or constructed, rock-solid or fluid, and if the performative epistemological ego (or *le sujet supposé (sa)voir*) is a substantial, coherent or disrupted self, or even an empty category. On the same grounds, fiction may well be overtly anti-traditional or, on the contrary, nostalgic-ironic (i.e. critically complicit) with regard to the past – what matters is that however different their premises and devices both modernism and postmodernism share the same mimetic concern, that is, the same preoccupation with the possibilities and limits of representation.

There are, of course, notable exceptions on both sides of the post/modern divide, and as always generalizations are ultimately fallacious. If I choose to gloss over such exceptions is strictly for heuristic purposes, since a more detailed discussion would fall beyond the scope of the present essay.

Let it be said then for the sake of argument that the concern with representation starts to fade out as postmodernism forces it to touch its very limits by calling into question the nature of reality, the vantage points from which it is observed, the accuracy of such observations and the means through which they are transmitted. Is it too soon to wonder what will come next? Despite the fact that, like any other literary orientation, postmodernism too is open-ended, in the sense that its typical features are likely to persist long after the historical moment to which they pertain would have been ranged under a distinct label within the literary tradition, it is my opinion that we witness the emergence of a new literary practice.

This "swing of the pendulum" has been noticed for a while now, as proven by a seminar on contemporary literature held in Stuttgart in 1991. Raymond Federman, one of the most famous postmodern writers, was the first to acknowledge it:

[P]erhaps Postmodernism also changed tense on December 22, 1989, with the death of Samuel Beckett – the first and last Postmodern writer (in Ziegler: 106).

For us Romanians this historical coincidence is unnerving on more accounts: the fact that "the end of postmodernism" happens to coincide with the downfall of the Communist regime is reason enough to make us feel the frustrated itch of having – once again – missed a beat at the very moment we had eventually ceased to be out of tune. Indeed, after we experienced, in Mircea Martin's phrase, a "postmodernism in the absence of postmodernity", chances are that we live through a "postmodern condition" devoid of postmodernism.

This would probably make an interesting subject for fiction, but reality is far less dramatic. In Romania just as anywhere else postmodern fiction is still produced on a wide enough scale; postmodernism-related issues still cause heated debates; literary canons are redefined; the criteria of inclusion/exclusion are reevaluated. At the same time, while both newcomers and well-established writers continue to explore the artistic potential of postmodernism, the seismic change I mentioned above does not leave Romanian literary field unaffected.

Although it is still too early to pinpoint the nature of this change, some recent novels – e.g. Filip and Matei Florian's *Side Street Boys*, T.O. Bobe's *My Summer Holiday* and Răzvan Rădulescu's *Teodosie the Lesser* – could give a pretty fair idea of the direction it will probably take.

One of the favored reference points when it comes to approximate the change such works bring about is, of course, the generation of the eighties, whose poetics is central in most theoretical accounts of Romanian postmodernism to the point that a significant broadening of the definition so that it accommodate writers outside the group itself and use a more relaxed timeframe became widely noticeable no sooner than the late nineties.¹ Various criteria were used for the construction of the said definition, ranging from the sheer inventorying of the stylistic features typical of postmodern writings to a more ambitious, “ontological” characterization focused on the “condition of liminality”² embedded in them. But, diverse as they may be, all these definitions amount to acknowledging that

[p]racticing a self-styled “textualist engineering,” blending intertextual games with a zest for “live broadcasts” of unmediated reality, and deliberately blurring the borderline between fiction and fact, the representatives of the Generation of the Eighties (that I will subsequently refer to as “G80”) have earned critical acclaim as the first practitioners of postmodern writing in Romania (Oțoiu: 87).

As one may easily notice from Oțoiu's brief summing up of the specific tenets of Romanian hardcore postmodernism, this kind of writing is far from being “postrealist” or “antimimetic” as postmodernism at large was oftentimes described³. Although I agree, as I have already mentioned above, that the understanding of reality underlying the notion of “realism” differs greatly from earlier acceptations, it seems to me that the problem of representation epochal for the “long modernity” as a whole maintains its prominent position, just as the “awareness of language” – the second feature I posited as typical of modern literature – does. While it is obvious that the term “antimimetic” is meant to point out at the shift in literary consciousness from literature's alleged function of “mirror” or “reflection” of reality to a fictional reenactment of the various ways reality is in fact constructed, I daresay that using it in relation to postmodern literature is both hasty and misleading. In my view, a properly “anti-mimetic” literary work would be one that utterly abandons the concern for representation, and not merely change its object and devices. Or, to put it differently, as long as reality (and its relationship with literary fiction) is problematized, it will remain a problem.

Against the current train of thought, then, I'd like to point out that if an instance of “antimimesis” is anywhere to be found, it is not postmodernism, but its aftermath that should

be labeled as such. That the new literary paradigm which is about to emerge moves towards what I would call the “educated autonomy of fiction”, in the sense that its practitioners are no longer interested in twisting, turning, negotiating and testing the limits of literature’s relationship with reality. Need is to point out that such an attitude is far from being a return to the self-referential, self-sufficient understanding of fiction specific for a certain stage in the evolution of modern literature. What makes such an attitude possible is not the belief that literature can do very well without a referential support and does not need to be grounded in real life, since its true nature is that of a gratuitous language game. On the contrary, the postmodern lesson resulted in a keen – and sometimes bitterly received – awareness that such a connection is always at work, much as we’d like to ignore and discard it. Once this becomes an accepted fact, reality can eventually be ranged among the various materials of fiction, without further ado about this conflation.

Contemporary literature’s gradual distancing from the problem of representation (post)modern fiction deals with under the guise of the dilemmatic nature of the wor(l)d is thoroughly observed by another postmodern champion, John Barth:

[A]lthough most of the leading practitioners of what is called Postmodernist fiction are by no means finished yet with their careers [...] and may feel themselves to be still in the process of exploring the style [...] it cannot be doubted that the pendulum swung in the 1980s from the overtly self-conscious, process-*and*-history conscious and often fabulistic work of Barthelme [...], Gass, Pynchon [...], Barth & Co toward that early Hemingwayish minimalist neo-realism (in Ziegler: 184),

who, for lack of a better term, uses “neo-realism” as an equivalent for “traditional fiction-writing”. It is highly significant that Barth empanels Hemingway’s early works as a ground for comparison, since the most striking feature of, say, the short-stories is not the portrayal of Marlboro man’s American way of life, but the pleasure the writer finds in the very act of story-telling, that is of waving into his text whatever materials he happens to come upon. Hemingway does no fret over reality’s elusive nature, and he cannot be bothered to deconstruct his characters’ worldview. His chief interest is to write a story, and if he uses real places or historical facts for his emplotment that’s because they come in handy. His approach to reality is not problematizing, but pragmatic, and together with the rejection of textual experimentation this is precisely what accounts for the innovative quality of the new literary wave.

On the Romanian literary scene, this change has already been heralded by the works of the young writers in the *Ego. Proză* series Polirom Publishing House started to campaign for a few years ago. In my opinion, they serve as a turning point between postmodernism and its aftermath, and due to their transitional nature they can hardly be grasped as a whole, as proved by their resistance to fall under a generational model or any other traditionally-constructed classification. However, we can identify in these writings several common features, some which pertaining to the postmodern legacy, others paving the ground for a new kind of literary practice.

The mimetic concern is still visible in the subdued form of the autofictional writing, a subgenre which investigates the process of self-fashioning through/in writing by means of

narrating personal, often intimate experiences from an overtly subjective perspective. The main focus of novels such as Ionuț Chiva's *69*, Dragoș Bucurenci's *RealK*, Ion Manolescu's *Skidding*, Cecilia Ștefănescu's *Love Sick* or Cezar Paul-Bădescu's *Luminița, Mon Amour* is the capacity of fiction to absorb/distort/deliver autobiographical information, and this interest for the changes undergone by real facts as they are translated into writing bears a strong resemblance to earlier postmodern work by, say, Simona Popescu or Mircea Cărtărescu. Unlike them, Filip and Matei Florian's *Side Street Boys*, a novel with a very strong autobiographical core, does not tackle representational issues, neither does it abandon itself to literary experimentalism. This double-voiced narration of childhood memories from 1980s Communist Romania carefully avoids any political or literary stake for the sake of telling a story, and if the authors make full use of the most refined discursive techniques, it is quite obvious their role is merely instrumental. Given the subject and the double authorship with everything it entails at a narrative level one would probably expect clever considerations about the persistence of the past into the present, deft exploitations of the ambiguous relationship between history and fiction and spectacular dialogic effects – and indeed there are such things in *Side Street Boys*, except that the authors make it very clear from the very beginning such elements are only coincidental, and not a goal in themselves. If there is something they are entirely devoted to, this is *le plaisir du texte* – a pleasure which, unlike the kind theorized by Roland Barthes, proceeds not from the reading, but from the writing itself.

At this point, it is worthwhile to linger a bit over a matter of historical contextualization. As I have mentioned at an earlier stage of the argument, the possibility that literary postmodernism had exhausted its potential for innovation and the realization that new modes of expression were about to emerge came to the fore during the late eighties. This global shift of paradigm, together with the region-specific political and cultural changes in the countries of the former Soviet block, led to the superposition of three distinct literary “ages”: the postmodern, with its still strong impetus, the post-Communist, whose main concern is to explore possible ways of dealing with the past in, and by means of, literary practices, and the anti-mimetic, which waves a spectacular farewell to its representation-and-sentence-focused counterparts. And since all three models inventoried above are (still) able to generate notable works, significant examples of literary *mestizaje* are very likely to occur.

The transitional *Ego. Proză* writings also share another important feature: their meta-fictional/intertextual character. Although constructed with an ironic detachment that anticipates its instrumentalization in anti-mimetic literature, this “cultural awareness” postmodernism held dear continues to be a focal point in the literature of the early 2000s. As pointed out in relation to John Barth's observation, this too will be discarded (although not entirely) once the anti-mimetic literature takes to constructing its

fictive stories with traditional devices which demonstrate how vacuous the deconstructive impulse in prose has become (Krasztev: 81)

A noteworthy “statement of purpose” in this respect is T.O. Bobe's *My Summer Holiday*, a novel with a “classical” chronological emplotment and for the most part devoid of

sophisticated narrative devices, an option cleverly motivated by the writer's use of the convention of a ten years old child school composition. Just like the particular dialogism in *Side Street Boys*, T.O. Bobe's carefully controlled minimalism signals a return to the very roots of story-telling, a penchant further documented by the favoring of the oral quality of language over the "textual consciousness" of postmodern fiction.

The novel is set in the post-Communist transition period, but T.O. Bobe shares with the Florian brothers the refusal to politicize the relationship between pre- and post-1989 worlds. The legacy of the ancient regime is present as a background element that often filters through to reach the main narrative, but no emphasis is placed on it, historical reality thus becoming just one of the components that inform the period of transition.

How long it will take until this wind of change stabilizes into a new literary paradigm is hard to say. What are the questions the emerging literary paradigm is going to ask and how the writers belonging to it will construct their answers is still to be seen. But, as Péter Krasztev argues when talking about a similar phenomenon in Hungarian literature,

certain is merely that they worked hard to cleanse literature of "literariness", to bring language closer to everyday life, and to smuggle back sentiment and a personal voice in the content. Our readerly instincts, sharpened by postmodernism, find them occasionally didactic and sentimental, and [it seems] generally disconcerting that shortly after 1989 some fiction became once again uncoded and cathartic, but this, perhaps, is due to the swinging of the pendulum (Krasztev: 81).

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NOTES

- 1 See: Mircea Cărtărescu, *Postmodernismul românesc* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1999); Carmen Muşat, *Perspective asupra romanului românesc postmodern* (Piteşti: Paralela 45, 1998); and Mihaela Ursa, *Optzecismul și promisiunile postmodernismului* (Piteşti: Paralela 45, 1999).
- 2 See: Adrian Oţoiu, "An Exercise in Fictional Liminality: the Postcolonial, the Postcommunist, and Romania's Threshold Generation", in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23: 1-2 (2003)

- 3 In his study, "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern" (in *My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, New York: Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 137-155), Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that both postcolonial and postmodern literature are "postrealist", since realism was but another way of advocating dominant discursive constructions, i.e. imperialism, nationalism and the like. In his view, "postrealism" is the token of a decolonized literature, very much in the same vein with the rejection in the East-Central European literature of socialist realism. However, both his account and Ihab Hassan's description of postmodernism as "antimimetic" are misleading, since the reading of these terms is political, rather than literary.