

How to do Things with Romanian Postmodernism

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Nous avons tenté d'expliquer pourquoi thèmes et structures distinctement semblables au postmodernisme littéraire occidental se retrouvent massivement dans la littérature roumaine des années 1980. Une première approche serait tentée d'attribuer cette présence à la persistance, dans les conditions hostiles d'une idéologie culturelle nationaliste-communiste, de la détermination de s'aligner sur l'Occident en l'imitant que la modernisation roumaine ne cessa jamais d'afficher dès le milieu du XIX^{ème} siècle. Un regard plus attentif pourtant permet de déceler dans le postmodernisme roumain des années 1980 le symptôme d'une analogie subtile entre l'expérience de vie quotidienne du postindustrialisme occidental et celle de l'industrialisme échoué de l'Europe de l'Est communiste.

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The notion of a Romanian post-modernism has been met with an equal measure of enthusiasm and hostility. The enthusiasts accuse the hostiles of nationalism, parochialism, traditionalism, fundamentalism, or provincial complexes. The hostiles, who, more often than not, are the merely prudent, suspect the enthusiasts of being plagued by provincial complexes, cheap mimeticism, intellectual opportunism, or simply affectation.

A patriotic cast of mind could take pride in the fact that, despite our technological backwardness, our culture has been able to give birth to such an intensely up-to-date polemics. Unfortunately, however, the way in which this polemics was launched harks back to the disputes between Romantic agrarianism and symbolism, or to those between orthodoxist traditionalism and the freethinking avantgarde, to such an extent that one begins to entertain the suspicion that we are actually not debating the issues of the present turn of the century at all, but merely run-of-the-mill domestic matters. Or else, as they say, we keep washing the same tattered linen at home.

Let us try a simple question: *what* does the concept of post-modernism do for us? This pragmatic reduction rests on the following provisional hypothesis: in culture, or, more appropriately, in the sphere of cultural doctrines, truth is a construct, a perspective, or else a point of view. Our problem is not to find out whether we are, in our essence, post-modern. It will suffice for us to understand whether and in what manner we can significantly and efficiently relate to this concept.

Against the backdrop of the late Ceaușescu era, the circulation of the idea of a “Romanian post-modernism” entailed a political attitude and conveyed a will towards an integration into Europe in the context of a complete political closure. “Romanian post-modernism” was a masked response of certain intellectual circles to national-communism. The rejection of the notion of Romanian post-modernism had a rather ethical than political motivation. In the midst of the dire poverty of the 1980s, the interest in the synchronization with Western Europe came out as somewhat unlikely, if not a clear proof of indifference and disengagement towards the reality of quotidian life, as well as of a missing sense of responsibility for the suffering of one’s fellows.

However, between the proponents and the opponents of post-modernism there is agreement in two fundamental respects. Nobody is denying that, from a theoretical standpoint, the concept of post-modernism allows one to coherently articulate certain structural features that characterize the Romanian literary production of the last few decades: its intertextualism, its jocular self-referentiality, its taste for parody and for rewriting, its irony, its sophisticated sensuality. Beside the above features, one has also to count in the symptoms of a “plebeian” reaction to modernism: a new realism, a biografism, a predominance of orality, brushes with the rhetoric and the imaginary universe of mass media, an ostentatious iconography of contemporariness, etc.

On the other hand, both supporters and adversaries of the concept agree that the concrete Romanian circumstances, mentalities and dominant sensibility do not allow us to speak of a post-modern or post-industrial moment of civilization. The disagreement occurs only with the interpretation of this fact. Enthusiasts consider that we are just as entitled to speak of a literary post-modernism of the 1980s as we are to label as romantic the literature of the 1840s, when the socio-economic reality of the Romanian Principalities was extremely dissimilar from that of Western Europe. Beyond socio-economic determinations literary structures have their own intellectual evolution. The antagonistic party, instead, considers that literature should not be mechanically incorporated into Western theoretical frameworks, but rather into a certain human concreteness, into a type of experience and a moral tradition; from this point of view, therefore, post-modernism is declared null and void.

If about the first consensus, namely that there is formal concurrence between the literature of the 1980s in Romania and the Western literary mainstream, matters appear to be clear, in what concerns the second consensus, the one that stipulates a rift between post-modern “civilization” and the Romanian cultural stage, enough nuances can be brought forth to modify the big picture. That is because the debate has been carried out in concrete terms and not at the level of morphological analogies or at that of possible similarities of psychological climate. On this particular subject we shall linger a little more in what follows. Post-modernism is generally placed in connection with post-industrialism, a phenomenon that brought about an unprecedented decentralization of society, the “humanization” of production through the gradual correction of its tendency towards massification, a new managerial flexibility, the relativization of the opposition between work and play, the dissemination of decision-making process, the decrease in the number of the “blue collars” (industrial workers) in favour of the “white collars” (employees from the domain of services), the total

transparency and speed of information, modular education, decisional mobility, cultural pluralism and cross-breeding, etc. As long as we limit ourselves to enumerating the positive determinations, it is apparent that not only Romania, but all the (former) socialist countries are anything but post-industrial. If, however, we accept that this concept may have its shadowy side, that it may be applied to negative phenomena as well, we have a different situation on our hands. Let us suppose, for example, that *post-industrialism* does not automatically mean surpassing industrialism. That it may as well apply to the failure of the latter – at a moment in which Eastern countries are lacking a better notion to describe the crisis engendered after it became impossible to conceal the fact that socialist industry, and everything connected to it in terms of mentalities, values, or day-to-day existence, were bankrupt.

In Romania, industrialism meant a reestablishment of the patriarchal mindset. The illusion of a country packed with oil derricks and furnaces next to ploughed fields and herds of livestock, with a homogenous and extremely joyful people, one large family in fact, in which the elderly sometimes boxed the ears of wayward youth and things went instantly back to normal, a people that went out to dance the round *hora* dance on Sundays in front of their apartment buildings, within the pan-national frames of the state-sponsored “Praise Romania” festival, and so on and so forth, was a crucial one for an entire epoch. From this point of departure, Romanian writers of the epoch can be divided into two categories: those who created/disseminated this illusion and those who understood that the illusion was counterproductive. From among the latter, some chose symbolically to signal the moral bankruptcy of ethno-Communism and, gradually and covertly, outlined a counterutopia, a black utopia, meant stealthily to erode the official one (I am thinking here of Virgil Mazilescu, Mariana Marin, Liviu Ioan Stoiciu, Alexandru Mușina, Florin Iaru and so many others). These are authors who *reacted*.

Other authors, however, tried to come up with alternatives of sensibility and perception, or, in other words, with existential alternatives. Marshall McLuhan said that artists are the antennae with which society prods the future. If we embrace the idea, then we could see the approach of the Romanian prose writers called “textualists” precisely as a prodding of the areas of the possible within Romanian society. Mircea Nedelciu, for instance, not only investigated atypical milieus from the point of view of communist industrialism (the worlds of the petty traffickers and spivs, the mafias in tourism, the “liberal” professions, etc.), but also experimented with new rhetorical means that allowed him to render a speedy, fragmented, kaleidoscopic life-style. This order was still somewhat unreal, owing to its marginality, but Nedelciu had the intuition of the direction in which society was going to evolve.

It emerges, therefore, that, by responding to the insightful feeling that a system which we might consider as an aberrant variant of industrialism was on its last leg, the approach of Romanian writing could “naturally” have come to resemble what was being done in the “downright post-industrial” world. Of course, we must not play blind to the direct influence that Western literary models exerted on Romanian writing, to imitations, borrowings, and assimilations. Yet, in the abovementioned cases, all such literary techniques are assimilated to the point of becoming original means of orientation in the word, and weapons in the struggle for survival.

In a post-modern civilization, fantasy becomes an effectual force of social change. The cultural structures, the way of life, the daily objects, they all bear the same imprint. The effect, however, is not necessarily that of lifelike spontaneity and natural diversity. The effort of continuously expecting the unexpected, of controlling and estheticizing disorder, can also create the feeling of unnaturalness, or of a laboratory creation – ingenious but somewhat unlikely. Something of this feeling could be found as well in a totalitarian post-Stalinist society. Established through crime and terror, such a society underwent a kind of cauterisation of the sensors – a general anaesthesia. Mass extermination was no longer a direct reality, but merely a memory, or less than even that. No longer present, it impregnated all reality, creating the feeling that you were in an abnormal environment, rather hostile to life. If to this we add the fact that communism explicitly proclaimed the artificiality of existence, the belief in social planning and social experimenting, there can be little doubt that one could form a powerful sensation of unnaturalness and the sensation that one's life occurred under a sheet of glass, in a vivarium.

Post-modernism, as a moment of civilization, is also about opulence, about a state of prosperous safety, about a strongly democratised luxuriousness, and about the cult for comfort. All of these features enter into open conflict with the imperative of suffering in the Judeo-Christian tradition, are imbued with that sensation the West has of itself that it is an island in a sea of Bolshevik and Islamic barbarity, and borrow the colours of the spectral memories of the gas chambers and crematoria from the near past. The result is a *Wetschmerz*, a *mal du siècle*, a mixture of voluptuousness and suffering, of cupidity, culpability and dread that we may call, with a word that rings deliciously in the ears of Western intellectual circles, *Decadentism*.

The Romania of the 1980s seemed to be at an astronomical distance from such refined perversities. Still, the analogy holds, because even in a world profoundly divided and atomized, the most probable refuge of the individual is still his own body and his own sensuality, burdened with remorse and obsessions.

Post-modernism, then, also has the acute feeling of a departure from history. The world seems to have reached an equilibrium between all interests, to have become a China, a realm which, for the span of millennia, has no longer any reason to evolve. The same feeling of departure from history could be found in the East as well. First of all, it existed at the level of ideology, because, as we well know, communism was Millenarist, then it existed in the form of the day-to-day exasperation of the person in the street, a reality ever since the shattering of reform dreams in the 1960s. The lengthy agony of communism was permeated by a sad feeling of stability. Totalitarianism, once established, became almost melancholic. Exterior constraints were fully internalised, assimilated into the genetic code. Still, in a way, this is the condition of any decadent period, which we may even define as a historical moment in which culture produces mutants.

Late communism was Alexandrian, eclectic, and incorporating necessary oases of contestation, if only to add stability to the system. It was a troglodyte world, yet not without its hierarchies of nuances, a world that required a sophisticated competence in slinking and surviving. Everything was regulated, so to speak, the chips were down. Well-oiled by every

imaginable form of corruption, the machine functioned so very well that it no longer required a human factor. The individual was thrown into a “no man’s land”, where he joined... whom else but his fellowman from the post-industrial society, who, in turn, experienced the same rupture. He too was coming from a very old world, burdened with a heavy heredity and with an impeccable social rotation, which evidently, even ostentatiously, functioned by itself.

Western man is born in a state of prosperity, Eastern Man, in one of precariousness: they do not meet under the auspices of post-modern hedonism. Still, they communicate through something that is of the very essence of this hedonism: a keen feeling of loneliness and vulnerability. This feeling immediately translates into an infinite self-love and self-pity. This delicate, passionate, devoted, feverish love for one’s own person, self-involved to the point of neurosis, crossed through the Iron Curtain in every direction, as if through soft cheese.

A case in point, to return to literature, seems to me to be the poetry of the Romanian 1980s generation. It is the work of people raised in admiration of the sacred monsters of the 1960s, growing on the idea of multilateral freedom, of the multifaceted man, of militant innocence, and of the poetic imaginary capable of changing the world. Permeated by a leftism as vague as it was explosive and generous, this poetry gradually evolves towards a total closure onto itself, towards lonesome fantasies, towards indulging in the authors’ own neuroses, towards the pleasure of the play with the combinatorial possibilities of language, towards the utopia of comfort, towards an aestheticism at times superb, at times merely precious. Through all these, the spirit of the poetry of the 1980s comes extremely close to the sensual autism that dominates the Western literature of the same period.

Reading the above, most of all the passages which may sound as if they lament the fate of poor Western people, to the mind of any man of good sense will have come the healthy saying: “A dog dies of too much walking, and a fool from worrying about other people’s business”. Let us go back, therefore, to what we have set out to accomplish, namely finding out how we can profitably relate to the concept of “post-modernism”.

In what I have said above, I have taken for granted that there exists a corpus of stylistic facts, of literary technologies, of motifs and themes common to the 1980s writing in Romania and elsewhere. I have then insisted that, beyond this purely formal level, we can also discover analogies with certain movements of the soul, with certain collective reveries and phobias of the so-called post-industrial civilizations. In conclusion, we may declare that there is an area in which the Western world and the Romanian world of the late 20th century meet both semantically and with respect to a common sensibility.

Now, this is the area in which the concept of post-modernism may operate. The concept as such is not called to define, or express, the intuition of a phenomenon’s essence. What “post-modernism” must accomplish is what in the jargon of sociology is called an *interface* relation, exemplified by “*me – Tarzan, you – Jane*”. It must establish a common language and a climate of goodwill in the (real or potential) dialogue with the Western world. In Roman Jakobson’s terms, this pertains to the *phatic* function of communication, which is that of controlling the channel of transmission. From the point of view of Romanian literature,

post-modernism ought to be thought of as just such a “phatic” instrument. Whereas the critic must be, to resort this time to Joseph Hillis Miller’s term, a *host*, an Amphitryon.

One must, therefore, understand that this concept has a purely pragmatic value. It functions just as a first approximation, as a first *translation*, an electronic and a quasi-automatic one. “Romanian post-modernism” is a public relation strategy, an operator meant to tame the image of the Other, to render it more familiar. Starting, however, from this platform, that of the *similar*, you may progressively stir the interest for what is *dis-similar*. What is different will then lend itself to be perceived no longer as exotic, picturesque, vaguely ridiculous, but, directly, as fascinating. The critic must lure his “foreign guest” beyond analogies with post-modernism and post-modernity, into a new determination, which utterly modifies the meaning of what has passed as familiar until then. This will be a point beyond which everything that has to do with the rhetoric or the psychology of “post-modernism” changes its aseptic and congenial appearance and begins to serve for the unravelling of a story of terror and mute desperation, of maddening expectation, of slow degradation, stubbornness, patience, cunning and cowardice.

Speaking of the mediation between Romania and the West, it remains to be said that this West is in fact noting but a slice of the Romanians’ own consciousness, one lobe of their brain. Eastern intellectuals, the Marxian included, matured, without exception, on the tradition of European thinking. Their concepts, values, taste are born quite naturally out of the Western tradition. The reality that these people inhabit is physiologically different from that of the West, yet they simply *do not* have any other mental model of the world except the Western one. This “West”, in fact, is a deeply internalised cluster of norms and criteria, a superego that permanently supervises them and makes them feel guilty.

The problem of the critic is, perhaps, that of reconciling the superego with the self, and that of employing the ruse of “post-modernism”, while denying it from inside, by stealth. He will then lead the alienated and snobbish Romanian intellectual consciousness into a gradual awareness and understanding of the real life in the midst of which it finds itself immersed.

There may be just one more fact left to bring to mind: that the years 1980s are over, and with them the illusion that history is at an end. The world we live in is unpredictable for everyone, rich or poor, strong or weak, intelligent or dull. “Post-modernism” already belongs to another epoch. It once gave shape to a comfortable and voluptuous sclerosis. However, now people are beginning to realise that they are not safe and that they cannot find their security through comfort, but only through moral effort. “Post-modernism” is over, has shut itself up for ever in the shell of the 1980s. The chance of Romanian literature is to take part in this feverish search for the revelation, for fundamental experiences meant to lead to a rebirth and to an intellectual revolution.

To justify ourselves using post-modernism is a shrewd and useful ploy, yet in moments such as these, when it is possible to discover unexplored territories, this may just as well be a huge waste of time.