

# Is There a Romanian Postmodernism?

CARMEN MUŞAT

Parcourant à la fois les textes théoriques des écrivains roumains des années '80, leurs romans et leurs récits, l'auteur crée un modèle du postmodernisme roumain, en juxtaposant les traits de la prose roumaine postmoderne avec ceux identifiés par les théoriciens occidentaux, définitoires pour le profil de la narration postmoderniste.

**Keywords:** postmodernism, authenticity, textualism, biographism, dialogism, intertextuality, parodic sensitivity

In what follows I shall once again take up the debate on the margin of Romanian postmodernism, begun in the 1980s in university circles, and which “exploded” in the literary press in a double issue of *Caiete critice* [*Critical Notebooks*] magazine (1-2/1986) dedicated entirely to the subject. Fought from the entrenched positions of the never-ending Romanian strife between traditionalists and modernists, the canonical battle on the terrain of Romanian literature showed from the outset the signs of a “battle between generations.” Moreover, since in the circumstances of the 1980s any novelty and any group action (let alone a “desant”<sup>1</sup>, be it merely literary) were frowned upon suspiciously by the party, postmodernism asserting itself as an artistic movement *also* had the connotations of a political gesture of defiance. I shall limit myself here only to those contributions which have highlighted the major features of postmodernism, and in which their authors have either attempted to accredit the existence of the current in Romania or have vehemently rejected the idea, most often by resorting to Maiorescu’s arguments from his theory of “forms without substance”. However, aside from controversies, statements, refinements or rejections, or perhaps owing to some extent to this effervescence of critical debate, Romanian postmodernism has evinced the tendency to develop from a theoretical concept into a literary fact, as substantiated by the large number of works – most of them published after 1989 – where one may recognize the characteristics of the current. To be sure, one of the main reasons for the reticence that accompanies any discussion about Romanian postmodernism has been the absence or the dearth of the volumes written by so many of the authors in the above-mentioned category. In an editorial climate that was anything but favourable to debutants, the publication in magazines – most of them students’ magazines – or the reading evenings in literary societies were the most frequent forms of becoming recognized.

Still, the prominent writers of the “1980s generation” began to speak of a major change in the way in which literature was written and perceived long before the term “postmodernism”

actually penetrated into the Romanian literary jargon or critical awareness. “The signs of a change of attitude and mentality in conceiving the relationships between text and reality, author and character”<sup>2</sup> emerge – also in the theory, not just in the practice, of fiction – after 1979, together with the first pronouncedly theoretical articles and texts signed by Mircea Nedelciu, Alexandru Vlad, Ștefan Agopian, Gheorghe Crăciun, Ioan Lăcustă, Bedros Horassangian, Daniel Vighi, Cristian Teodorescu, Adina Keneres, Ioan Groșan, Gheorghe Iova, Gheorghe Ene, Maria Mailat, Constantin Stan, Vasile Gogea, Carmen Francesca Banciu, Nicolae Iliescu, Viorel Marineasa, Hanibal Stănculescu, Emil Paraschivoiu, etc. In an article dating from 1980, which differentiated between the “realism of the method of transcription” and the “realism of the attitude towards the real,” Mircea Nedelciu was the first to signal the new direction in fiction, as well as the difficulties of classifying texts by fiction writers as diverse as Mircea Horia Simionescu, Costache Olăreanu, Radu Petrescu, Tudor Țopă or Petru Cretă into a genre. The difficulties arose from the fact that these authors challenged the readers to reconstitute not just the narrative as such, but the very world of the fiction. The *dialogism* of the new literature, which “made the reader the main character of his/her work,” and the *authenticity* of the different discourses – the author’s, in his/her own name, the narrator’s and the character’s – were, in Mircea Nedelciu’s opinion<sup>3</sup>, distinctive features of such narratives, and consequently were extensively commented upon in a series of articles by him:

The document, the record, the direct transmission of an event that actually occurred in real life can enter the economy of the literary text, where they will no longer be artistically transfigured, but authenticated. The status of the character changes inasmuch as the utterances attributed to it no longer exist except as traces in texts written by real persons.

The idea of authenticity, as mentioned here by the author of the volume *Amendament la instinctul proprietății* [Amendment to the Instinct of Property] “inevitably connects to the personal identity of the transcriber or the writer, without definitively bracketing away that of the interlocutors.” In his turn, when he invoked the etymology of the word *authentes* which, in ancient Greek, denoted the author, Gheorghe Crăciun – probably the most substantial and subtle theoretician of the new manner of writing in these parts – correlated authenticity with the undisguised presence of the author in the text. Autobiography thus became, not only in theoretical articles but also in the novels and short stories produced by the authors of the “’80s generation”, a “symptomatic, essential material.” Both in *Acte originale. Copii legalizate* (a programmatic title) and in the succeeding volumes, *Componere cu paralele inegale* [Composition with Uneven Bars] and *Frumoasa fără corp* [The Bodiless Beauty], Gheorghe Crăciun systematically resorts to biographemes, to the insertion of his own name into the texture of the narratives (a gesture with a different finality than in Camil Petrescu’s novel), always preoccupied<sup>4</sup> by

the experimentation of new compositional formulae that proclaim the natural discontinuity of the act of narration, the initiation of new syntactic models based on a

more analytical awareness of language, the problematisation that goes up to the point of demonstrating its quality as a narrative incentive to the status of the character, the reconsideration of the author's position towards the development process of his/her writing, and, broadly speaking, the opening towards techniques and "materials" exterior to the genre.

At any rate, even as early as 1982, Gheorghe Crăciun spoke of the interest shown by the fiction writers of the "’80s generation" in the "mechanisms responsible for the generation and functioning of the narrative text," a preoccupation that set the young writers apart in the literary landscape of those years, bringing them closer to the representatives of the French Nouveau roman or to the American experimental prose (John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Kurt Vonnegut, etc.) than to the Romanian fiction writers of the moment, excluding, of course, Mircea Horia Simionescu, Radu Petrescu, Costache Olăreanu, or Tudor Șopă, as well as the writers of the oneiric group, on whom the literary press of the '80s was keeping an almost generalized quiet, even as the only oneiric writer still active in Romania was the poet Leonid Dimov. Not only a very talented fiction writer, but also, like Mircea Nedelciu, a redoubtable theoretician of narration, Crăciun, in his 1982 essay entitled "Arhipelagul '70-'80 și noul flux" ["The '70-'80s Archipelago and the New Flux"], put forward an extremely synthetic portrait of the generation. This portrait, although in it the term "postmodernism" is not mentioned once, reunited a series of characteristics of postmodern prose at roughly the same time in which Ihab Hassan commented upon the same in the 1982 edition of his book, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*<sup>5</sup>. Starting from the observation that the fiction writers of the "’80s generation" were synchronous with Western literature and with the theoretical thinking of their epoch, the author of *Composition with Uneven Bars* believed that

the deliteraturization of perception and of narrative discourse, the disputation of certain aesthetical "relations of production" so far kept under wraps (writing-reading, statement-enunciation, author-narrator-character, living tongue-language, description-narration, narration-presentation), the revision of the nature and importance of the categories of "species" and "genre", the practical reconsideration of the ideas of "invention" and "representation", the option for the "text" as an open structure, these are problems that crop up in the manifestations of that theoretical consciousness that I have talked about earlier.

These obvious modifications of narrative structures were, in Gheorghe Crăciun's opinion<sup>6</sup>, motivated by the rapid evolution of the surrounding world, which rendered the old fictional formulae unserviceable:

The probing of a world of extraordinary complexity, in which social structures have an unprecedented dynamics, in which psychical stress, the RTS process, the informational onslaught, the aggression of the technological environment against that of the senses, and the syncopation of the mental flux are everyday commonplaces,

demands, most of the time, that working tools should be built on the fly, that preexistent literary techniques should be either reconditioned or shattered, that the perspectives of perception and discourse production should be swiftly altered, that one should turn to the naked document and to the jargon of various specializations as well as focus on the forms of manifestation of oral language, that the movement of syntax should adapt to the rhythm of narration, of the report, of analysis, and ultimately to the rhythm of “textuation”. Irony, pastiche, parody, quotation and self-quotation connect to the same specific way of setting the subject’s issues inside a universe where, the fact is much too well known, culture has transformed into a second nature for man.

Again, there is no explicit reference to postmodernism, although all the traits of the new prose enumerated here fall under the postmodern paradigm described *per se* not just by Ihab Hassan, but also by Matei Călinescu or Brian McHale, to name only the most prominent commentators of the so many who have discussed the phenomenon. The elements of the new narrative poetics stood out gradually from most of the young writers’ press input: the rejection of the novel as a genre and the resurrection of short fiction, the concrete imagination and the absorption of the real into the imaginary Stelian Tănase<sup>7</sup>), the recourse to unspecialised narrators, whose role was to bear witness, the rethinking of the relations between author and text (Cristian Teodorescu<sup>8</sup>), the exposure and re-examination of the conventions of the epic genre, the connection between the tragic and the ironic, the pseudo-demystification of culture, the *farcitura* (in Paul Zumthor’s acceptation<sup>9</sup>) and the revue as the epitome of today’s civilisation (Nicolae Iliescu<sup>10</sup>), the minimal fiction, *tel-quel*-like, progressive, psychedelic or *new-romance*, the new mannerism and the appropriation of *kitsch* George Cușnarencu<sup>11</sup>), the “informality of the stylistic exercise, [the] experimentation (even if on the exclusivist, negativistic, autarchic side) with diverse narrative modes, debates, sometimes implicit, at other times explicit, on the text, on the act of writing and of creation through a metatexting that discloses – in and of itself – if not the attitude of a monumentality sure of its own achievements, at least an acute awareness of creation understood as an irrevocable fact” (Daniel Vighi<sup>12</sup>), literature and life, expression and content as the two faces of a Moebius’s strip, visionarism and indetermination, the poetic self as a biographical fact (Ioan Buduca<sup>13</sup>), the (educated) misfortune of the human condition, induced by the fact that “today’s man, in a world where power is textual, feels himself and knows himself to be written” (Gheorghe Iova<sup>14</sup>), the paraphrasing, re-creation, decomposition and re-launching of quotations, the “ambiguity and gliding between text and reality,” the intertextuality (Simona Popescu<sup>15</sup>). What we have here is a group self-portrait that captures the main innovating aspects of the ‘80s fiction without, however, “labelling” it in any way.

The inventory of postmodern techniques made by Matei Călinescu in *Five Faces of modernity* is worth invoking here, if we are to be able to compare the narrative typology of the “‘80s generation” with that of a postmodernism theoretically “certified” a new existential or „ontologic” usage of narrative perspectivism, different from the rather psychological one that we found in modernism [...]; the doubling up and the multiplying of the beginnings, the endings and the narrated actions (e.g., the alternative endings in Fowles’s *The French*

*Lieuteunant Woman*); the parodic thematisation of the author (the reoccurrence of the nagging and manipulative author, this time, however, in a special self-ironic disposition); the thematisation, not any less parodic, but a lot less disconcerting of the reader (the „involved reader” becomes a character, or a series of characters – e.g., with Italo Calvino, in *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*); treating action and fiction, reality and myth, truth and lie, the original and the imitation equally, as a means of accentuating imprecision; the self-referentiality and “metafiction” as a means of dramatizing the inexorable spinning in circles (in Borges’ *Circular Ruins* and *Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*); the extreme versions of the “doubtful narrator”, paradoxically used sometimes to obtain a rigorous construction (“the perfect crime” of which Nabokov speaks in *Despair*, via a self-declared, but also self-deluded mythomaniac).

Nowhere in the texts quoted above do the authors resort to an umbrella concept to place all the works of the “new wave” under. Nicolae Manolescu<sup>16</sup>, one of the best informed commentators of the young fiction of the period, also stayed clear of it in his 1985 review of two volumes of short fiction by Bedros Horasangian, *Curcubeul de la miezul nopții* [The Midnight Rainbow]<sup>17</sup> and *Închiderea ediției* [Closing Edition]<sup>18</sup>, where he discerned five essential traits of the “new style”:

1) the observation of daily reality, through painstaking description and the ‘photographing’ of its components; 2) the exact, audiotape-like, recording of the non-literary idiom spoken in the street, slang or jargon, with “voices” intermingling as in a telephone switchboard; 3) the merging of the most varied techniques and procedures, many of them avantgarde, in an often experimental manner; 4) the absence of a subject and of its classical stages, the plot, the climax, and the rest; 5) humour, irony, both in the attitude towards the real and in that towards literature, the use of intertextuality, of bookish references, of metalanguage, etc. All can be found, in different doses, throughout the works of the “’80s generation”...

Among the first writers to speak of the “impact of the postmodern sensibility” in Romanian literature was Cristian Moraru, in a 1985 article where, employing the term in the acceptation given to it by Ihab Hassan and by other Western theoreticians of the postmodern phenomenon<sup>19</sup>, he determined a direct connection between the narrative discourse of the “’80s generation” writers and the distinctive marks of postmodern writing – the mock-conspirative denunciation of the *mise en abyme*, of textual symbolism and of textuality itself, the self-exposure of writing and the predilection for irony and self-irony, stylistic polyphony, intertextuality, paratextuality, quotation, interpolation, cultural allusion, the text within the text. In the same year, Mircea Cărtărescu announced postmodernism<sup>20</sup> as the chance of a rebirth for Romanian poetry, and defined it as

... refined *textualism* (involving techniques of metatext, paratext, hypertext and self-referentiality), an intentionally prosy *biographism*, and finally a *stylistic synchrony* (a stylistic Babel, employing, in a sham traditionalist fashion, all available historical styles).

These lines sketch not just the profile of the new literary paradigm, but also the project of the *Levant*, a work which was to be published a few years later<sup>21</sup> and in which the author rewrote the history of Romanian literature in a parodic key. The “postmodern” gauntlet once thrown down, the concept began to gain ground and, in a very short span of time, it recruited just as many enthusiastic advocates as it did vigorous adversaries. Among the former, Mircea Martin [with his 1986 volume, *Singura critică (The Only Criticism)*], Mircea Mihăieș and Ion Bogdan Lefter stand out as the commentators of postmodern Romanian literature most careful about nuances and most capable to argue in a well-informed and lucid manner for the need to situate both the recent fiction and its interpretation in a universal context. Although authorities on the postmodern phenomenon and the latest theories, Monica Spiridon and Ștefan Borbély saw in the debate on the theme of postmodernism in Romanian literature merely the reflex of a desire to be “up to the times”: “I do not believe that we have a postmodern literature, so much less a ‘generation’ of postmodern authors,” claims Monica Spiridon<sup>22</sup>, an assertion subscribed to by Ștefan Borbély the following year<sup>23</sup>. The most outspoken dismissal, however, came from an author who – the irony! – was the first to use the term in 1982, albeit in a singular acceptation, quite different from what English-speaking critics and theoreticians have had in mind when referring to postmodernism. In “Postmodernismul, o frumoasă poveste” [“Postmodernism, a Beautiful Story”], an article published in April 1988 in *Astra* magazine<sup>24</sup> that inveighed – and for good reason – against the terminological confusion deriving from the frenzied invocation of the term “postmodernism” in countless critical articles of the day, Alexandru Mușina rejected any attempt to see the specific traits of the ’80s fiction as marks of postmodern literature, convinced that “postmodernism,” as understood in the West, “may well describe certain Romanian literary phenomena which are, however, (relatively) marginal.” Moreover, connecting the artistic typology of an epoch with its economic, technological and political background, Alexandru Mușina<sup>25</sup> spoke of the inadequacy of the term to describe Romanian literary realities and warned,

... one must not allow oneself to be carried away by the ease with which one can discover in Romanian contemporary authors, especially in the young ones, techniques similar to those used by postmodern writers. In defining a typology, a literary current, what is essential is not so much the use of *certain techniques* (the figures of “language” being, after all, a common good for the literature of all times), as the attitude towards the act of writing, the relationship with the reader, the world vision that can be discovered beyond the “rhetorical surface”.

The observations are quite correct, in essence, but for the fact that, when one takes a closer look at the literature of the Târgoviște School and of the “’80s generation”, and also at the theoretical contributions of their representatives, one discovers that it is not so much the use of certain narrative techniques that warrants a postmodern reading grid as is exactly the attitude towards the act of writing, the relationship with the reader, the world vision...

The passage of time and the publication of a large number of literary works by these writers caused the attitudes towards postmodernism in Romanian literature to be enriched with

countless nuances. Ten years from the first ample debate on this topic – *Postmodernism in Romanian Culture* – the subject was tackled<sup>26</sup> with considerably more theoretical precision than in 1986. Meanwhile, the critical studies dedicated to the phenomenon piled up, both because essential books were translated (Lyotard, Linda Hutcheon, Steven Connor, Gianni Vattimo, etc.), and because theoretical studies or articles came out under the authorship of Romanian authors Liviu Petrescu, Mircea Cărtărescu, Magda Cârneci, Mircea Martin, Sorin Alexandrescu, Monica Spiridon, Ion Bogdan Lefter, and Gheorghe Crăciun). Although often quite different in terms of theoretical options and critical perspectives, the above-mentioned authors all agreed on an extremely important aspect: Romanian literary postmodernism *was not* and was not to be treated as a phenomenon of cultural *mimeticism*. Describing the Romanian postmodern model in terms of four specific traits – the predilection for *short fiction*, the postulate of *authenticity* and of the *trivial*, the *non-mimetic* poetics and the postulate of a “*new humanism*”, endorsed especially by the poets Alexandru Mușina and Călin Vlasie and to a lesser degree by the fiction writers of the “‘80s generation” – Liviu Petrescu saw in this new literary paradigm “not a cosmopolite model of postmodernism, but an organic one,” which was “in harmony with certain literary traditions and evolutionary lines in Romanian literature.” To him<sup>27</sup>, the “‘80s generation”

... represents not only the most systematic theoretical model of postmodernism to be generated in Romania, but also one of its versions of considerable interest that exist in the world at the present time.

As for the relationship between Romanian modernism and postmodernism, Petrescu spoke of two distinct *epistemic categories*, one built on the principle of *totality*, the other on that of *plurality*. Appropriating the typological scheme used by Frederic Jameson in *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), the theoretician from Cluj distinguished, inside the modernist paradigm, between the “first modernism,” where he included the so-called “scientific novel” and the realism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the “great modernism,” or the “late modernism,” which brought along the erosion of the mimetic theory.

Also in search of theoretical and literary landmarks for ‘homebred’ postmodernism, Gheorghe Crăciun turned to modernism, dissatisfied with the precariousness of the concept. Just like Liviu Petrescu, he considered that “modernity as a coherent literary model almost simultaneously establishes its main characteristics both in the poetry and in the prose of the second half of last century [the 19<sup>th</sup>, translator’s note],” but, unlike the binary model put forward by the previously quoted theoretician, Gheorghe Crăciun opted<sup>28</sup> for a typological description of the modernist model of poetics and there he delineated three main lines of force:

... the *transitive*, direct, denotative, prosing one [...], the *reflexive* one (the Hugo Friedrich–Marcel Raymond–Carlos Bousono model) [...], and the *avantgarde-experimental, mannerist-ludic* one, which includes poets such as Tristan Tzara, Pessoa, Raymond Queneau, Peter Handke, etc.

Here postmodernism was seen, perhaps also because of its restorative nature, both as a “crowning of certain developments that were actually initiated in the period of modernism” (Liviu Petrescu) and as a fiercely polemical reaction to it, which originated “in a vital urge, an almost biological necessity for normality,” as, for instance, Caius Dobrescu stated in a 1987 essay included in the *Competiția continuă* [The Competition Continues] anthology. Although he did not plan to discuss the concept of postmodernism, Ion Bogdan Lefter<sup>29</sup> observed that

... while the approach of the '60s generation was more restorative than innovating, that of the '80s generation came as a first attempt to go beyond the modernist current.

In Lefter's opinion, the polemical reaction of the '80s generation was determined by an overwhelming feeling that the dominant literary structures of the epoch were exhausted. This was essentially the same feeling as the one “that in the last couple of decades has brought about the transition to postmodernism in all the literatures of Europe and America.” Still, the innovating approach of the '80s generation was not a strictly nihilist one, but a restorative one at core, which is evident in the *dialogic, living* relationship that its representatives entertained with tradition. Even if they rejected the literary formulae of the '60s generation or, if only in part, the formulae of the '70s generation, the '80s writers proposed a novel way of reading a series of important interwar authors, such as M. Blecher, Mateiu I. Caragiale and Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, or, from among “marginal” contemporaries (in fact marginalized in relation to the official canon), Gellu Naum, Mircea Ivănescu, Virgil Mazilescu, Leonid Dimov, Radu Petrescu, Mircea Horia Simionescu, Costache Olăreanu, Sorin Titel, and the list might, of course, continue. The natural consequence of this rereading was a new canonical configuration of interwar and contemporary Romanian literature, which – as time passed and the attitude of the most important representatives of this generation radicalised – incited reactions as diverse as they were vehement. Moreover, the '80s writers' preference for the work of “Mister Caragiale”, at whose “door” many of the fiction writers of the generation schooled themselves, carries great significance in the economy of their cultural venture.

Starting from a series of essential questions for the aesthetic profile of the phenomenon in Eastern European countries, namely “How was/is it possible for something akin to a postmodern symptomatology to exist in countries with a communist/post-communist regime?” and, consequently, “What can postmodernism mean in a small, marginal, isolated country?”, Magda Cârneci advanced a hypothesis both interesting and pertinent. She saw in the “fashion of postmodernism,” which spread like wildfire in countries governed by communist parties, not only “a characteristic aesthetic way to surpass aberrant political conditionings, obsolete social struggles, artificial cultural blockages,” but also “a subtle symptom of a diffuse premonition of change.” The subversive nature of the debate around indigenous postmodernism thus stands out poignantly from<sup>30</sup>

... the fact that the pluralist, antimonopoly vision, so typical of postmodernism, is only possible when grounded in an acute sense of freedom. Or, as plenty of commentators from outside and from inside the communist phenomenon have noticed, despite

numerous limitations, constraints and risks, there has always been a margin of liberty in communist societies, especially in the sphere of the arts – a degree of freedom even larger than the rulers were inclined to tolerate.

Evidently, the subversively political dimension of Romanian postmodernism, the same as what the trend experienced in other former communist countries, fully contributed to the emergence of unique aesthetical structures, quite different from those of postmodern American literature. What I have in mind here is, first of all, the “new humanism” theorized by Alexandru Mușina and considered by Liviu Petrescu to be one of the distinguishing marks of the literary model of the “‘80s generation”. The effect of a particular horizon of expectations, Romanian postmodernism had its origins not so much in a given political and economic context as in a series, as Magda Cârneci noted in the essay quoted above, of socio-cultural and psychological causes, among which the opposition against the “new man” designed by party ideology played an important role. The fiction writers of the “‘80s generation” showed an unconcealed interest in the authenticity of everyday speech and life, and in the ordinary person as well as in the oversophisticated, refined and erudite individual. The “grip on reality” or the “fidelity in rendering,” the “direct transmissions” or the “self-reflexive positioning,” the “new sensibility” obsessively directed at everyday experiences and the street bustle, the rediscovery of man – after decades in which literature seemed interested only in generic beings, pure abstractions after all, when not mere sums of commonplaces borrowed from materials of party propaganda – this whole pursuit of authenticity, captured from every compartment of human existence, reflected to the highest degree the *symbiosis between ethics and aesthetics*, so typical not only of the literature of the “‘80s generation”, but also of a fiction writer such as Gabriela Adameșteanu, whose career was in full swing in the ninth decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The question that serves as a title to this chapter received a completely affirmative answer in the book published by Mircea Cărtărescu at the beginning of the year 1999, entitled *Postmodernismul românesc [Romanian Postmodernism]*<sup>31</sup>, an imposing plea both because of its dimensions and because of the objective that it set itself. An extremely talented poet and fiction writer, Mircea Cărtărescu came up with an original panorama of Romanian literature, interpreted in a postmodern grid. The central thesis of Mircea Cărtărescu’s study is that<sup>32</sup>

... postmodernism is not just a stage in the evolution of artistic forms, nor is it just a literary current, but an interruption of that cultural order in which it is possible for forms and literary currents to evolve, a “convalescence” after the modernist illusion, made possible by a shift of civilization, and not merely one of culture.

Proclaiming the “relative independence of the culture of marginal zones from the social-political and economic reality of those zones,” the poet/theoretician did not – with well-grounded arguments – consider it necessary for a direct relationship to exist between postmodernism and postmodernity as a post-industrial stage; what was important, in his opinion, was the rapid circulation of ideas, capable of triggering a substantial transformation in the world.

As a person with an insider's understanding of the “‘80s generation”, Cărtărescu knew only too well how large an impact rock music, hippie and ‘Flower power’ movements, blue jeans and television had made on the artistic cast of mind of his generation. The most striking characteristic of Romanian postmodernism, and also of its different incarnations in the other East European countries is precisely the reversal of causalities. As a matter of fact, this is true of all artistic movements that are mentioned in the history of Romanian literature, and modernism itself is no exception. Even Maiorescu's revolt against forms without substance was, after all, caused by the same perpetual and typically Romanian lack of synchronization between infrastructure and superstructure, a lack of synchronization that did not prevent Romanian literature from burning stages periodically – on the contrary, it may be argued that it actually offered an impulse – out of an overwhelming desire to concur with the “up-to-date” trends of Western literature. Still, I find Mircea Cărtărescu less convincing when, for didactic purposes, he simplifies the relationship modernity/postmodernity and considers the world of the 1950s and 1970s as “not so different, in fact, from the interwar one,” and also when he sees in the “‘80s generation” the first post-historical occurrence. For reasons that I have extensively commented upon in an earlier chapter, I do not believe that what we have been living through for the last couple of decades may be called post-history, as I do not believe that the modernity of the literature of the 1950s-1970s is of the same mettle as that of the interwar epoch. That is for the simple reason that, whilst the modernity of the interwar period was genuine and in sync with the same current flourishing all over the world, generated in a democratic climate and in a socio-politic context in which freedom of thought and of expression favoured the production of a great variety of literary formulae and structures, the second modernism, that of the 1960s-1970s, was out of sync and nostalgic, timeless and aesthetically eclectic, totally apolitical in its refuge in abstractness and at the same time paradoxical, extremely politicised as an attitude, given the opposition towards the evident dogmatism of “socialist realism.” In the name of defending the aesthetic realm from the intrusions of everydayness, the writers of the period, completely isolated from their congeners in the free world, rediscovered interwar literature after many years in which the authors and the literary works of the period had been on the “black lists” drawn up by the censors of the communist regime. Consequently, one cannot pretend that we are dealing with an informed *choice* for modernism, but with a conditioned reflex – additionally motivated, it is true, by the nostalgia with which the young people of the time looked back at the interwar period – in a situation in which any dialogue with Western literature was broken, and the only alternative available inside the country was the lecturing dogmatism of socialist realism.

The 1980s arrived with an entirely different intellectual climate, even though the ideological pressure was equally great, and the cult of personality reached its climax. Only a few years of the system's relative relaxation (1964-1971) were sufficient in order for the freedom which was then only glimpsed to take firm root, especially in the artistic and academic milieus. In fact, it is here that one must search for the signs of postmodernism, in the literary societies for students that were set up in the major university centres – Bucharest, Cluj, Timișoara, Iași. Their role in shaping the Romanian literary scene has also been highlighted in Mircea Cărtărescu's book, as in most studies and articles dedicated to the literature of the

1980s. I shall not insist here on this particularity of Romanian postmodernism, which has been extensively analysed in most contributions on the theme of the ““80s generation”. What I believe to be important is the diversity of the narrative formulae that the ‘80s writers experimented with, which fundamentally distinguished them from their immediate predecessors. Although one of the steadiest promoters of Romanian postmodernism, with his threefold role of poet, fiction writer and critic – *Romanian Postmodernism* can and has been read also as a *manifesto* of the ““80s generation”, a vehement and at times unfair *pro domo* plea – Mircea Cărtărescu resists the temptation to identify the writing of the ““80s generation” with postmodernism<sup>33</sup>, convinced that

... like the poets, the ‘80s fiction writers do not follow a single direction, but are diverse and versatile, “filling up” the space of contemporary poetics from the almost “traditionalist” prose up to the most advanced avantgarde, oneiric and postmodern experiments.

A representative work for the diversity of narrative poetics frequented by the ‘80s writers is the collective volume *Desant ‘83*<sup>34</sup>, a genuine manifesto for the new sensibility. To the fiction of the 1980s, the volume had the same importance that *Aer cu diamante* [Air with Diamonds]<sup>35</sup> and *Cinci* [Five]<sup>36</sup> had for poetry. As, above all, a *prospective* anthology, *Desant ‘83* marked not so much the editorial debut of certain fiction writers as the innovating onslaught that a group of writers, each different from the others but sharing the desire for the renewal of literature, lead on literary structures that were felt to be obsolete. What followed after 1989 was the confirmation and consolidation of the project of the ““80s generation”, where the postmodern direction is one of the best represented ones. The novels and short stories published by the most iconic authors who gained renown in the eighth/ninth decade gradually but irreversibly undermined the dominant structures of post-war Romanian fiction.

Consequently, I believe it becomes self-evident that the answer to the question posed in the title can only be a plain yes, now, at almost two decades since the onset of this debate. The pages that follow shall hopefully offer a more refined image as to the specific traits that distinguish the poetics of Romanian postmodernism, as they stand out from the analysis of several of the most significant works written not only by the ‘80s writers but also by the fiction writers of the Târgoviște school, with whom the former share countless (s)elective affinities. Gabriela Adameșteanu’s work, situated at the border between neo-realism and postmodernism, must also be taken into account, as both *Diminea\_ă pierdută* [Lost Morning] and the short stories in *Vară-primăvară* [Spring-Summer] stand among the most accomplished works of the Romanian fiction of the 1980s. As I do not believe that one may licitly equate postmodernism with the ““80s generation”, even though its writers had a major contribution to establishing the term, the adventure of writing initiated by the representatives of the Târgoviște school – who composed postmodernist texts at a time when socialist realism was in full swing, with the same assurance with which Monsieur Jourdain wrote prose without knowing it – seems to me to be the first pronouncement of an authentic postmodern sensibility, for which the space

of the World becomes undistinguishable from the space of the Library, because the world is “a book in which each sign leads you to another,”<sup>37</sup> and

... to read is to go as far as the words will take you. And where will the words take you?  
To heaven or to the earth, into our own selves or into the selves of the things around us, into the past as well as into the future, into a bird’s flight as well as into the depths of a thought...

The writers of the Târgoviște school discovered the paradise of reading in an age when reality was an inferno and they took refuge in the Library, imagining how they would mount learned sieges upon platitudes, with arsenals made of books, regiment trains packed with libraries and miraculous cures obtained from stewing old manuscripts, apt to cure the ailments provoked in one by one’s unrelenting contact with reality. Unlike them, equally fascinated by books yet all too little inclined to withdraw into the library and ignore the surrounding world, the writers of the “‘80s generation” perceive the real as a text that generates itself, in permanent motion, while their own existence – experienced as texistence – is systematically circumscribed to a paltry everyday reality, the only space left undistorted by party propaganda.

## NOTES

- 1 Allusion to *Desant ‘83*, an anthology of young writers published in 1983 that breached the literary norm of the age and, while not openly dissident, showed the disquieting drabness and the absurdity of life in communist Romania (translator’s note).
- 2 Crăciun, Gheorghe, *Acte legalizate, Copii originale* [Certified Documents. Original Copies], Cartea Românească Publishing House, Bucharest, 1982.
- 3 “Dialogul în proza scurtă” [“Dialogue in Short Fiction”] (1982), in Crăciun, Gheorghe (ed.), *Competi\_ia continuă. Genera\_ia ‘80 în texte teoretice* [The Contest Continues. The ‘80s Generation in Theoretical Texts], Paralela 45 Publishing House, Pitești, 1999, p. 311. Other articles on the same theme by Mircea Nedelciu: “Dialogul în proza scurtă. Transcriere și construc\_ie” [“Dialogue in Short Fiction. Transcription and Construction”] (1980), “Un nou personaj principal” [“A New Main Character”] (1987), “Noile structuri și limbajul” [“The New Structures and Language”] (1988), all of them reprinted in the anthology quoted above.
- 4 “Autenticitatea ca metodă de lucru” [“Authenticity as a Work Method”] (1987), in Crăciun, Gheorghe (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 271-2.
- 5 *Towards a Postmodern Literature*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1971, 1982.
- 6 “Arhipelagul ‘70-‘80 și noul flux”, in Crăciun, Gheorghe (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 215-6.
- 7 “Conul de umbră” [“The Shadow Cone”] (1983), *ibid.*, pp. 317-20.
- 8 “Proza tinerilor – încotro?” [“Young Fiction – Whereto?”] (1983), *ibid.*, pp. 329-31.
- 9 Zumthor’s definition – “The insertion of vulgar passages as interpolations or as tropes in a classical text” – is quoted by Nicolae Iliescu in his text. (See *infra*, note 8).
- 10 “Proza tinerilor – încotro?” (1983), in Crăciun, Gheorghe (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 331-3.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 333-4.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 335-6.
- 13 “Banda lui Moebius” [“Moebius’ Strip”] (1984), *ibid.*, pp. 14-7.
- 14 “Cititorul” [“The Reader”] (1985), “Ac\_iunea textuală” [“Textual Action”] (1989), *ibid.*, pp. 293-304.
- 15 “Compendiu despre noua proză” [“Compendium on the New Fiction”], *ibid.*, pp. 246-52.
- 16 *Literatura română postbelică. Lista lui Manolescu* [Postwar Romanian Literature. Manolescu’s List], 2nd volume, *Proza. Teatrul* [Fiction. Theatre], Aula Publishing House, Brașov, 2001, p. 275.

17 Albatros Publishing House, Bucharest, 1984.

18 Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1984.

19 I find it necessary to accentuate that I am not interested here in “innocent” uses or personal acceptations of the word, which, however, crop up often enough in the literary press of the ‘80s. Ion Bogdan Lefter discussed each one of these occurrences in his article “Fise pentru analiza unui concept” [“Index Cards for the Analysis of a Concept”] published in two “instalments”, in 1986 and 1986, and reprinted in Crăciun, Gheorghe (ed.), *op. cit.*], as well as in the volume *Postmodernism. Din dosarul unei „bătălii culturale”* [Postmodernism. From the File of a “Cultural Battle”], Paralela 45, Pitești, 2000. To Lefter’s article I shall come back in the pages that follow.

20 “Textualism, biografism, sincronie stilistică” [“Textualism, Biographism, Stylistic Synchrony”], in *Cronica* magazine, issue no. 25/1985.

21 Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1990.

22 “Mitol iesirii din criză” [“The Myth of a Coming Out of the Crisis”], in *Caiete critice* [Critical Notebooks], issue no. 1-2/1986, pp. 78-92.

23 “Postmodernismul – un model (cultural) oportun?” [“Postmodernism – an Opportune (Cultural) Model?”], in Crăciun, Gheorghe (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 388-94.

24 Reprinted in Crăciun, Gheorghe (ed.), *ed. cit.*, pp. 423-41.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 423-41.

26 In *Euresis*, issue 1-2, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1995.

27 In *Poetica postmodernismului* [The Poetics of Postmodernism], Paralela 45, Pitești, 1996, pp. 143, 148.

28 In “Între modernism și postmodernism” [“Between Modernism and Postmodernism”], in Gheorghe Crăciun, În căutarea referinței, Editura Paralela 45, 1998, p. 22.

29 In “Introducere în noua poetică a prozei” [“Introduction to the New Poetics of Prose”] (1989), in Gheorghe Crăciun (ed.), *Competiția continuă. Generația 80 în texte teoretice*, Editura Vlasie, 1994, p. 223.

30 “Dezbaterea în jurul postmodernismului în România anilor ‘80” [“The Debate around Postmodernism in 1980s Romania”] (1994), in Cârneci, Magda, *Arta anilor 80. Texte despre postmodernism* [The Art of the 1980s. Texts on Postmodernism], Litera, Bucharest, 1995, p. 99.

31 Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999.

32 *Idem*, p. 207.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 404.

34 Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1983; with a preface by Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu.

35 Cărtărescu, Mircea, Coșovei, Traian T., Iaru, Florin, Stratan, Ion, *Aer cu diamante*, Litera Publishing House, Bucharest, 1980.

36 Bucur, Romulus, Ghiu, Bogdan, Lefter, Ion Bogdan, Marin, Mariana, Mușina, Alexandru, *Cinci*, Litera, Bucharest, 1982.

37 Costache Olăreanu, *Cu cărțile pe iarba* [With Books in the Grass], Militară Publishing House, Bucharest, 1986, p. 46.



\*\*\*  
\*

