# THE THREE POSTMODERNISMS. TWO GENERATIONS OF ROMANIAN WRITERS FACING THE WEST[1]

Cătălin STURZA[2]
Independent Researcher
catalinsturza@gmail.com

**Abstract:**
The Postmodern Theory, that had united the previous literary generation, is challenged and partly abandoned by the generation of the 1990s. Furthermore, the very idea of a literary generation united under a literary ideology fades away in the 1990s. What happens in the transition that separates these generations of intellectuals and writers? The purpose of this essay is to describe some of the major changes in paradigm that follow the peaking of Romanian Postmodernism and to bring to debate some of the possible causes of the successive transformations of the Postmodern Theory in the peripheral context of the Romanian artistic and intellectual environment of the 1980s and 1990s.

**Keywords:**
Postmodern Theory; Eastern European Postmodernism; Romanian narrative fction of the 1980s and 1990s; literary ideology; literary history; literary criticism

If we look back at the history of the Romanian literature throughout the past four decades, we will discover that the last major esthetical and

[1] This paper is based on a wider research on the Romanian narrative fiction of the 1990s and 2000s. The project was supported by the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number SOP HRD/159/1.5/S/136077.

[2] Cătălin Sturza obtained his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the Faculty of Letters of the University of Bucharest and is currently an independent researcher. He conducted a post-doctoral research on the *Romanian narrative fiction of the 1990s – Between the Influences of Tradition, Dominant International Models, and the Rules of the Market*, with the support of the Romanian Academy and the European Union. A book entitled *Fictional Worlds. Invented Mythologies in the Romanian Prose in the Second Half of the 20th Century* is soon to be published at the Eikon Publishing House.



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ideological movement is the Postmodern one – and this movement, that meets its climax in the Western artistic and academic world in the eighth decade of the past century, reaches its highest point in the Romanian cultural space in the midst of the ninth decade – in the 1980's.

Then, in the 1990s (the 1990-2000 decade), a time defined by a movement of the social pendulum from authoritarianism to democracy and from a state-owned economy to (neo)liberalism, a movement that generates major social and political changes, the Postmodern Theory and, with it, the very idea of a literary generation united under a literary ideology fade away.

Therefore, we have a theory born in a certain type of society (Capitalist, Consumerist) that becomes relevant for an entire generation of writers in the alien context of a completely different type of society: Communist Romania of the 80s, a space that could be defined as "negative reflection" of the original point of emergence of the Postmodern theory. In the 80s, Postmodernism is, for the Romanian writers, much more than a theory: it's a "war banner" and the symbol of a common aspiration.

Then, suddenly, the same theory that had united the previous generation is challenged, blemished and then forgotten by the generation of the 1990s (and by some writers of the 1980s, as well). But the emotional challenging and blemishing are also atypical: and the real enemy doesn't seem to be the Postmodern theory, but the theory in a given, peripheral and atypical context. What happens during the transition between these generations? And do we agree that we're speaking of one and the same theory – or are we actually speaking of three very different Postmodern theories, **three Postmodernisms**, two of them radically restructured by this peripheral context?

The purpose of this essay is to describe some of the major changes in paradigm following the peaking of the Romanian Postmodernism and to bring to debate some of the possible causes for the transformations, ascent and decline of the Postmodern theory in the peripheral context of the Romanain academic and artistic world of the 1980s and 1990s.

**I. What is Postmodernism?**

Before looking more carefully at the Romanian society and at the history of the Romanian Postmodernism, we should rise a fundamental question. What is, in fact, Postmodernism? – this is a question any essay on



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the postmodern phenomena, at the beginning of the XXIth century, should start from.

> "A late 20th-century style and concept in the arts, architecture, and criticism, which represents a departure from modernism and is characterized by the self-conscious use of earlier styles and conventions, a mixing of different artistic styles and media, and a general distrust of theories." – Oxford Dictionary

The term "Postmodernism" has been applied to a great number of movements, mainly in architecture, painting, philosophy, music and literature that reacted against tendencies in modernism, and are typically marked by revival of historical elements and techniques.

One of the first usages of the term is in architecture, at the end of the fifth decade of the XXth century. The reemergence of the surface element and eclectism are some of the signs of the postmodern architectural style.

In Western literature, the beginning of the eight decade (1971-1972) brings the term to the center of the Western academic debate. Ihab Hasssan's *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* places the nouveau roman and the Theatre of the Absurd under the wing of postmodernism. Many other directions, such as deconstructivism and poststructuralism, have been associated, at that time, with Postmodernism.

In the Western world, the rise of Postmodernism is closely connected to the social and political context of the 60s and 70s: in the midst of the Cold War and on the background of a relative stability and prosperity, at the peaking of the baby boomers and of the Western capitalism and consumerism, the young generations are looking for new "freedoms" through the Hippie Movement, Sexual revolution, Marxism and other –isms, trying to challenge the traditional social and cultural codes and to change the establishment. There is no wonder, then, that the modernist literature and art are suddenly seen as "oppressive" and "totalitarian" and that new forms of expression are sought, often in great haste.

But, as the critics of the movement will later point out, the sudden break with modernism was not, in many cases, justified by an authentic leap in expression or message: it was more a "revolutionary" kind of leap, a demonstrative gesture, a supposedly radical break with tradition which will be, subsequently, reconsidered from more tempered positions.

Noam Chomsky, one of the critics of Postmodernism will argue the movement is meaningless, as it adds nothing to analytical and empirical



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knowledge. And another critic, William Lange Craig, will also deny its meaning, pointing that „People are not relativistic when it comes to matters of science, engineering, and technology; rather, they are relativistic and pluralistic in matters of religion and ethics. But, of course, that's not postmodernism; that's modernism!"[3]

**II. The First Postmodernism**

Criticism aside, the first Postmodernism (P1) that is referenced in the title of this essay is in fact what the Western world usually calls Postmodernism. Quoting Lyotard, Postmodernism is "lamenting the loss of meaning"[4], the de-narativisation of knowledge, the de-realization of the world, the collision among innumerable, heterogenous language games. Or, in the words of Ihab Hassan, the opposition between Transcendece and Immanence, between the Signified and the Signifier, the Metaphor and Metonymy, between Purpose and Play etc, etc.

Speaking of Ihab Hassan – and of postmodernism in general –, Hassan himself redefined his own terms and concepts several times, during his career. And I would point out an interesting quote from a 1999 interview with Ihab Hassan: "Once, I coined the term Indetermanence (indeterminacy cum immanence) to describe the ethos or impulse or style of Postmodernism. This was an insufficient description because, in the geopolitical context, Postmodernism does not only involve Indetermanences in Western cultures but also new relations between centers and margins, margins and margins, centers and centers, nowheres and nowheres (utopias?) of every kind. That's the emergent and tortuous syntax of localization/globalization."[5]

In conclusion, we will label this postmodernism (P1) "The Western Postmodernism", or "The Original Postmodernism"[6].

[3] Craig, William Lane, "God is Not Dead Yet", in *Christianity Today*, 3.07.2008

[4] Lyotard, J.-F., 1984, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (trans.), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 26

[5] Ihab Hassan, "Postmodernism etc", an interview by Frank L. Cioffi, Princeton University, http://www.ihabhassan.com/cioffi_interview_ihab_hassan.htm

[6] Of course, labeling the Western Postmodernism, *in corpore*, as a single unity is a simplification; there are many other Postmodernism within this "Original Postmodernism", but, when we move the point of view in the Eastern Europe, all the rivers, borders and nuances of the map tend to fade out, while the rivers, borders and nuances of the local



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## III. The Second Postmodernism

The Second Postmodernism that I'm referencing in the title of this essay is the Romanian Postmodernism – the translation of the Western Postmodernism of the 70s in a marginal space (in the terms of Hassan) and in a non-typical society: an authoritarian, socialist, and impoverished society at the far end of the spectrum – in complete opposition with the liberal, capitalist, and prosperous societies of the Western World.

What happens in Romania in the 1980s – and how is it possible for such a movement, that is synonymous with relativity and breaking with authority, to emerge within one of the most authoritarian Eastern Europe regimes?

First of all, a new generation of writers is emerging in the 80s; it is a generation coming after some very dark times – in the 50s the Romanian literature and culture had been brutally sent off course by the communists imposing the official discourse of the "social realism" to all the writers that haven't been previously sent to prison; then in the 60s and 70s, the arts and literature started to slowly come back to their previous, modernist course. But the arts were far from being free or "genuine" and the writers often sought to camouflage their message in sophisticated allegories and smart word plays. In reality, the writers were engaged in a complicated waltz with the regime, trying, on the one hand, to write on the topics and issues they thought important and, on the other hand, to negotiate and compromise with the Communist authorities in order to gain status or privileges.

### *III. 1. The "war banner" of Postmodernism*

The young writers of the 80s – as one Romanian literary historian points out[7] – were favored by some extraordinary circumstances. First of all, they went to high school in the 70s, when it was still possible to read uncensored Western literature; then, they came to the Faculty of Letters in Bucharest (many of them where philologist) where they met some benevolent and well-read professors and where it was still possible to read Western literature. And they formed strong friendships and alliances in the midst of a literary group called "Cenaclul de luni". Some of the young writers went on

phenomenon tend to become more and more visible. And this translation of the point of view is, in the end, the purpose of this article.

[7] Eugen Negrici, 2002, *Literatura română sub comunism*, vol. 2, București: Editura Fundației Pro, p. 402.



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writing poetry and prose, while others became influential literary critics, promoting and defending their common "war banner": Postmodernism.

Some of the prominent writers of this generation are Mircea Cărtărescu, Ion Bogdan Lefter, and Alexandu Mușina. They are at the same time poets and theoreticians and we find them, at the beginning of the 80s, fighting side by side under the banner of the Romanian Postmodernism. We will call them – given they ardor and militant passion – the three ministers of the Romanian Postmodernism.

We shall follow some of their first theoretical interventions on the subject, and then we shall observe the evolutions of their opinions during the next 10-15 years.

"After an average lifetime of a human being, 70 years of wearing the crown of supremacy, the Modernism is, we can all witness, dead and buried" – was triumphantly noting the young and brilliant poet Mircea Cărtărescu in 1985. "Its great peculiarities, the fragmentarity, the impersonal objectivity, the abstract metaphorical expression, the progressive language (highlighted by Hugo Friedrich, T.S. Eliot etc) start to become ill-suited for the most recent poetry. (…) We could gather all the tendencies of the contemporary poetry after a single generic term, within reach for everyone. We are, therefore, heading towards a wide postmodernism, generous, open, which could mean a regeneration of our poetry."[8]

The young poet Alexandru Mușina – a colleague of Mircea Cărtărescu within the famous "Cenaclul de luni", a literary circle that reunites most of the young poets of the 80s, between 1977 and 1983 –, noted in an article published in the same year (1985): "The poets of my generation moved the center of gravity of the discourse from the imaginary to the language, to the existence of the ordinary man, to his problems, to our daily problems. Here is the place where one can find, I guess, a genuine originality. We are no longer dealing with Modern poetry, as defined by Hugo Friederich, but with a postmodern poetry. This is a pretty major break, I think"[9].

Ion Bogdan Lefter advances a theory of a gradual advancement towards postmodernism that starts at the advent of modernism, in the 1920s:

[8] Mircea Cărtărescu, „Textualism, biografism, sincronie stilistică", in *Cronica*, 25/1985, p. 5 (all the Romanian quotes are translated by the author of this essay).

[9] Alexandru Mușina, 1985, "Șase teze și o addenda", in *Astra*, 12, pp. 8-9.



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"After Alexandru Macedonski the Romanian poetry becomes modernist; the Modernism becomes exhausted in the years 1960s and 1970s; with some visible roots even before WW2 and with more and more obvious symptoms in the 70s, we can see, in the Romanian literature, a transition towards «something else», towards a structure that succeeds Modernism and that we have called Postmodernism"[10].

### *III.2. Tree ministers and a guru*

In the initial "charge" of the postmodern theory we can see not only young poets – but also experienced literary critics and respected intellectuals. Nicolae Manolescu is one of the most respected critics of his time and also the leader of "Cenaclul de luni"; he steps in the debate, raising the war banner in the midst of his students: "Postmodernism is oligarchic and tolerant. It holds as essential the lyrical orientation, the intuitive and imaginative expression, but it doesn't follow the cult of the purity of the poetic blood, as Modernism does. Therefore, it isn't so elitist and difficult. It steps down in the street, it joins the protest. It is straightforward, not secretive, it is aggressive, persuasive, primitive, not prudent, musical, esoteric and enigmatical. It is, at the same time, ironic, histrionic, ludic and Asian. The Modernism was fundamentally «serious», Greek in spirit, it rarely played and it didn't love any kind of staging, because it didn't love the dialogue, but only the monologue, the confession"[11].

We can identify, therefore, two major ideas behind this "charge": 1st, we can notice a set of opposing features of Modernism (elitist, prudent, esoteric, enigmatical, secretive) and Postmodernism (tolerant, imaginative, straightforward, aggressive, ironic etc), very similar to what we find in Ihab Hassans's famous list, and 2nd, we can notice the clear idea that the existence of a Postmodern movement in the Romanian literature and culture is not only sustained as a theoretical hypothesis – it is argued as a fact.

We basically have two schematic representations, two simplified models presented to the general public (and to the fellow writers and philologists): 1st, we find a simplified opposition between Modernism and

[10] Ion Bogdan Lefter, „Secvenţe despre scrierea unui «roman de idei»", in *Caiete critice*, 1-2/1986, p. 148.

[11] Nicolae Manolescu, 1986, *"*Planeta ascunsă", in *O ușă abia întredeschisă*, *Teme*, vol. 6, București: Editura Cartea Românească, pp. 106-107.



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Postmodernism, where the latter is the undisputed champion (with all the desirable features on its side); 2nd, we find a visible cleavage of the literary history when at a precise point, between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the literary paradigm suddenly changes and a new movement comes and replaces the old one, almost as overnight.

***III. 3. A few heretics show their faces***

Interestingly enough, some of the original "ministers" will soon change their point of view – pretending not to be so convinced any more. Alexandru Mușina, the same young poet we have seen defending the Postmodernism of "the poets of his generation", will approach the VIP popular concept of the decade in a very different manner only one year later, in 1986:

"We should use the term «Postmodernism» in order to name phenomena that are specific to our contemporary literature that cannot be entirely equated with the Western models. This operation implies a rebuilding of the meanings, a theoretical reshaping that already has another 'biography' and another meaning in the Western world. But we shouldn't proceed before choosing between the following starting points – the Postmodernism refers to: a) a theoretical concept emerging from "Cenaclul de Luni"; b) a distinct generation of writers in the Romanian literature; c) a poetical state – the Postbelic stage – defined by a re-writing, in a different "key", of the models (types) of the poetry from between the two Great Wars; d) last, but not least, a certain way of writing prose consistent with Barth's and Pynchon's."

Thus, what Alexandru Mușina does is to warn of the danger of a semantic confusion: if we speak of a Romanian Postmodernism, we speak of a local phenomenon that borrows, in terms of exterior qualities and expression, some of the traits of the Western Postmodernism; but that's not the same as saying that the Romanian Postmodernism is one and the same thing as the Western Postmodernism; it is, in the best case scenario, an adaptation of a Western phenomenon to the local particularities and conditions.

"And still… Postmodernism at the Gates of the East", adds Mușina. How nice it sounds! What an extravagant, what an impossible story!"[12].

[12] In Astra, nr. 4, 1988 apud *Competiția continuă*, *Antologie alcătuită de G. Crăciun*, Pitești: Ed. Paralela 45, 1999, p. 441.



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But Alexandu Mușina is not the only skeptical mind, at the midst of the 80s. Some of the intellectuals of the older generations also join the debate, making strong objections. Monica Spiridon, for example, goes so far as saying – in 1986 – that Postmodernism is only a "Cultural Myth". I think it is also very important to know that Monica Spiridon is one of the few Romanian scholars that came into direct contact, in the 80s, with the American academic world and the American Postmodernism; in 1984 she had a scholarship at the Indiana University, Bloomington and at the University of California, Berkeley[13]. I will quote not just her intervention in the debate, but also Mircea Cărtărescu's comment from a book on the Romanian postmodernism published in 1999:

"Like some of the older critics which I referred to, Monica Spiridon sublimates, with irony and sarcasm, the fear in front of the postmodern challenge. The «real» existence of Postmodernism is denied from the outset (as real as the existence of the Avant-garde or Modernism): the whole debate is, after all, only about a cultural myth: «Postmodernism – which disturbs some people and irritate others – will be able to enter the dictionaries and the archive pages as a genuine cultural myth of the end of the millennium.»"[14]

The interesting fact is that, in the same book, Mircea Cărtărescu himself (we can consider Cărtărescu, together with I.B. Lefter, as the two remaining great "ministers" of the Romanian Postmodernism – after the "betrayal" of Alexandru Mușina) recognizes that the young writers of the 1980s were themselves shocked to discover they were actually postmodern writers:

"The appearance in the Romanian region of the concept of Postmodernism was therefore a shock to the writers of the 1980s, acting as a catalyst for their artistic identity. Vague self-defining intuitions («the adherence to reality», «the descent of poetry in the street», «the new sensibility») or mischievous («The Textual Engineering» – Mircea Nedelciu) are now embedded in a vast philosophical-aesthetic paradigm which suddenly gives them meaning and coherence; between 1984 and 1988 the authors of

[13] Monica Spiridon's academic CV can be consulted on the PEN Romania website: http://www.penromania.ro/?p=206#more-206

[14] Monica Spiridon, „Mitul ieşirii din criză", in *Caiete critice,* 1-2/1986., p. 78., apud Mircea Cărtărescu, 1999, *Postmodernismul românesc*, București: Editura Humanitas, p. 176.



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the 1980s find out that, in fact, they were writing postmodern literature – as the proverbial Monsieur Jourdain – without being aware of it."[15]

Nevertheless, Mircea Cărtărescu insists that the Postmodernism was a break with the Modernism tradition and, at the same time, a radical shift of civilization, after WW2; when he's speaking of the Romanian Postmodernism, he's always doing that with the larger picture in mind and he's insisting that the Romanian society was, in the 1980, in spite of the authoritarian regime and of the communist barrier – a part of the Western society and civilization:

"The central thesis of this study, namely the assertion that postmodernism is not only a stage in the evolution of artistic forms, not just a literary movement, but an *interruption* of that cultural order where the evolution of the forms and cultural currents was still possible, a "recovering" after the Modernist illusion, made possible by a change in civilization, and not just in the cultural field, is equally valid for the facts of artistic practice and for the theoretical endeavors; in the postmodern world the arts, the aesthetics, the artistic theory and criticism seem very different from their situation in European modernity, from the revolution of mentalities of the eighteenth century until after world War II."[16]

In conclusion, we shall label this Postmodernism (P2) "the militant Postmodernism" – or the Romanian Postmodernism of the 1980s.

**IV. The third Postmodernism**

In the 1990s, the voices of the heretics/challengers of the Romanian Postmodernism become louder and louder – and the group of the challengers is now supported by literary historians with great prestige and authority. There are several reasons to doubt the authenticity of the "war banner"– and genuineness of the Romanian postmodernism. There are two questions that return, over and over, on the lips of the intellectuals that belong mainly to two distinct groups: the philologists and professors of the more mature generation (the generation of Monica Spiridon) – and the former "ministers" of the "Postmodern" generation turned skeptical in the proximity of the Romanian revolution. The two questions are:

[15] *Ibidem*, p. 185.
[16] Mircea Cărtărescu, *op. cit*, p. 208.



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1. Can modernism be declared "burnt out" and "obsolete" in a national literature in only two decades? Such a "leap" could be admitted when everything has been done and re-done, but one must not forget that we are speaking of the Romanian literature of the 80s, closely regenerating after the "social realism" plague;

2. Can Postmodernism exist in the midst of an oppressive, totalitarian society that is neither "emancipated", nor "capitalist"? One must also keep in mind that we are speaking of the Communist Romania of Ceaușescu, one of the most oppressive country of Eastern Europe.

### *IV.1. Can Postmodernism exist in the midst of Communism?*

We shall start with the **second question**. At the beginning of the Millennium, Alexandru Mușina's discourse on the Romanian Postmodernism becomes ever more nuanced – and radical. The theoretician now speaks of a complete impossibility of having a true Romanian Postmodernism in the midst of Ceaușescu's regime:

"To talk about postmodernism in Romania seems exaggerated. And to speak, in the 80s, about a Romanian postmodernism was pure diversion. Or cowardice, schizophrenia, whatever you want to call it. Turks were besieging Constantinople, and the monks in the city were fighting over dogmatic issues; Ceaușescu was destroying the country, we were kept in cold, in darkness, we were being starved to death, and the intellectuals, the writers, instead of protesting, of thinking (as in the Czech Republic and Poland) of an alternative to the communist aberration, were discussing Postmodernism. They were Postmodern Communist supporters; Postmodern Romanian Communist Party members; we were being watched and being betrayed, we were afraid in a Postmodern way. Some decency, please – if you don't mind!

To pretend you didn't see what was happening around, to write in a Postmodern style in the midst of disaster, to write in the middle of a totalitarian Postmodernism a literature «with hidden meanings» is a way to postpone taking the blame by the Romanian (pseudo) elites. (...) And the West will treat us as interesting specimens of Third World writers, will say «yes, how curious, you were postmodern while you were trembling (with fear and cold), how nice, how nice»"![17]

### *IV.2. Can Postmodernism exist in the midst of a very young literature?*

[17] Alexandru Mușina, 2001, „În materie de poezie nu poți să știi ce vei scrie peste o săptămână, dacă vei mai scrie", in: Mihail Vakulovski, *Portret de grup cu generația 80*, București: Editura Tracus Arte.



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The **first question** also receives a radical answer – from a few very prestigious intellectuals. One of them is Eugen Negrici, one of the professors of the young writers of "Cenaclul de Luni", in the 1980s. In his very consistent *History of the Romanian Literature under Communism*[18] he states:

"And suddenly, in the early 80s, a literature like ours, where there are only a handful of prominent Balzacians, one great Realist writer and not even a true Proustian, where Baroque and Mannerist forms are very hard to find, in such a literature recently established and very young in its essence, suddenly everything started to stink of stale water and decay. A group of graduates of the Bucharest Philology Faculty (that have become, through a series of favorable circumstances, more and more influential) had the impression that, in the midst of a Communist regime, around the 1980s, after just 150 years of recorded history of fiction in the Romanian language and only two decades after the terrible social realism experience, all that had to be said was said and, for this literature, came that moment, at the end of the race, when you're tempted to review, with irony, how you ran and to make, in a mocking spirit, a few more steps beyond the finish line."[19]

According to Eugen Negrici, the real "cause" of the Romanian Postmodernism is not the wearing of the Modernist paradigm (a legitimate cause for the Western Postmodernism); the real cause is a little bit different in nature – and it has very much to do with the marginality and isolation of the Romanian culture in the 1980s:

"The prose writers, poets, essayists of the generation of the 1980 wrote and acted – creating, after a while, a strong current of opinion – as if they had felt the signs of the wearing of the modernist paradigm and had heard the great noise of some rusty mechanisms. Pretending that everything had been evolving in our literature (as in our society) as naturally as possible, and assuming their initiative corresponded to a well-defined internal dialectic, the writers who were called, after a while, "writers of the eighties" and, after a decade, "postmodernists" have turned upside down the forms of the Modernity that, in their eyes, seemed exhausted. (...)

In our special and unusual case, [these forms subordinated to the category of the intellectual playfulness] might be attributed to the philological formation of the poets and to the years they spent on a strange island of normality where they could move freely, protected by the most respected

[18] Eugen Negrici, 2002, *Literatura română sub comunism.* Vol. 2, *Proza*, București: Editura Fundației Pro.
[19] *Ibidem,* p. 401.



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literary critics of the country, who wanted a change (even stylistic, if not political) and thought these young writers could really bring that change."[20]

The specifics of the situation reside, therefore, in the fact that the young writers of the eighties were educated in a "greenhouse climate"; their impressions of the world were mediated by the literature they read (it was a luxury to read the *beatnics* in the heart of Communist Romania) and the pressure of the reality was diminished by the protection of this climate. And, while they enjoyed a very special freedom, their mentors were also following, through the success of these young writers, a particular agenda, a kind of "bet":

> "In the greenhouse climate prepared by their professors (who happened to be the same guys as these influential critics), enjoying full access to many new sources of information, familiarized with the movement of the aesthetic ideas and with the general state of the poetry of the world, the young writers of «Cenaclul de luni» could easily mimic normalcy and to count themselves as citizens of the world. They could, for example, allow themselves to feel synchronous and uninhibited and behave as such."[21]

### *IV.3. Not so sure any more*

The interesting fact is that, as the attention of the former "ministers" of Postmodernism shifts towards the issues of the post-1990 liberal and capitalist Romania and as they get involved in the cultural and political debates of the liberal, post-communist Romania, their perception of the Romanian Postmodernism tends to become more nuanced.

For example, Mircea Cărtărescu admits, in 2011, that the "group debuts" were a strategy used by the young writers of the 1980s in order to open corridors more easily in an otherwise crowded and suffocated market:

"The group debuts are, after all, a habit of the writers of the 1980. These writers accredited this way of making literature as a group, as a platoon or as a squad. In a small and busy literary world, as ours, a poet trying to make his debut on himself and who is set on a direction risks to go, many times, unnoticed. This is why a group debut was a strategy that worked under the circumstances of the1980s, i.e., under the circumstances of a strict control [by the Party] of the literature."[22]

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[20] Eugen Negrici, *op. cit.,* p. 402-403.

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 403.

[22] Mircea Cărtărescu, „Sunt un om format în cenaclu și care își trăiește viața în cenaclu", in: Mihail Vakulovski, *op.cit.*, p. 116.



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But what are the stakes of this strategy? Are the writers of the 1980s only following their personal glory? It seems not. It seems that they are trying to steer the Romanian literature and culture on the direction of the culture they most admire – the culture that has given their models, both for poetry and prose: this is, of course, the Postmodern American culture. Let us quote another passage from Mircea Cărtărescu's book on the Romanian postmodernism:

> "Perhaps a further clarification should be made: a commitment to the Postmodern world could mean the exit of the Romanian culture from the traditional Western European influences (French, German, etc.) and its orientation, for the first time in our national history, towards the North American culture, that is, nowadays, a true archetype of Postmodernity."[23]

Still, this is not the only masked or camouflaged stake. This signal – "we are steering towards America" – is not just a signal for "the inside" – we have chosen "the right side of history"; it is also a signal for the outside, for the Western world: Romania and the Romanian culture has chosen "the right side".

Finally, the ultimate victory in the fight between generations, the prevalence of the young generation over the old one is another stake: who is not a Postmodern is automatically obsolete, old-fashioned, worthless:

> "Another obvious feature of the Romanian Postmodernity is its cultural *ideological dimension*. Several participants noted that the debated term, far from being used genuinely, as a simple theoretical concept, was actually loaded with militant meanings. The distance between Modernism and Postmodernism was often exaggerated in order to mark a brutal rupture, «revolutionary» in nature (actually very similar to the Avant-garde movement) between the new generations and the old ones. «Postmodern» has come to mean either «a writer of the eighties» or «a writer of the ninties» or, simply, as Alexandru Musina noted, *a good writer* in the context of the current literature, while «Modernist» (equivalent to «a writer of the sixties» or «a writer of the seventies») is sometimes taken in the sense of *old-fashioned, old, worthless*. These idiosyncrasies are in themselves unfair and regrettable. But in the literary political game – that's as tough and ruthless as the «true» political game – they are inevitable, because the new movements need, beyond the actual artistic practice

[23] Mircea Cărtărescu, *Postmodernismul românesc*, ed.cit, p. 120.



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(never as radical as the theory goes), a quick affirmation, even simplistic, of a conspicuous identity."[24]

Finally, we can find two more statements, at the beginning of 2010, that shed a different light on Mircea Cărtărescu's approach of the Romanian Postmodernism. The affirmation that "the artistic practice is never as radical as the theory" finds an interesting echo in the affirmation that, in fact, the literature of the "writers of the 1980s" is not a "pure Postmodern literature":

"The writers of the 1980s are not pure postmodern poets, they are a synthesis of an older poetry, a Modernist poetry, in the spirit of T.S. Eliot, and a new poetry, a Postmodern one, that no longer suffers distances between subject and object, that transforms everything into a continuum."[25]

And, commenting on the "literary output" of his colleagues after 1990, Cărtărescu states: "The most visible trend of the writers of the eighties, today, is to make anthologies of their writings."

That means that, after 1990, most of the writers of the 1980s – although still young, at the peak of their creativity – are no longer writing anything. They make anthologies of what they have written before, in the 1980s.

If the Romanian Postmodernism peaking ten years before was a real "shift with the tradition", a real "revolutionary movement", and not a "war banner" used by a group of writers following political stakes (maybe these were noble stakes, in so far as they were opposed to the Communist regime, but were still political in nature) disguised as an aesthetic revolution, why aren't the most prominent writers of the group not trying to give their very best exactly when it seems their revolution is actually succeeding? Or could it be that the feeling of their triumph on the political battlefield, the dissolution of the old opponents is, in fact, so disarming, unexpected, and confusing that all their creative fuel runs out?

In conclusion – the second Postmodernism (P2) could also be called, in the light of the objections risen in the 1990, "utilitarian" or "political"; while we are going to call the third Postmodernism (P3), the Postmodernism of the 1990s, "the fading Postmodernism" or "the disillusioned Postmodernism".

**V. The metaphor of the island**

In order to have a better perspective of these successive shifts and fracture, we can build a metaphorical parallelism. A group of castaways arrive

[24] Mircea Cărtărescu, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

[25] Mircea Cărtărescu, „Sunt un om format în cenaclu și care își trăiește viața în cenaclu", in: *op.cit.*, p. 120.



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on a desert island. What's the first thing they are going to do after they make sure they have secured the basic conditions for survival (food, shelter and water)? They will start piling everything they find – wood, kindling, weeds – to build a big bonfire on the most visible place of the island. Then, the moment they see the smoke of a steamer on the horizon, they will jump to light the pyre – maybe someone will stand guard at all times, or maybe they will make their camp close to that pyre to be able to light the pyre as quickly as possible when the alarm signal is given.

Anyway, this means of communication will have, for the castaways, a symbolic meaning and a vital role – it's their only means to get in touch with the world, and the aim is to show the potential rescuers that they exist and, thus, to be observed and saved. The day-to-day life of the colony is centered around the pyre – and all the castaways are united around a single idea: that pyre should be maintained, increased, and, at the right time, set on fire. The construction of the pyre gives meaning to their existence and it is a means to structure a hierarchy within the group while defending the pyre from other groups that may have different approaches or visions. Furthermore, the existence of the pyre allows them to maintain hope and to dream of that day where they will go back to the civilized world – the world of comfort, of material and spiritual abundance, and, why not, of famous universities and prestigious prizes.

Now let’s suppose that, after a few years, their plan miraculously works out – and that a passing ship actually notices the fire – or the smoke – of the great pyre. Or, even more likely, their rescue is the result of an accident: the pyre was really lit, but a ship got there not because the sailors noticed the smoke, but because the island was much closer to a continent than the castaways thought and that ship came with the precise mission to prospect the island. Some of the castaways leave the island, but others, learning that the island is about to be colonized, decide to stay and go on with their lives on the island.

Several years have passed, and the island is now, if not a thriving colony, at least a somewhat comfortable colony. There are ships that constantly commute between the island and the mainland, and soon a bridge will be built, linking the island to the main land. It is true that the new world is very far from what the castaway hoped – they have found themselves carried away by a radical shift they had no control of. Some of them go on with their lives – and adapt to the new society. Others walk up and down, without finding any niche for them in the new world, or talk endlessly about the new world, about how it should be and how it actually is. But at the end of the day, the castaways spread in all directions, become almost invisible and



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anonymous – and they are no longer working side by side for a common cause, in a common project.

Their children also talk about the new world – but each of them has a different opinion, everyone sees things a little bit differently and believes that they should be done a little bit differently, so it's very hard to find a group larger than two to three individuals that is united by a common ideal and is able to function, as a group, for a long time.

**VI. Two generations of Romanian writers (1980 and 1990) facing The West**

Well, the writers of the 1980s, who try to signal the Western world through their congruent effort, under the flag of the aesthetic ideology of Postmodernism, and to send the message that "they exist" and they're not barbarians (Eastern Europeans marching under the banner of the Nationalist-Communist doctrine, led by the single party and by the Great Leader), at least not as far as their literature is concerned – are our castaways on the island.

The discovery of the island (a mere accidental one, we could say retrospectively) is the equivalent of the Revolutions in November-December 1989, that swept throughout Eastern Europe and that had put the social pendulum in motion – in some societies with a lower speed and a more uniform motion, in others (as in Romania), with a higher speed and a chaotic motion. And the dispersion of the castaways – and of their children, who are, in metaphorical terms, the writers of the 1990s and 2000 – is, on the one hand, the result of losing their common goal, and, on the other hand, the result of their absorption into the whirlpool of the social transformation over which the writers have no control whatsoever (not even an apparent leverage – as the leverage of building a pyre as a means of communication with potential "saviors" from the outside). And, when you cannot control reality, the only things you can do is to ignore it, to criticize it, or to describe it, on a spectrum where the extremes are more pronounced than the middle (i.e., either on a tragic tone, or on a parodic one).

The last two actions are specific actions of literature – but they do not automatically require an unity of purpose or a common direction. And what are the place and the role of literature in a society that is changing at breakneck speed? Action or ideological activism first, then meditation or reflection: it seems like a good slogan for a political transition such as the one that the Romanian society undergoes. This is, briefly, the context in which the writers who are carried away by this transition – and whose position is becoming more and more vulnerable, as the welfare state that was once supporting the role and the writer is eroded by the assault of the neoliberal ideology – lose their unity of purpose and direction; and, with that, they also lose their drive, their creative fuel.



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**VII. Conclusions**

We have discussed, up to this point, about a theory that's produced by a certain type of society (Capitalist, Consumerist) that becomes relevant for an entire generation of writers within the alien context of a completely different type of society: the Communist Romania of the 80s, a "negative reflection" of the original point of emergence of the Postmodern theory.

What is Postmodernism in the 80s, for the young Romanian writers? It is:

1. An aesthetic theory "borrowed" from the West – where the Western Postmodernism, the (P1) Original Postmodernism or the First Postmodernism emerges;
2. Something much more than a theory: a "war banner" for the young generation, and for a few respected senior intellectuals;
3. A form of change (of the literary expression, if not of the political context);
4. An ideology and a weapon used in the inter-generational wars (he who is not Postmodern is old, obsolete etc);
5. The symbol of a common aspiration – towards the "Western normality".

I labeled this Postmodernism (P2) "the militant Postmodernism"; the "utilitarian" or "political" Postmodernism – or the Romanian Postmodernism of the 1980s.

Ten years later, the same theory that had united the previous generation is being challenged, blemished and then forgotten. But the emotional blemishing is atypical: and the real enemy doesn't seem to be the Postmodern theory, but the theory in a given, peripheral and atypical context.

While crossing the bridge between these two generations, the Postmodern theory (P2) becomes unnecessary and some of the writers and intellectuals start to see the Romanian Postmodernism more like the thing it really was: an ideology used by an emerging generation in

(1) an attempt to bring a sudden change in the aesthetic paradigm; but also to

(2) occupy the center of the literary world.

I labeled this Postmodernism (P3) "the fading Postmodernism" or "the disillusioned Postmodernism".

Therefore, I think we actually speak of three theories and historical phenomena, and not about just one unitary theory and phenomenon; we speak of three very different Postmodern theories, **three Postmodernisms**, two of which have been radically restructured by the peripheral context of the Romanian Communist (P2) and Post-communist (P3) society.

And the main cause that produced these fractures is partly related to the peripheral context, and partly to the sudden shift that takes place, in the



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1990s, within this peripheral context, and partly related to the "weaponizing" of Postmodernism in the inter-generational competition.

**VIII. A few conclusions after the concluding section**

In the interview I quoted at the beginning of this essay Isab Hassan – the scholar who started the whole debate over Postmodernism in literature – also stated:

"Certain topics or problems or figures, however, do run from Romanticism, through Modernism, to Postmodernism, mutating all the while. For instance, Romantic Imagination becomes Modernist Consciousness becomes Postmodernist Language – from Imagination to Language, as master tropes. And the Romantic Self becomes the Modernist Ego becomes the Postmodernist empty Subject, itself a Discourse. But these are largely French conceits: try to tell the Self or the Ego or the Subject or your child, for that matter, that its imperious needs are a form of absence, dissemination, or deferral."[26]

In a certain way, we can therefore say that Romanticism has never ended – and that we all live in a prolonged Romanticism, or we all are "belated" romantics. If this is the case, Postmodernism can be seen as a convenient ideology and "war banner" not only for the Romanian communist and post-communist writers; it can be seen as "war banner" for the Western cultural wars, as well.

One of the consequences of this observation may be that the gap between the periphery and the center is not so wide as it is commonly described; and these two spaces are not so radically different, after all.

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[26] Ihab Hassan, *op. cit.*



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