

Vitalie Ciobanu

NEW LITERATURE IN MOLDOVA IN 2018

Moldova, a country that was subjected by and made part of the Soviet Union, is largely populated by ethnic Romanians and uses Romanian as the official language. At least in the early 1990s (shortly after the declaration of independence from the USSR), the evolution of literature went hand-in-hand with democratization of Moldova and the transition to a new socio-cultural paradigm. Yet, too soon two realities – cultural and political – came into contradiction. The Moldovan state increasingly acquired features of a mafia state led by oligarchic clans that merely pretend to aspire to European integration. In reality though, they aim more towards Putin's Russian authoritarian model. Nonetheless, literature followed its own path, increasingly following in the spirit of literature in Romania and European aesthetic models.

The new generation of Basarabian writers, who belong to the generation of 1980s and even younger generation carry the vision of reformation. The coming of age of this nonconformist generation occurred in the context of freedom and free exchange of ideas. From this point of view, the privilege that young writers of the 1980s generation enjoy is uncontested with their predecessors. Young writers present more advanced sensibility that is seen as postmodern.

The last two decades of literary development in Moldova are marked by critical reassessment and polemics between the postmodern and some “tribune-writers” from Moldova, with medals and state awards who sometimes respond quite violently and excessively to cultural debate. The polemic was also inadequately called intergenerational struggle and resonated widely in the media. It's actually a conflict between two different mentalities: the open-minded, European, and the dated, autarchic that seems to be stuck in the period of 1989–1991, hostile to the international models, denying “the synchronization at all cost with Romania and Europe”. In some cases, there is also the issue of a conflict between biographies.

The magazine *Contrafort*, founded in October 1994, represents aesthetically and ideologically the agenda of the new generation of authors in Moldova. Its

mission is to revive the critical spirit as opposed to that deformed by the decades of Soviet ideology, intoxicated with false values, blocked in mental inertia and provincialism. The magazine also aims to develop an authentic civil society.

The year 2018 was rich in book releases by authors from the new reforming generation who featured in *Contrafort*. A number of books of poetry and essay collections, and especially prose, have attracted the interest among critics and enjoyed popular success. The following part presents a few additional authors who tackle in their narratives current themes, as well as preoccupations related to human fate in the confusing age of transition.

Iulian Ciocan (born in 1968), literary critic, novelist and journalist at Radio Free Europe, published the novel *The Cup Lady* (Polirom Publishing House, Iași). It is a story of the fallout of a community, of a city, Chisinau (the capital of the Republic of Moldova), under the burden of corruption, lies, duplicity, hypocrisy, cruelty against the weaker and the helpless. The gap that opens overnight in the downtown (metaphysical projection), consumes cars, walls, gardens, houses, and parking lots. People also disappear without trace. It is a parable about guilt and punishment. Ciocan leaves the story open-ended and invites readers to think about the chances to salvage whatever can be redeemed.

Ciocan has specialized in dystopias. Three years earlier, in 2015, he published the novel *And Russians Will Come in the Morning*, where he presents a horror scenario: in a not so distant future, 2020, the Republic of Moldova is attacked by the separatist regime in Transnistria, aided by the Russian Federation; the Moldovan state collapses. The plane with which the corrupt leaders of Moldova attempt to escape the invasion is destroyed by Russian missile; convoys of refugees flee towards the river Prut to Romania; cities are destroyed everywhere, villages are emptied, pandemonium is omnipresent, gangs of criminals roam in the streets.

This scenario is not quite fictional: it did actually happen in 1940, when, following the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, USSR attacked Romania (the same way it attacked the Baltic States). It occupied Basarabia and North of Bucovina – Romanian territories – after the USSR participated with Nazi Germany, in September 1939 in the dismemberment of Poland. Ciocan's dystopia warns that, unless we learn our lessons, history has the habit to repeat itself, and not necessarily as a farce. Ciocan invites readers to think about the power of fiction to challenge the reality, particularly after the annexation of Crimea by Putin's vengeful Russia in March 2014, and the start of the war in Donbas.

Constantin Cheianu (born in 1959), playwright, journalist and television producer, published the novel *Cioran's Last Mistress* (Cartier Publishing House, Chisinau) about existential crisis. The protagonist is a chef who has an opportunity to cook in his restaurant for all sorts of people – from intellectuals and free artists to mobsters and different interlopers. His kitchen is a sort of observation tower, from where he studies physiognomies, characters, contemplates enamored couples and

extravagant get-togethers of political figures. The role model of the lead protagonist is the famous Anthony Bourdain, master chef and producer of documentaries for CNN, celebrity of American high-life, from whose book, *Kitchen Confidential*, the protagonist extracts life lessons.

Cheianu's storyline refers to the idea of suicide, an obsession of the protagonist. In this context, Emil Cioran is quoted as someone who also inspired the title of the book. The theory of the Romanian philosopher exiled to Paris, famous for his incurable scepticism and paradoxical thought, suggests that suicide, as seen as a supreme act of individual freedom, helps overcome one's despair, anxieties, phobias, it helps one go further. As long as one can commit such act anytime, everything is at his or her disposal. Next to Thanatos, Eros occupies an important place in the novel. Sex scenes, passionate and explicit, are a demonstration of expressiveness that only few readers are able to face.

2018 saw an emergence of a number of gifted voices in feminine prose from Moldova. The novel *End of Road* by Liliana Corobca (born in 1975), released by Polirom Publishing House in Iași, presents the drama of the Stalinist deportations that Moldova suffered during the Soviet occupation in 1940 and later after World War II. An 80-year old lady tells her niece about the inferno of her exile in the steppes of Kazakhstan. Long journey by train in a cattle wagon, where she was put along with thousands of innocent people arrested by the Russian NKVD only because they were Romanians. She spent ten years in the steppes of Asia during the war and famine, yet her faith in God and hope that she would survive and return home gave her the power to endure the testing ordeal.

A novel is based on real events, on an experience multiplied in hundreds of thousands of families in Moldova, who suffered from Soviet Communism. Preoccupied in her previous narratives by the children who became victims of the exodus, a plague that has hit brutally the Moldovan society within the last years, and also concerned by the literary censorship from the Soviet era, Liliana Corobca proves in *End of Road* her passion for elaborate and emotional historical recollections.

Tatiana Țibuleac (born in 1978) is a former journalist, living in France, where she found her vocation as a writer. The two novels that she has published so far show her as a distinct, vigorous author, who prefers difficult themes, through which she reveals the relationship between parents and children, and also the uncertain trajectory of some women who have to face, at a very young age, the hardship and injustice of life.

After her first novel, *The Summer in Which My Mother Had Green Eyes* (Cartier Publishing House, 2018), Tatiana Țibuleac published her novel *The Glass Garden* (also at Cartier). Gabriela Adamesteanu, an acclaimed prose writer from Romania, characterizes the book by her younger colleague: "The orphan who discovers the multicultural Chisinau was adopted from a village orphanage by a solitary and

ambitious woman who wants to give her prosperous future, or perhaps she was bought as labor force and is exploited as cruelly as in Dickens novels? The questions continue to haunt us even after reading this coming-of-age novel about a girl who grows up between two languages and cultures, during the years when frontiers and the political systems change. *The Glass Garden* confirms the entering into contemporary literature of a writer both gifted and intelligent, who knows how to combine the cruelty of observation and the compassion with suffering, revealing the tragedy of destinies and the beauty of life.

The debut in the prose of the year 2018 is signed by Emanuela Iurkin (born in 1980), with the novel *The Bronze Dog*. Authenticity is the best description of Iurkin's epic vision and style. A miniature novel, in which the distance between life experience and its written projection is utterly reduced. The text is nervous, hurried, anxious, frustrated, as it were to imitate the uneven breathing of a teenager who walks up and down the stairs. The story comprises several confessions about an unhappy family, with a father who abandons them, starts a life with another woman, the mother goes to work in a foreign country, the teenager-children, forgotten at home, learning to manage their living by themselves, in an indifferent, rapacious, mercantile, insensible world. The book also has many cultural references to films and popular works. It is also textualist, as Iurkin clearly shows that the text is a work-in-progress.

The lyrical character says: "It has no name or it cannot be named. You understand what it is about. And the name is just a word. Silence is everything. I wish you would hear me. I cannot say some things aloud. They don't let themselves to be told. It only happens if you have developed your hearing."

Moldova in 2018 saw the presence of a number of fine authors worthy to be explored and translated elsewhere in Europe.