

**"BABEȘ-BOLYAI" UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA, ROMANIA
FACULTY OF LETTERS**

Doctoral Dissertation Abstract

Claudiu Turcuș, *Norman Manea – Alternatives to a portrait*

Key Words:

Norman Manea, Romanian Post-War Literature, Exile, Subversion, Esthetic, Ethics, Testimonial Pact, Holocaust, Gulag, "The Obsessive Decade", Non-Epic Narratives, Fictional Autobiography, Memoir, Compulsory Happiness, Judaism, Augustus The Fool, Burlesque, Censorship, Alienation, Eastern European Discourse.

Sometimes, revisions can be euphoric. Having almost become a genre in the time of Eugen Lovinescu, they came to dominate the national cultural landscape in the first decade after the Revolution of 1989. Nevertheless, even if the author of *Footsteps in the Sand* conceived of revision as a redressing of the critical spirit reevaluating with emphasis the validity of its own esthetic judgments, the Romanian transition towards democracy often particularizes an informed type of revisionism. Naturally, the disappearance of a single center of influence has generated a dispute regarding the redistribution of power, revision being utilized as a moral-axiological strategy in the agendas of various cultural politics. Two essential aspects of this occurrence are *est-hetic* radicalism and the generation-based pretext. In short, while under communism the collaboration of writers with the dictatorial system constituted a justification of the recontextualization of Romanian literature, the recuperation of "postbelic" marginal literary trends (the Târgoviște School, oneiricism, textualism) afterwards, by the Eighties generation, represented the recreation of an esthetic hierarchy. Though having their own marked importance in that epoch, these recuperations have proved partially inconclusive, since a double standard compromised an important part of their well-intentioned attempts. While these recuperations have established themselves as professional projects, they have usually failed to take a broad perspective of the literary landscape. Failing to become part of one of the two previously mentioned categories – for he was neither a canonical "duplicitous" writer whose work was to be contested, nor a marginal writer whose work needed to be recuperated as, for example, Radu Petrescu demanded – Norman Manea has suffered the consequences of a form of Byzantine revisionism even if, or perhaps especially since he himself proposed an alternative, non-euphoric type of revisionism (as his famous essay on Mircea Eliade's *Memoirs* proves). His works being reedited only sporadically in the nineties, the writer of the *Black Envelope* came to no longer be read and became simply a figure to be contested. Indeed, only after 2000 was his literary status

reconsidered through an effective probing of his works. Nevertheless, the stereotypes according to which the lack of style/talent prevents Manea from achieving the status of a great prose writer and, more importantly, the certitude of certain detractors who claim that Manea has become famous because of his ethnic background, continue to foster provincial perspectives, which continue to be cultivated to the detriment of authentic experiences of reading. In fact, the ethic-methodologic motivations of this study originate from the precise acknowledgement deriving of this fact, namely that, regardless of taste or horizon of expectations, a writer must be “confronted” on his own terms. This is the primordial rule that the critic, if he can call himself that, must always respect. Such terms ensure the full and complete legitimacy not only of admiration or sympathetic scrutiny, but also of the disavowal of reputations, should such disavowals be demanded by the quality of the work.

Taken in its full context, the bibliography of the reception of Manea’s work consists of more than six hundred articles and studies (penned in Romanian, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and in other languages of smaller circulation). Of course, given such breadth of material and affirming that the works of the writer represent an insufficiently explored terrain, the risk of quantitative distortion arises. However, despite the numerous critical contributions – from Lucian Raicu, Mircea Iorgulescu, Liviu Petrescu, Paul Georgescu, Ovid S. Crohmăniceanu, to Paul Bailey, Robert Boyers, Reginald Gibbons, Antonio Tabucchi, Claudio Margis, Matei Călinescu, Ion Simuț, Carmen Mușat, and Paul Cernat – a systematic analysis of Norman Manea’s work is lacking. If it is true that much has been written about the author of *The Black Envelope*, it is also true that what has been written has been fragmentary. The first group of aforementioned critics has inherently focused on the Bucharest works (from the 1966-1986 period), while the second group has focused almost exclusively on the books published after the New York exile. In any case, in the European and American space, the works published before 1979 are simply unknown, *October Eight O’Clock* (1981) and *The Black Envelope* (1986) being the only works that having been translated into other languages.

Given this, my research proposes two objectives for itself. A first objective is to provide a *unified interpretation of the oeuvre* of Norman Manea (**The Esthetic**) by means of systematic collation of his narrative poetics, his vision of the world, and of thematic or stylistic nodes of recurrence – an interpretation examining both creative periods, the Romanian and American. In this case, the chronologic approach allows for an examination of the processes of morphologic change and of the imaginations’ own points of inflection. The first chapter of my dissertation (**Happenings in a Ruined Reality**) includes a study of the pre-1981 novels and prose, which focus on the preservation of a humaneness threatened by a

crude atrophication and mortification. The beginning section of the chapter examines the reception of the first work, giving contours to the narrative byways of a lost childhood, recuperated in the present through a regenerated affective memory, a narrative to which Manea would return in his later volumes of short stories. This section also examines the vaguely-biographic absurdist imagination of a vulnerable young-adulthood, which is lengthened and reworked in Manea's novels. The next three sections attempt to circumscribe the particular retractile subversion specific to Norman Manea, by focusing successively on the three foci of epic: the narratological – often imbued with the technical obscurity of the new French novel; the thematic – emphasizing failure/ineffectuality as a strategy of defense against the dispossession of the self; and the psycho-stylistic – a carnivalizing burlesque of conscience that parodies the totalitarian circus. The novel *The Days and Game* brings to the fore an interlude of normalcy, the protagonist discovering the apolitical matter-of-factness of existence (the erotic game and the maternal candor), but only in the space of this one text, since *October Eight O'Clock* obsessively takes up again the happenings of a ruined reality. The second chapter (**The Socialist Reality Sans Socialist Realism**) underscores the epic transition from a traumatized, individual, alienated choice towards an insupportable, absurd social choice that marks both the youth and maturity of the protagonist. A veritable anti-novel of the obsessive decade, *The Apprenticeship Years of Augustus the Fool* reevaluates Manea's view of Romanian Stalinism through an archetypal outline of the condition of the artist under totalitarianism, while *The Black Envelope* represents a virulent, jagged Joycean allegory of the socialist quotidian dominated by suspicion and surveillance. The chapter **The (Im)Possible Return** examines the problematizing of the (auto)biographical as it is instituted in the novels of exile (*The Hooligan's Return* and *The Lair*), the testimonial pact and the biographic rendering of fiction representing two fundamental concepts without which the metamorphosis of Norman Manea's works escapes systematization. Similarly, the analysis of the 1986 novel, *On the Edge* – a veritable panorama of the state of Romanian prose-writing in the eighties, seeking to unpack intimate cultural inferences by means of essays on Musil, Canetti, Sabato, and Thomas Mann – demonstrates yet again, through its subtle connection to the memoir influenced *Envelopes and Portraits*, that the originality of the imaginary universe of Norman Manea issues from a profound sense of conjunction between reflections of literature, the exploration of biographical memory, and the acute need to relate to alterity. The novel evokes, from the perspective of an exile, the physical features of close friends, most of whom have passed into unbeing.

The project's second objective is the contextualization of certain types of ethical discourse, which have generated hostile remarks in the press both in the last decade of the

communist dictatorship and after 1990. The three polemical controversies, brought about by Manea's interview in *The Family* (1981), and by his essays (*Felix Culpa* (1992) and *The Incompatibilities* (1998)) are examined by means of a socio-ideologic analysis (**The Inopportune Archive**), followed by a commentary on the narrative essays *On Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist*, in the chapter **The Separation from Totalitarianism**. The latter work, *On Clowns*, is read both as an example of the configuration of an ethical profile and as a work that is symptomatic of the sign-posting of identity that Norman Manea performs. The unpacking of these tensioned relationships that have, in part, promoted the confused reception of Manea's work in the Romanian cultural space, marks the second step of the circumscribing of Norman Manea's complex portrait, composed as it is, from multiple artistic, esthetic, ethical, and dialogic choices.

George Călinescu pointed out almost a century ago that, unlike cultural history, literary history must be "a history of values." By the nature of its form, a monograph oversteps this injunction, since, through its dedication to specificity, such a work finds itself having to consign to paper not only valuable acts, but also relevant acts, and sometimes even marginal ones. Despite this necessity, the critic has the duty to examine the subject matter (more precisely, a protean creative subjectivity) in the greatest depth so as to later distance himself from it. An exhausting dynamic, but an imperiously necessary one for the opening out of the cultural viewpoint towards an axiologic perspective. Approaching Norman Manea's writings from a historic, morphologic, sociologic, esthetic, and socio-ideological point of view, I have tried to maintain an equilibrium between a healthy skepticism of methods, the inclination towards disassociation, and the temptation of stylistic effects, fully convinced, as Cioran writes, that I have "no convictions besides those of not knowing anything in great depth."

If at the beginning of my research I sought to divulge one of the significant deficiencies of the reception of Norman Manea's works in the post-revolutionary Romanian space – the contesting of Manea's works based on the belief, unsubstantiated by close reading, that the writer lacks the necessary "certificate of talent" – in the course of my elaboration of this study I have also detected the risk of the insinuation of another interpretative obstacle. Many of the professional studies with which I tried to enter into dialogue, became stymied through their comparative capacity for circumscription – with no alternative – of the proximate category in which the Romanian writer integrated himself. Unfortunately, most of these latter works being short commentaries (articles, essays), the specific difference between Manea and his contemporaries remained undefined, and sometimes even metonymically identified with the respective proximate category. Moreover,

no matter how fragmentary or to the point such critical interventions were, it seemed as though everything had been said about Norman Manea. Remarking upon a certain ease of cataloguing, Robert Boyers similarly declared himself unsatisfied with the inflation of too-encompassing syntagms: “But what comprehensive statement will we dare to make about Norman Manea? [...] The established line of this writer is at once useful and misleading. Ought we to think of him as a writer defined by the exercise of “conscience?” Is he, in the end, one of the many gifted contributors to what is called “the literature of totalitarianism.” Or is he, as has been said, one of “the great poets of catastrophe” and thus fit to stand alongside predecessors like Kafka or Bruno Schulz, or even Paul Celan. The trouble with such analogies and formulas and definitions is that they are tempting.”¹ Naturally, a fitting question is not only that of the adequacy of such statements; more importantly, there arises the question of the precise depths probed by such statements. On the surface, they seem memorable, fit to deck the covers of Manea’s books, since, through their *chapeau* relevance, they create a sense of expectancy in the reader. Though they do not manage to get at the specific qualities of the writer, they nevertheless create a powerful sense of being representative. On the other hand, the exhausting analytical effort caused by a critical confrontation with the effective reality of Manea’s work, destabilizes any synthetic certainties. The relativizing instinct becomes the natural manner of observation, the recourse to skepticism towards the undertaken critical reformulation conferring to the process the necessary dose of prudence, demanded, as it is, by the very polymorphism of Norman Manea’s writings.

Stretched out across half a century, his literary, essayist, and memoir opus can be visually rendered with the help of a chiasmic structure. If in the Greek and Hebrew literary antiquity (*The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, the mythological and prophetic texts of The Old Testament – *Genesis*, for example, *The Book of Judges*, *The Book of Joel*, *The Book of Habakkuk*) the chiasm provides a skeletal structure for narration or articulates a form of argumentation (as is the case in the Pauline epistles of The New Testament – *Romans*, *Corinthians*, *Hebrews*), thus positioning itself, a principle of symmetry in modernity, the rhetorical figure accentuates the ontological fragmentation that reinforces the need for order. Thus, from a *teleological* structure, meant to camouflage the Saussurian division of signified and signifier, the chiasmus becomes a *morphological* structure, revealing the existential-textual rupture, as well as the lines of its coherence. Even though Norman Manea does not utilize it as a lexical building block, the chiasmus – understood not as a mechanism of

¹ This fragment is part of a speech given by Professor Robert Boyers, of Skidmore College, on the occasion of the colloquium dedicated to Norman Manea, organized by ICR and Bard College on June 27-28, 2011, in New York City.

contradictory dialectics (as is the case in the work of Miguel de Unamuno), but as a dialogical representation (in the Bakhtinian sense) – can function as a critical support for a better understanding of the complexity of Manea’s work. Simplifying, so as to create a visual rendering, the works of the author can be assembled in this manner:

A. *The Captives* (1970)

B. *The Atrium* (1977)

C. *The Days and Game* (1977)

D. *On the Edge* (1986)

E. *Night on the Long Edge* (1969); *The First Gates* (1975);
October Eight O’Clock (1981); *The Book of the Son* (1976)

F. *The Apprenticeship Years of Augustus the Fool* (1979)

X. *The Black Envelope* (1986)

F1. *Compulsory Happiness* (1999); *On Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist* (1992)

E1. *The Hooligan’s Return* (2003)

D1. *Envelopes and Portraits* (2004); *The Black Milk* (2009)

C1. *Before Parting – Conversation with Saul Bellow* (2008);
Eastern Messenger: Dialog with Edward Kanterian (2010)

B1. *The Desk-Drawers of Exile – Dialogue with Leon Volovici* (2008)

A1. *The Lair* (2009)

The relevance of such a parallelism is not of structuralist provenance. It has, in my study, a synthetic, not analytic function; it follows the interpretative attempt, rather than defining it; it has a retrospective nature and in no case a prospective one. Thus, my work is defined not by a derivation of the interpretation from a schema, nor by the derivation of a schema (in no way original, since it existed in antiquity) from an interpretation, but rather by the ulterior application of an adequate pattern (rather iconic) to the investigation, for the purpose of circumscribing the morpho-dialogical network of Norman Manea’s writings. *The Black Envelope* represents the point of inflexion. After the long travail of this novel’s publication, the writer leaves Romania, assuming the not at all comfortable status of an exile. If to this situation we add the detail of his linguistic fidelity, it becomes clear that the decision to emigrate was not taken without turmoil. Conscious that the form of *The Black Envelope* was drastically altered by bartering with the censure organs, Manea would rewrite the novel (for the American edition, published in 1995, similar to the Romanian edition of 1996). This rewriting equals a fundamental stylistic metamorphosis, generated both by the lack of ideological constraints, and more importantly, by the assimilation of a somewhat more

transitory (though not simpler) perspective of the world, brought about by contact with the American environment. Unlike in the case Paul Goma or Bujor Nedelcovici, the narrative art of Norman Manea has not suffered in exile, but, on the contrary, has benefitted from the writer's inspired readaptation. The fact that it has become more accessible has not diminished its subtlety, only its hypercodification. *The Black Envelope* constitutes a powerful "fresco" of Romanian socialism, acting at the dead center of this redeeming process, which is then prolonged in *Compulsory Happiness*. The veiled criticism of the politicization of life/literature in the aforementioned books, becomes a criticism of totalitarianism in the volume *On Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist*. The second foci of this study includes the discourse of memory, which has been recovered through a fictive pact – *Night on the Long Edge*, *The First Gates*, *October Eight O'Clock*, *The Book of the Son* – and is perfected in a testimonial pact, autobiographically marked in *The Hooligan's Return*, though without the exhibitionism of subjectivity. The volume of literary criticism *On the Edge* is a companion piece, written twenty years later, a *Black Milk*, the writing on others' books a complement to the autobiographical chronicles of *Envelopes and Portraits*. The interlude of normalcy discovered by the narrator of the novel *The Days and Game* by means of submergence into the weighty quotidian of the 60s finds its pair in the fecund normalcy of the dialogue *Before Parting* (2008) and in *Messenger from the East* (2010). The discourse of identity performed in the correspondence with Leon Volovici (collected in *The Desk Drawers of Exile*) alludes to the solitariness of the (de)formation of age investigated in *Atrium*, and the panting psychological imprisonment of *The Captives*, which is transformed in *The Lair* into a bookish captivity, haunted by the vitalist nightmare of aging.

Opting for a literature that sublimates the preexistent senses in favor of a surprising immediacy that is independent of any overarching explicative discourse, Norman Manea remains reticent in the face of any narrative reality derived from exterior meanings. Without capturing *an occurrence*, in the traditional sense, his novels/novellas written prior to 1986 are non-epic. The representation of latencies, of the potentialities of a disappointed, defeated humanity now decrepit, of the intermittent states of exterior focalization followed by the reabsorption of the narrator into the discontinuous, fragmentary, amorphous murmuring of textual reality outlines a veritable poetics of obscurity. The manifest put forth in Manea's first novel, *The Captives*, restated more even-handedly two decades later in *The Black Envelope* (where the abyssal symbolical-discursive weave gives form to the narrative), this type of artistic, experimental communication highlights the pulverization of a language rather than its inconsistency. From this perspective, even the eventual artistic failure must be motivated, since it is not the presence of obscurity that lessens the esthetic value but its insufficient elaboration.

A circumspection regarding definitive literary cohesions is preserved even in American exile, where, instead, we are faced with Manea's preeminent *poetry of maturity*. Diagnostician of his own memory, rather than canonic memorialist, in *The Hooligan's Return* Norman Manea reinstitutes the *subject* of a *de-subjectivization*, his writing containing traces of life, as any testament that transcribes the vision of one who no longer is ought to do. The germination of his escape from the obscurities of conscience had naturally taken place beforehand, in a strictly fictional context. The traumatized voice of the meta-character in *October Eight O'Clock*, a character who is placed in a strange rapport to his fellow men and in an intimate relation with inhuman objects, in a relation that is slowly fed by a lucid, even reflexive consciousness, marks the novellas with the effect of biographical impersonation. This, of course, does not compromise the subjectivity of the perspective, it only makes it subject to a question of indeterminacy. In this potential novel of the preservation of humanity, the collapse of anthropocentrism gives birth to a redeeming *altercentrism*, the individual managing to survive a ruined reality through another. Similarly, the discrete sufferer of illusions, Augustus the Fool from *The Apprenticeship Years*, finds solidarity with "the day's defeated," obligated as he is, by a history of dysfunction, to convert the incompatibility between his own (camouflaged) graveness and a form of burlesque parody, which is rendered theatrically. *A poetry of otherness*, in fact, ties the three projects of the writer together: the fiction, the memoir, and the essay. In the critical essays in *On the Edge* and in the autobiographical fragments of *Envelopes and Portraits*, books and people make up a veritable intellectual-artistic genealogy, the solitude imposed by the acts of creation and reflection alternating with a human-intellectual solidarity with others. The emphatic rapport to otherness does not, however, provide an anecdote against loneliness. Rather, it functions as a complementary way of understanding one's own interiority. It is, simultaneously, also a means of recuperating the individual who is often lost under the boot-sole of social, ideological and communal conditions, since, for Manea, the intimate circuit of *communion* constitutes a reversal of flattening *commodification* of the human being.

The sinuous movement from obscurity towards witnessing, based in a strong awareness of otherness, does not modify the writer's view of the world. It simply gives new dimensions to his perspective. The kaleidoscopic sublimation of his own mechanisms of writing remains constant. A clarity of writing manifests itself exclusively in the narrative essays of *On Clowns*, in which literature continues to represent a field of tensions and hybridizations. The biographical rendering of the fictive pact in a novel like *The Lair*, the distrust of the autobiographical pact, which, in *October Eight O'Clock* and *The Apprenticeship Years* is thought to be irrelevant, is replaced with the witness pact in *The Hooligan's Return*, marking a

subjacent, skeptical, problematized ethic. Manea is perturbed not only by the crisis of representation, but also by the effort of the infinitesimal assimilation of existence. The apparent analytic form of writing and the disconcerting decomposition of meanings reinstates the absurdity of a centrifugal, viscous, larval inner world, as well as the farces of biography and the traps of traumatic memory – revelations which are not new in a late modernism that has been defeated and regenerated along the long Sisyphean process of obsessive contemplation, of useless, flayed elucidations. The exhausting strategy of the creative process, whose weight is similarly borne by the reader – the strategy of lucidly, somehow simultaneously, altogether with delicate emphasis bringing to light both of the points of perception of the human – remains, however, unknown: the critical, ironic, burlesque perspective that portrays the alienated, even mechanomorphic social being, and also, from the opposite, complementary perspective, the emphatic, nostalgic, affectionate being derived from the interrupted, vague flux of a disturbing consciousness.

As essayist and public intellectual, Norman Manea is set apart by the ethic implicit in his aesthetics, an ethic reflected in the social order as a civic reaction. The author of *The First Gates*, defeats his skepticism of rhetoric, as pronounced as it might be, though both the complaint against the minimum sense of normalcy under the totalitarianism of Ceaușescu, and, after 1990, the denouncing of the ethical-social incompatibilities of the national “interbelic” elite were vehemently silenced. Adherent in the Byzantine cultural medium, discretely subversive and trenchant, a penetrating critic of all and any radicalisms, Norman Manea remains an apolitical writer, not as a dissident, but in the sense which George Konrad gave to a term that can be situated in the line of descent of East-Central European skepticism, described by Vaclav Havel in his famous *Anatomy of Reticence*.

A retractile Herzog, of solid Humboldtian tenacity, an Athenian chronicler of the minute, abandoning, only at the crossroads, esthetic research in order to become “the son of the Hebrews,” a fluid theoretician of interiority, an artisan of vague syntax, a lucid reflector of psycho-social alienation, a diagnostician of his own insulted memory, a refined interpreter of the burlesque, an unyielding apologist of honesty, a torn collector of vulnerabilities, an agnostic obsessed with incertitudes, a skeptic cosmopolitan, a faithful scribe of the Romanian language, Norman Manea is part of the very small category of creators whose literary masterpieces and literary failures are both emblematic of the late, Eastern European modernity.

Translated by Carla Baricz

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