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On the transgressive formula of exile - Norman Manea in a dialogue with Hannes Stein

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Abstract

Our paper proposes a new critical approach for one of the spoken-book - *Cuvinte din exil/ Conversations in Exile* - where Norman Manea (re)formulates his choices of literary ideology and rewrites his biography using the means of confessional dialogue instead of literature. With definite correspondences in the author's representative book, the autobiographic novel *Întoarcerea huliganului/ Return of the Hooligan*, *Cuvinte din exil/ Conversations in Exile* works like an implicit *mise en abyme*, a reconsideration through the filter of two translation works before the Romanian version and of the selection made by journalist Hannes Stein, an interviewer intent on bringing into discussion a series of perception stereotypes on the cursed Jewish question disclosed by the Jewish Romanian writer. On the other hand, the dialogue also reveals a series of Norman Manea's own *parti-pris*, which, in view of the work's scope and, particularly, of his writings' international superlative reception, are difficult to explain.

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Introduction

Being received with interest, *Cuvintele din exil/ Conversations in Exile*, the result of a dialogue between Norman Manea and Hannes Stein, was followed by critical considerations that focused either on the structure and the characteristics of the writing, or on the implicit specular effect of the text in relation to the protagonist, who, although seemingly *cured of Romania*, carries it and reconstructs it every time he talks about himself. Constantina Raveca Buleu's observations synthesise the first area of interest, since, as she puts it, "purta în limba engleză, «limba tuturor expatriaților» – cum o califică Hannes Stein în *Preliminarii* –, dialogul din 2009 de la Bard College reînvie secvențial biografia lui Norman Manea, atent decorticată în coregrafia jurnalistului german, dezbate implicațiile exilului în economia existențial-creatoare a acestuia, etalează complexitatea raportării sale la

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personalități precum Philip Roth, Nabokov, Proust sau Kafka și oferă un diagnostic exigent asupra actualei situații a literaturii.” [Carried out in English, “the language of all expatriates” – as Hannes Stein describes it in *Preliminaries* –, the dialogue from 2009 at Bard College sequentially revives Norman Manea’s biography, carefully unveiled under the careful choreography of the German journalist, it debates on the implications of exile in the author’s existential-creative economy, it displays the complexity of his relation personalities such as Philip Roth, Nabokov, Proust or Kafka and it provides an exigent diagnosis of the current state of literature.] (Buleu, 2014).

Interested in the problematics of exile as generalized existential model, Dana Pîrvan-Jenaru identifies the marks of *normality deprivation* borne by the dialogic writing adopted by Norman Manea – “Și aici se simte aceeași durere a privării de normalitate. Problema apartenenței, a «casei» este încă departe de a se fi sfârșit, atîta timp cît, afirmă autorul, s-a vindecat de România, dar în America este acasă ca într-un «hotel». Încercarea de dizolvare a rădăcinilor românești nu aduce o altă împămîntenire odihnită.” [Here too one can feel the same pain of normality deprivation. The matter of belonging, of “home” is still far from over, as long as the author claims to be cured of Romania, but in America he is at home like in a “hotel”.] (Pîrvan-Jenaru, 2012)

As for Andrei Corbea, he seems to evade several aspects of the implicit – and implied – ideology in the confessional dialogue analysed here, underlining the model of Socratic dialogue correlated with the ironic ebullience of the interviewed writer’s behaviour – “Chiar și «punerea în scenă» a dialogului mizează pe abilități ce-l proiectează pe interlocutorul lui Norman Manea, el însuși un eseist cunoscut și respectat, în ipostaza, simpatică de altfel, a lui Alcibiade. Dacă această repartiție a rolurilor a fost spontană sau regizată nu are, în ultimă instanță, importanță pentru efectul empatic al dramaturgiei, ce se prefiră firesc, într-o succesiune de replici în care timbrul grav se conjugă cu agerimea de spirit, iar franchețea transpare deopotrivă din intervențiile ambilor parteneri de discuție. Strategia interogativă a ziaristului german constă, în definitiv, în a-l determina pe Norman Manea să se demarce permanent de un «portret-robot» în care opinia publică germană (și nu numai!) este tentată, prin asociere cu clișeele pe cît de ieftine, pe atît de persistente ale est-europeanului, evreului, supraviețuitorului lagărelor de concentrare, disidentului anticomunist, emigranului în America etc., să-i comprime personalitatea și individualitatea.” [Even the *mise-en-scène* of the dialogue relies on abilities that distribute Norman Manea’s interlocutor, himself a renowned and respected essay writer, in the congenial role of Alcibiades. If this distribution of roles was spontaneous or directed is not, ultimately, important for the empathic effect of the production, which flows naturally in a succession of lines where the grave tone combines with the quick wit, while frankness characterizes the interventions of both participants in the discussion. All in all, the interrogative strategy of the German journalist consists in determining Norman Manea to permanently detach himself from an “identikit” to which the German public opinion (and not only!) is tempted to reduce his personality and individuality by association with the clichés, as cheap as they are persistent, of the East-European, the Jew, the concentration camp survivor, the anticommunist dissident, the emigrant to America etc.] (Corbea, 2012)

Exile as existential landmark and transgression through literature

More and more often adopted as formula of the contemporary confessional dialogue, the *spoken-book* multiplies, in the case of Norman Manea, in an innovative and multiple autobiographic (re)focalization. Whether as *Sertarele exilului. Dialog cu Leon Volovici/ The Drawers of Exile. Dialogue with Leon Volovici*, as *Înainte de despărțiri. Convorbire cu Saul Bellow/ Settling my account before I go. Interview with Saul Bellow* or as *Curierul de Est. Dialog cu Edward Kanterian/ Eastern Messenger. Dialogue with Edward Kanterian*, all of Norman Manea’s *spoken-books* echo in the autobiographic novel *Întoarcerea huliganului/ Return of the Hooligan*, an exceptional book about the human condition bearing the ethnic mark and, even more so, that of history and of the totalitarian ideologies.

A survivor of the Transnistria concentration camp, during the Second World War, and a fugitive from communist Romania, the writer recalls his personal history in a fourth *spoken-book* (Ifrim, 2013), together with Hannes Stein, a German journalist. The book is, as Manea explains in a *Notă la ediția în limba română/ Note to the Romanian edition*, the result of a selection made by the journalist and of the two stages of translation – from English to German and then to Romanian. Adapted and filtered to suit the Romanian reader’s horizons of expectation, *Cuvinte din exil/ Conversations in Exile* (Manea, & Stein, 2011) opens with the *Preliminarii/ Preliminaries*, signed by Hannes Stein, who describes the three days of interview and sincerely regrets his helplessness in regard to the perception of Romanian language.

Thought out as (de)formingly-chronological, the adventure of the *spoken-book* establishes a few important landmarks in the life of the Romanian writer of Jewish ethnicity – as Norman Manea likes to call himself, and not a Jewish writer of Romanian origin, as Hannes Stein mistakenly calls him (Manea, & Stein, 2011, pp. 9) – it unrolls in seventeen conversations that prove, on the one hand, the human exemplarity, the destiny value of the writer's life, and, on the other hand, the lack of adherence – natural, up to a point – to the realities lived and recounted, and the inability to overcome the stereotyped discourse register that still carries the image of the Jewish alterity in relation to the totalitarian regimes.

Under the sign of “dezordinii și al suferinței timpurii” [disorder and early suffering] (Manea, & Stein, 2011, pp. 11) are the shining lights of childhood, grandfather Avram's bookshop, the family pampering, immediately followed by the recalling of that distinctive age of memory linked to the concentration camp in Transnistria. A lot less marked by the signs of artistic literariness, the dialogue adds, nuances or clarifies the episodes known from *Întoarcerea huliganului/ Return of the Hooligan*, with details that show, for instance, how small islands of humanity can, sometimes, save lives: “mama mi-a povestit, când am întrebat-o mai târziu despre această perioadă, că un ofițer român a venit la ea și i-a spus: nu schimbați nimic aici, căci veți pierde totul, de cealaltă parte a Nistrului cursul de schimb este mult mai avantajos.” [my mother told me, when I later asked her about this period, that a Romanian officer came to her and told her: don't exchange anything here, or you lose everything; the exchange rate is much better on the other side of Nistru.] (Manea, & Stein, 2011, pp. 15-16)

The second dialogue centres on the moment of liberation – not at all festive, not at all filled with joy, but, on the contrary, with the fear of death. The more so, since the father is immediately enlisted, together with the other men in the camp, and sent to the front line. Wishing to live, and with no desire for retribution – as Hannes Stein would have expected – the thirty-six year old man deserts.

As for the Jewish identity of the family, falling under the responsibility of the mother, as in any traditional family of this type, things are not at all rigid – “Casa noastră nu era *kosher* – totuși, de Pesach se făcea de fiecare dată curățenie generală. Mama nu mânca lactate amestecate cu produse din carne și nu mânca nici carne de porc – dar nu ținea ca noi să mâncăm doar *kosher*.” [Our house was not *kosher* – still, for Pesach there was always general cleaning. My mother never ate dairy products mixed with meat and she never ate pork – but she didn't insist that we eat only *kosher*.] (Manea, & Stein, 2011, pp. 25)

Normality is retrieved gradually, the child returned from the camp reintegrating himself among people and (re)discovering the joy to live. The warm feminine figures of memory – the teacher who invites him to the touching Christmas celebration, and especially Maria, the orphan [“A venit după noi în lagăr și ne-a adus mâncare și haine. (...) Era o creștină de origine țărănească, un copil orfan, luat în casă de bunicul meu. O femeie minunată și foarte frumoasă. O eroină fără onoruri, care apoi a devenit ea însăși o victimă a comunismului.”/ She came after us in the camp and brought us food and clothing. (...) She was a Christian peasant, an orphan child, taken by my grandfather in his home. A wonderful and extremely beautiful woman. A heroine without honours, who later became herself a victim of communism. (Manea, & Stein, 2011, pp. 29-30)] – populate the fiction and colour it in the unmistakable shades of spiritual beauty. Beyond them, the ghosts crane their necks – those of the communist fairy-tale and those of Betar (a movement initiated by Ze'ev Jabotinsky – a left wing of Zionism).

The chronology of this life in history continues with a fourth dialogue – *Tovarășul Stalin/ Comrade Stalin*, an *intermezzo* on the leftist ideological contamination plaguing not only post-war Romania, but the whole of the European intelligentsia. Beyond it, however, the readings of the teenager are sound, and the selection – irreproachable: Tolstoy, Chekhov, Turgenev, Gogol, Pushkin. And – memorable as another symbol of the spiritual birth – the meeting with the Romanian writer Ion Creangă: “(cartea) era scrisă într-o limbă ciudată și fascinantă – nu în argoul de stradă. Arhaică, populară, originală, minunată.” [(the book) was written in a strange and fascinating language – not in the street slang. Archaic, popular, original, wonderful.] (Manea, & Stein, 2011, pp. 38-39).

The break with the illusion of communist equalitarianism happens quickly, yet the writer leaves the trail of memory retrieval to briefly trace the history of Ana Pauker, presented as the wrongful victim of the Romanian perception of Jewish alterity associated to communist doctrine. Welcome in that it brings information that may not be known to the Romanian reader and not only, the cautioning of particular historic circumstance cannot erase the objective history among whose negative characters one may well list the feared woman-commissioner. The signs that the ideological war continues, even though centred on the *Jewish monopoly on suffering* and restricted to the level of discourse, are numerous. Directly blaming Romanian intellectuals for not assuming totalitarianism and its negative effects, Norman Manea enters a conflict of memories disputing the literary critic Nicolae Manolescu, one

of the voices of authority (the president of the Writers' Union and Romania's ambassador to UNESCO) who sanctions earlier the mentioned monopoly – “Nu avem de-a face cu un antisemit, ci cu un democrat, aici e toată surpriza! Formularea nu trădează multă compasiune, nici înțelegerea propriei istorii sau solidaritate cu oprimații, nici exces de inteligență sau onestitate.” [We do not deal with an anti-Semite, but a democrat, that's the surprise! The statement doesn't betray a lot of compassion, or the understanding of one's own history, or solidarity with the oppressed, or excess of intelligence or honesty.] (Manea, & Stein, 2011, pp. 57).

Moving beyond these still debatable aspects, and which should be formulated and supported with objectively-verifiable historical data, the sixth dialogue approaches femininity as problematic and individual history, which immediately changes the tone of the conversation – from grave and authoritarian to affectionately ironic. To love women – this is a normality that, the writer believes, any self-respecting man should adopt. Which Norman Manea does, openly and sincerely. The erotic affairs of a young man living in a totalitarian state have their own savour, in their re-telling for the non-initiates. To be with the loved woman, surreptitiously, for a couple of hours, in the room of a colleague, is a source of unexpected voluptuousness, hard to transmit to a Westerner. For, Hannes Stein does not seem to possess the empathic availability to understand the man before him, a European Jew from the East. The story of his love for a Christian gathers proportion, the Jewish clan becomes increasingly restless, but to no avail, as the love story obeys other rules, profoundly human. And it is in keeping with these rules that the story ends when the flame of erotic energy is extinguished.

The second concentration camp – communist Romania – contains within itself the seed of escape. The protecting plunge into Romanian language proves, at a certain point, insufficient, and the writer chooses exile at the age of fifty. The story of the two scholarships, DAAD and Fulbright is followed by a series of comments on the status of the Romanian language writer in Israel. Norman Manea explains his choice of America over Israel starting from the wise advice of Leon Volovici – “Dacă vrei să fii evreu, du-te în Israel. Dacă vrei să rămâi scriitor, nu te duce în Israel.” [If you want to be a Jew, go to Israel. If you want to remain a writer, don't go to Israel.] (Manea, & Stein, 2011, pp. 96), moving beyond Hannes Stein's (staged?) innocence, owing, perhaps, to his journalistic profession, or to the stereotypical simplification of reality – “H.S.: Ai nevoie oare de o comunitate pentru a fi scriitor? N.M.: Nu, dar dacă ești scriitor român la Tel Aviv, ce faci? H.S.: Îți scrii cărțile și savurezi seara promenada stradală. N.M.: Iar manuscrisele le lași prin testament văduvei și copiilor? Sau poate statului Israel?” [H.S.: Do you need a community to be a writer? N.M.: No, but if you are a Romanian writer in Tel Aviv, what do you do? H.S.: You write your books and enjoy your evening walks. N.M.: And, in your will, you leave your manuscripts to your widow and children? Or maybe to the state of Israel?] (Manea, & Stein, 2011, pp. 96). Since the American setting projects the image of a democracy where ‘there are two sides to every story’. The story of the interview for becoming a Professor at Bard College confronts the Byzantine perspective [“În fiecare instituție academică există, după cum știți, grupuri, intrigi și lupte. Iar eu nu cunoșteam părțile aflate în conflict, nu știam care e linia frontului. Deloc. Sigur era doar faptul că eram propus de președinte. Acolo erau și dușmanii președintelui. Dar nu îi cunoșteam, nu știam care sunt jocurile de culise.”/ In every academic institution there are, as you know, groups, intrigues and conflicts. And I didn't know the sides involved in the conflict; I didn't know where the frontline was. Not in the slightest. The only certainty was that I was being proposed by the president. The enemies of the president were also there. But I didn't know who they were, I didn't know the backstage intrigues. (Manea, & Stein, 2011, pp. 117)] with that of the American society allowing for a woman to be the rabbi and for her sister, converted to Buddhism, to raise horses at a ranch in California.

The gaps between cultures are enormous, both within the American space and in terms of external alterities. An incoherent country, the writer believes, but the more so impenetrable by any possible type of totalitarianism. Equally, however, it is a county with little sensitivity for the intellectual pattern of behaviour, for the values of the intelligentsia or for its social or political power. Which is not necessarily a good, or a bad thing, but different. From this perspective, the confessional dialogue acquires strong semantic nuances in favour of or against ethnic and social stereotypes of perception, both in what concerns Norman Manea, and especially in what regards Hannes Stein. If the former believes in the intellectuals' value as leader of opinion, the latter has strong reservations: “Intelectualii sunt adesea complet scrântiți din punct de vedere politic și sprijină dictatori săngeroși. În orice caz, din punct de vedere politic nu sunt mai deștepți decât alți oameni. De ce ar trebui opinia publică să le asculte răbdătoare opiniile?” [Intellectuals are often completely batty, in terms of politics, and they support bloodthirsty dictators. In any case, in point of politics, they aren't wiser than other people. Why should public opinion listen patiently to their views?] (Manea, & Stein, 2011, pp. 127)

The positive results of American democracy, and which continue to support it, such as *simplification* and *pragmatism*, the *freedom of movement*, to which one may add that it is a *country of exiles*, are supplemented by a conversation about the essay *Felix culpa*, where Manea calls on the issue of Mircea Eliade's pro-legionary attitude. The writer's veiled attempt to minimize the importance of Eliade's research is dislikeable from the start and Hannes Stein's clear superficiality is disturbing – "Mircea Eliade a fost un profesor care a scris cărți încâlcite despre teme îndepărtate..." [Mircea Eliade was a professor who wrote tangled books on remote topics...] (Manea, & Stein, 2011, pp. 139). An entire discussion about the ideology of the extreme right, about the Iron Guard – a fascist military organization where Eliade was never a member, but with whose doctrine he sympathised – should be held so as to clarify the matter (such debates already occurred, along the years), but this is not the place for it.

Similarly unsuitable is the association, in the fourteenth dialogue, of Paul Celan and Benjamin Fondane – self-clarifying cultural models for Norman Manea, in their capacity of Jewish Romanian writers in exile, asserting themselves in Europe in a language other than Romanian – with the image of Emil Cioran. Especially since the latter is reduced to a few particularities which, taken out of a much broader context, and outside the path of the philosopher's inner development, sound reductive and, worse, unjust. To read *ad litteram* the work of an author for whom metaphor is second/ true nature, which leads to the fact that his work reflects the hypostases of a scriptural character, in permanent self-re-composition – is, clearly, an error of perspective – "Și Emil Cioran se ura pe sine nu doar ca român, ci și ca creștin. Era fiul unui preot ortodox, iar în toată opera lui vorbește de fapt numai cu dezgust despre creștinism." [Emil Cioran hated himself also, not only as Romanian, but as a Christian as well. He was the son of an Orthodox priest, and in all his work he speaks of Christianity only with disgust.] (Manea, & Stein, 2011, pp. 157) (cf. Diaconu, 2008) Leading the dialogue along this path threatens to turn the *cursed Jewish question* into a Procrustean bed that Norman Manea knew how to avoid in other circumstances.

Norman Manea's writing vein truly vibrates when – finally! – the text becomes meta-discourse on the act of creation, on the autofiction's making process in *Întoarcerea huliganului/ Return of the Hooligan*, or on the different reception possibilities by the American public, in comparison with the (East)European. In this sense, an *ad hoc* definition of the writing act leads back to the European Jewishness validated by the aesthetic canon not for its ethnic roots, but for bringing, for example, Proustianism to universal literature. Therefore, the last chapter, entitled *Un Proust din Est/ A Proust from the East* explains, by similitude with the illustrious model, the manner in which the story of the Jewish boy returned from the concentration camp and become a writer turned mythical and took possession of its protagonist, transforming him into a character, so powerful and so alive that it already put reality in between brackets.

Conclusion

The formula of the *spoken-book* facilitates, beyond or on this side of individual truths, a re-writing doubled by a re-contextualization of an auto-biography that opens, in this manner (as well), its own path towards the exemplariness of the *lone individual's* destiny – that in which another Romanian writer of Jewish origin, Mihail Sebastian, believed and with whose books, and, particularly, with the auto-biographic essay *How I Became a Hooligan*, Norman Manea's writings establish a dialogue.

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