

Alternative Readings

Rereading Norman Manea: The Imaginary Mapping of his Works

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Abstract

Imbued with the nostalgia for 'Romania of the mind' as reflected by the metaphor of "snail's house" the literary works addressed in our paper deal with a pervading acuteness of exilic consciousness of trans-location superseding the ambiguous ethnic (Jewish-Romanian-American). We attempt to follow the narrative/historical trajectories on the imaginary maps Manea's works entail, bearing in mind such concepts as "literary geography" "spatial imagination" or "projected spaces in fiction" based on (re)reading his texts with a special focus on the documentary value of (re)location.

Keywords: (re)reading, documentary value, migration and literature, geography of literature, fictional mapping, exile, identity

The ongoing fluidity of transnational and translocal displacements of the contemporary world informs literary criticism in terms of appropriate means of (re)reading, (re)interpretation of *extraterritorial* literature, as George Steiner indicated already in the 70s. (1) If critics nowadays agree that human condition is defined by migration rather than "nationality, origin, settlement, dwelling, roots, birthplace, or bloodlines", (2) Søren Frank claims two problems arise from the tendency to regard

movement in relation with postcolonialism: first, migration literature written in English of second or third generation immigrants and secondly, the literature outside the sphere of postcolonialism, outside the borderlines of the British, German or French context. (3) Frank convincingly points out the “attempt to liberate the concept of migration from the entrapment in post-colonial studies”. Thus authors like Grass, Kundera, “illuminate the question of migration role from a different perspective, Nazi and Communist totalitarianism, globalization, dissemination”. (4) It would therefore follow as a relevant addition to include Norman Manea among the writers whose works give illuminating answers to the queries raised by the issued related to migration literature phenomenon.

Our contention is that Norman Manea resorts to “an alternative space, a third geography” (5) conceived as an overlap of geographical and fictional space and represented in terms of transnational literary trajectories on the imaginary map of his writings. We used both autobiographical excerpts and fictional fragments that are endowed with testimonial, documentary value and support the (re)location of the writer relative to the fluctuant coordinates of his literary career.

He was born in Burdujeni in 1936, in a multicultural milieu. At the age of 5 he was deported with his family to Transnistria in a labour camp, then “liberated” by the Soviet Army, lived for one year in Briceni (Bucovina), where he studied his second grade in Russian. Then he was repatriated to Fălticeni, then in Rădăuți he finished the last two years of primary school (in Romanian). Norman’s family returned afterwards to Suceava, where he attended one year the Jewish Highschool, closed by the Communist authorities, graduated highschool and entered the Faculty of Hydraulics and Construction in Bucharest, 1959. From 1961 to 1973 he was an engineer in construction – in Suceava, Ploiești – and a senior researcher in water management in Bucharest. He confessed several times it is about a profession completely obliterated from his memory, chosen only as an illusory haven. Only in 1966 did he make his début with his first short story (before quitting the career as an engineer, he had published one volume of short stories, *Noaptea pe latura lungă* and a novel, *Captivi*). In 1976 he made his first trip abroad – his first escape from the communist “camp”/“fold” – to Jerusalem. In 1979 he travelled to the west, he visited Paris, Zürich, Venice. From 1986 to 1988 he lived Berlin with a DAAD scholarship. In 1989 he obtained a Fulbright scholarship in New York. Since 1989 he has been a professor of literature at Bard College (among other prizes and titles, he was awarded the Chair *Francis Flournoy Professor in European Culture and Studies* and the title *Writer in Residence*).

Due presumably to his tormented real biography, Norman Manea has always had an acute awareness of what Frank called “the potential for translocal mobility”. (6) When Miron Radu Paraschivescu, his literary mentor, asked him in 1966 for his bio, the writer thought of the following fictionalised resumé, which obviously was not published at the time: “the war interrupted the theological studies in Vilnius of the precocious young scholar, so he pursued them in Jerusalem, then went on with Mathematics in the United States, Psychology in Vienna and Amsterdam, Literature and Arts in London and Florence. On his way to Petersburg, a short stop in Romania offered him the promise of ‘happy love’”. (7) On the other hand, the idea of choosing, re-creating his own biography preoccupied him all throughout his literary carrer – the subtitle for (at least) his first

novels was "Variants of a Selfportrait" – moreover the latest edition of his short stories published by Polirom are re-united under the same title.

If we take the spatial coordinates one by one, we should start with the *locus amoenus*, the place of his birth in the north east of Romania – Burdujeni, depicted in vivid colours in *aureo tempore*, in the short story *Cizmele și vioara*: „Amintirea nu restituia decât panta abruptă a unei fâșii de stradă gălbuie, încremenită în soare, luciul de-o clipă al genții rotunde, de grădiniță, din tablă albastră, în care se aflau cornuri albe și moi, cu șuncă.” (8) „Întinericul dens îl orbea, ca bezna unei boli fără capăt. N-ar mai fi vrut decât să se deschidă dunga unei străzi urcând printre case cenușii, fâșie de soare la capătul căreia zbura cândva, în lături, ușa grea a prăvăliei, iar băiatul năvălea din dreapta, în strada goală.” (9)

Elie Wiesel emphasized writers' concern for the life before the Holocaust, “the life, the peacefulness of the family, the joy of its holidays”, depicted with saved, dug up words - “with words build upon ruins”. (10) From this perspective Burdujeni can be said to constitute the ruined golden “lane” of Norman Manea’s childhood. Burdujeni is also depicted in his memoir *The Hooligan’s Return*, where the writer imagines the encounter of his parents (on pages that go beyond the genre of the memoir, his parents become fictional characters): “My earliest memory is linked to this trip [his parents meeting on the bus from Fălticeni to Burdujeni, 1933]. A memory preceding my birth, a memory of the being I was before I came into being – the legend of a past before the past. When the Chinese sage asks : ‘What did you look like before your father and mother met’, I conjure up the strip of road between two neighboring towns in north-east Romania in the mid-1930s, a narrow expanse of cobblestones between two slender columns of trees under a homely, sleepy sky. A ribbon of golden space made time... Premature birth, followed by a time of solar blankness, without contours or memories. An idyllic time out of which the mind picks up only a flash of a sloping street and the entrance to my grandfather’s bookstore. Memory does not say much about the way I was before the true birth, which was still to come. Much later, fiction was more eloquent: a scene from the Tarkovsky, the film *Ivan’s Childhood*, which I watched endlessly, many years later. The blond child, the laughing mother, happiness...suddenly the thunder of October.” (11)

The “thunder of October” is the metaphor of the war, of the deportation and Transnistria alludes also to the first exile recorded in the well-known poems by Ovid - *TransTristia*: “Transnistria, beyond sadness. The prebirth Initiation had begun. Yes, I know what I looked like before I was born. And I know the way I looked after, in April 1945, when the surviving expatriates had been repatriated to the *patria*, the *motherland* that had banished them and ... did get rid of some.” (12) “The lesson in history and geography would not be complete without mentioning the crossing point on the Dniester – Ataki. Not Aarat, as in the biblical flood, but Ataki. Little Noah was only five years old at the time, but he would not forget that name. Fifty years later he would never forget the name...”. (13)

If in *The Hooligan’s Return* there are some precise locations and descriptions of Transnistria (although only a few), what is worth mentioning is the way Norman Manea has been very tentative with this subject matter in his fiction, namely in his short stories. The writer clearly states he is not a writer of the Holocaust, he rejects “the industrialization of suffering”, rebukes playing the role of the victim and, on the other

hand perceives Holocaust not only as a Jewish or a German tragedy, but as a *human* tragedy. He has chosen very cautiously the appropriate manner to write on his experience of the Holocaust, consequently out of his writings - including seven novels and several volumes of short stories - only five short stories may be considered about Transnistria: *The Sweater*, *Proust's Tea*, *We Might Have Been Four*, *Death*, *The Balls of Faded Yarn*. "Paradoxically, once established in the New World ... Manea does not offer too much new Holocaust fiction to the American market." argues Mihai Mîndra. (14)

In order to render a profound human dimension to suffering - as the main theme of his early fiction- space has to be bracketed, "it could have happened anywhere", confessed Norman Manea in interviews and essays. He wanted to put down on paper scenes where suffering is not only a concept, but a *process*, expressed by an active identification. (15) "Manea's prose describing his experience in the Transnistrian camps, and published under severe nationalist-Communist censorship, employs poetic strategies that mask the particularly visceral aspects of the Romanian Holocaust. Short stories like *The Sweater* and *Death* are almost *devoid of temporal and spatial markers*" says Mihai Mîndra (16) and there is an illustrative example of this "oblique style" right at the beginning of the *The Sweater*: "The sky might suddenly open and we might find ourselves in a real train, not like the cattle cars they had unloaded us from in this emptiness at the end of the world. It would be a warm, brightly lit train with soft seats ... kind, gentle ladies would serve us our favourite foods, as befits travelers returning from the other world. Or, perhaps ... this endless ashen sky would come crashing down to swallow us or redeem us, this sky that we awaited to enter once and for all, so everything come to an end." (17)

Going on with the next location on the literary map we have in mind when we deal with Manea's writings, Bucharest emerges like the setting for all his novels, a suffocating cage he describes in the famous letter to Ernesto Sabato: "Retreated from the surveillance of our guardians between the covers of algebraic calculations, like in a sanctuary that protected me in an *encaged city*, devastated by barbarians. The theorems had once clung on me like delicate nurses on a wounded with his spine burnt. Thus my youth punished itself for a long time, satisfied only with glimpses of virtual beauty, peeping through the fissures of my faulty spirit ... till one day when I woke up listening to people talking on the smoky serpentines of the *novel*." (18) The image of the cage-city, a hyper-realist metaphor of Bucharest in the 1980s, "others" the solitary wanderer who inhabits one cell of the communist panopticon. In *Peretele despărțitor* [*The Separating Wall*], the character-narrator is surveilled incessantly, watched by neighbours, especially by a „securitate” officer disguised as the janitor, and wanders for hours through the streets of the city in order to avoid them, to seek for an illusory lair and to preserve his last escape of critical self-awareness: "Mă aflu înăuntru, încolăcit, invizibil: coada subțire a unui diavol de rând. Nu știu decât adevărul." (19)

A very important coordinate on our imaginary map of Norman Manea's literary trajectories is Jerusalem, a poignant topos of culture and civilization. It is significant that Jerusalem is the destination of the very first three-week trip abroad in 1976 (the year of the publication of *To Jerusalem and Back* by Saul Bellow), the first escape from the cage described above. "The Jew from the East finds his 'freedom' through his first travel not in

Sewden or Spain, but precisely in Israel”, says the author in *Sertarele exilului*. (20) In the same book Norman Manea muses over the (im)possibility of using Jerusalem, an ambivalent signifying-place, as the setting or the topic for his literary work: ”A fictionalised Jerusalem, a virtual I, and a real Jerusalem, a concrete Jerusalem, an authentic I. ...What if I had been born and lived there, in Jerusalem? But you cannot catch up with time. You are doomed and also blessed to have missed the chance, to have been born somewhere else, far away, destined to a weird vocation. At the same time aware of the other phantasm of reality, which I almost got hold of. A feeling that I’d always been there, no matter how long I’d been wondering meanwhile. This ambiguity haunted me all throughout my visit to Jerusalem ... inward projection/ introspection. ...strong attraction, as well as rejection sometimes equally strong.” (21) ”I was thinking, while walking through Jerusalem, of a book similar to *The Alexandria Quartet*, a symphony of Jerusalem, a stratified novel on history, silence, music, lust, sunset, fiction, depicting a kaleidoscope of ethnicities - the ambiguity of fiction and real(ity).” (22)

Jerusalem, not only a name of a place on the map, but rather a code, a monad, a mark of spirituality (23) is also the place where both Primo Levi and the writer’s father are buried. Manea’s poem *Speaking to the Stone*, written after a Book Fair, depicts Jerusalem as a metaphorical topos of suffering: ”I have come to the Fair / in a place that gave birth to the Eternal Book / to face the stone / that once was a man.” (24) ”In front of the stone with a human name ... Primo Levi is praying in front of my father / who has become a stone.” (25)

Venice is the city he visited in 1979, transfigured into a fictional space in *Kinderland* (and *Reading Kinderland*): the adventure of an Eastern Aschembach who faces a short temptation of escape and death in the Western Kinderland. (26) Here the protagonist, who knows already everything about the city by heart, literally perceives it like an album (not the city itself), whose *pages* (not streets) is treading in wonder, as he cannot rid himself of the *image/copy* if it - an illustrative case of the Baudrillard’s simulation, as we find it in *Kinderland*: ”The street. I was wondering on a new page” (27) ”I woke up on the pages of the Album I had learnt in school about. The Monument, the Cathedral, The Bridge ... An old child, entering the fairy tale too late “ (28) After his return to Bucharest, after becoming aware of the the impossibility to escape from his (fore)doomed captivity, the narrator compares Venice to a lost world, thus ”he was unable to explore Atlantis, he could not get out of himself. In himself he had travelled, after all...”. (29)

The next important spot on the literary map envisaged in our analysis is the German capital city, envisioned in *The Fifth Impossibility: Essays on Exile and Language*, in such excerpts of powerful documentary value as follows: ”During my agonizing Berlin transition, I was overwhelmed by doubts and questions from the past. And precisely because that transition happened in Berlin, I also had to confront my ethnicity, as I had already confronted the invective ”alien” in my own country. I was five years old when in 1941 I first left Romania, sent to death by a dictator and an ideology. In 1986, at 50, by an ironic symmetry, I left again, because of another dictator, another ideology. Holocaust, totalitarianism, exile—these fundamental experiences of our contemporaneity— are all intimately related by a definition of the stranger and of estrangement” (30) ”BERLIN! The horror-name of my childhood. It was from Berlin that

what had happened to me and my family had come. And wasn't what we lived through after the war also a consequence of it? The journey could be a pilgrimage to the place that was a crossing for one's existence and that of so many others." (31)

Maybe because of his mixed feelings about Berlin, Norman Manea neither chose it as a narrative "setting", nor was he tempted to do it, unlike in the case of Jerusalem.

Our last stop on Norman Manea's real and fictional mappings of life is New York, which he calls "my home" at the end of *The Hooligan's Return* - in spite of the declared unique homeliness that only the "snail's house" seems to offer: "the Babylon of the New World, and of the Old World... There is nothing lacking in Paradise... The Dada Capital of Exiles". A surprising question, relevant to our analysis, poses Katrarilyna Jerzak when discussing the stakes of literary exile from a comparative perspective: Is New York/"New World" comparable to the "Old World" of Eastern Europe? The critic points out how the writer from eastern Europe draws a lucid and complex parallel between two cities that stand for two worlds after all strikingly similar: "The narrator stands on front of his apartment building that reminds him of Stalinist architecture ... An exile never ceases to compare. Therefore, the immigrant who has not stopped comparing after twenty years is also an exile, permanently accompanied by the cognitive dissonance of double vision." (32)

The Lair, the latest novel of Norman Manea, sets its characters in the America of the 1990s, namely in New York, with various retrospections into the Romania before 1989. It is a literary thriller, whose plot stems from the communist ambiance and goes along the postcommunist Romanian turmoil, up to the burlesque and hysteria of the United States after September 11th 2001. *The Lair* encompasses all the themes and fictional 'mappings' of the previous books, from the traumatic experience of the Transnistrian concentration camp to the "impossibility" of the American exile. Moreover, it is the novel that marks a substantial change in terms of a return to more traditional narrative techniques. Peter Gașpar, born to Jewish parents after their liberation from Auschwitz, raised and educated in communist Romania, emigrates to the United States and by picaresque circumstances becomes a professor on an American campus. The academic milieu is thus focused upon altogether the bustle of the New York city, where ordinary people are only numbers - in terms of medical insurance, for instance, as one episodic character argues humorously. Another episodic character, one of Peter's students, Deste Onal, writes a weird message "*Next time I kill you, I promise. The labyrinth made of a single straight line which is invisible and everlasting.*" (33) - a quotation from Borges - to forty immigrants all over the United States in order to prepare a postmodern installation called *Babylon Lottery*, where the last room suggests a labyrinth with all forty envelopes, including the receivers' answers and their biographic details, and above all, an ironic motto mocking the communist real slogan: "The exiled of all countries, unite!" We deal therefore with a vivid spatial metaphor of the globalized world, a very important signifier as it questions postmodernist artifices and thus reworks valuable insights of the exilic dimension of the contemporary world.

To conclude, a helpful reliable source would represent the projects carried out by the Institute of Cartography and Geoinformation in Zurich, which we resort to in order to summarise visually the rereading of Norman Manea's works with a special focus on the

trans-national dimension. Following the example of the article *Dreams, Longings, Memories – Visualising the dimension of projected spaces in fiction* (34) we have drawn upon the symbols used by the researchers who conducted the project. Hence we devised an imaginary map presenting Norman Manea's location of "longing", "remembering" and "dreaming", where places/spaces are turned into symbols and metaphors, as shown all throughout the study:

- "longing" represented by Burdujeni, the symbol of happy childhood before deportation, personalised topos of *origo mundi* or *regressum ad uterum*;
- painful "remembering" in/of Transnistria and Bucharest, standing as epitomies for the 'two evils of the century' at the individual level – the former transfigured into short stories and the latter in all his novels;
- "dreaming": in its purest sense, that is poetry, consisting in dreaming of Jerusalem in the poem *Speaking to the Stone*; escapist dreaming of Venice, in the short-story *Kinderland* and bitter dreaming of/in New York.

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