Norman Manea's Game of the Masks or Playing Hide-and-Seek with Censorship

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Résumé: Norman Manea, l'écrivain – ingénieur, a dédié sa vie, et continue à le feire, à écrire la vérité, malgré les conditions imposées par l'époque où il a débuté comme écrivain. Le discours de ses romans, spécialement de ceux écrits avant son exile américain, est marqué par la censure. Peu de ses collègues écrivains ont réussi à capturer le destin de l'artiste et de l'être humain dans la société totalitaire de la manière de laquelle l'avait fait Norman Manea. Pour réaliser son destin artistique, l'écrivain utilise une technique un peu particulière, qui aide le discours s'échapper à l'institutionnalisation, ça veut dire la technique du jeu des masques. C'est ainsi que l'écrivain réussit-il à mettre son âme et la vérité dans le texte.

Mots clé: roman, écrivain, jeu, masque, censure.

Controversial writer, Norman Manea addresses various literary species, but the essay and the novel have become his preferred forms of expression. Giving up the profession of engineer to become a writer, he manages to successfully take a stand and maintain himself in the literary world due to the essential characteristic of his style. Phrases shaped with an engineer's expertise, and carefully chosen words, they all help to build his discourse. Despite the adversities of the times he lived in, exceeding imposed totalitarian boundaries, Norman Manea managed to reinforce his position of writer in exile and as a skillful narrator. The

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writer began writing in the 65-70's, a time where Romanian essayists and novelists were discovering the literary experiment. "Din acest climat care afirma, în primul rând, libertatea de expresie, accentuându-se asupra diversitatii stilurilor si modalitatilor artistice, se va ivi romanul conditiei umane al unor Alexandru Ivasiuc, Norman Manea, Romul Iuga, Mircea Ciobanu."[1]

Norman Manea – the novelist – is preoccupied with his own destiny, with that of the artist, and the constraints hereunto applied, in different times, or political and social contexts. The identity of self becomes the subject of perpetual outward and especially inward searches. Introspection is the base method in observing the process of his own conscience. The author seems to wear himself out in dualities like present and past, ideal and real, right and wrong, guilt and resignation, setting himself limits and trying to overcome them, and all this while facing communist censorship. All these searches and questionings are reflected in his novels, Norman Manea inventing characters "doar ca sa se exprime pe sine prin intermediul lor, ci si ca sa se dezica uneori de sine însusi"[2].

In terms of discourse analysis, Norman Manea has used innovative discourse techniques to work his way around censorship, to tell the truth in the quest for *self*, and it has beautifully resulted in the use of the game of the masks. Censorship has tried, and will continue to try, to use discourse as an instrument of power. Since power has always generated resistance, Norman Manea has attempted, and successfully managed, to escape an institutionalized discourse, to prevent discourse from being used as an instrument of power. He wants to write and proves it. His novels, discussed

[1] Ioan Holban, *Profiluri epice contemporane*, Cartea Românească, Bucuresti, 1987, p. 14: "Out of this climate, that offers, first of all, the freedom of expression, accentuating styles and artistic modes, the novel of the human condition appears, written by Alexandru Ivasiuc, Norman Manea, Romulus Guga or Mircea Ciobanu." (As translated by Amelia Groza).

[2] Nicolae Manolescu, *Arca lui Noe. Eseu despre romanul românesc*, Editura 100+1 Gramar, Bucuresti, 1999, p.14: "not only to express himself through them, but to sometimes deny their existence" (As translated by Amelia Groza).

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bellow, provide an extensive illustration of the game of the masks technique.

1. Variations on a Self-Portrait

Norman Manea tries to seal on paper sides of his own self in an explicit effort to put himself together. His novels bring to our attention different moments of his life, melted into his characters destiny. Norman Manea is not even trying to hide the fact that his writings are sometimes limited to his biography. Throughout his collection of essays and interviews called "The Black Milk", Norman Manea himself admits that ever since the beginning of career as a writer, his biography marks his writing. Experiences like the Holocaust, the communism and the exile turn into literary experience. The author successfully creates and recreates himself in his characters, in an attempt to reach comfortable limits, both as a writer, and as a human being.

Captivity, limitation to a certain environment, being trapped under a mask are some of the main themes of Manea's novels. His characters – Mihai Burlacu of "Captivi" – "Captives" (1970), Rafael Banu of "Atrium"(1974), Tolea of "plicul negru" – "The Black Envelope", Norman of "Întoarcerea huliganului" – "The Hooligan's Return: A Memoir" or Peter Gaspar of "Vizuina" – "The Lair", captives by definition, are struggling to escape limitative epochs or environments – from adolescence, mother's home, native town or even country, to profession, political regime and destiny – only to find themselves in another restrictive environment. The dual elements and continuous oscillation are used by the writer to emphasize the need to escape, to find a way out.

Mihai Burlacu, central character of "Captives" is a traumatized individual, trapped in a state of deep, fuzzy conscience. Reality becomes inconsistent for him, life is sequential, and existence becomes possible in other worlds. For him, real life is mixed with an imaginary one, and objects are seen in sequences. Everything becomes an attempt to survive his own self. The author turns out to be the narrator, and vice-versa, and the characters are only part of the background. The captive that opens

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the *Variations on a Self-Portrait* series is trying to break free and partially does, even though this first attempt is twisted and confusing. Norman Manea proves he is no stranger to the *nouveau roman* techniques, turning his novels into "un interesant experiment de tehnica narativa."[3] "Atrium" develops the story of other captives – former high school colleagues, lost in their own attempt to escape adolescent life and become adults. They impersonate the story of Man, in his becoming, the human destiny in general, in a decadent and limited society, that smothers the proper development of youngsters' life. Always returning to familiar elements, like the river or the six columns house – the atrium, oscillating between the safe past, and the uncertain present, Rafael Banu and the rest of the characters are witnesses, like the writer himself, to the degradation of the society they live in, metaphorically represented by the river: "[râul] primindu-ne aici, lânga mal, într-un con turtit: o inima, iata: doua cavitati comunicând: orificii valvule gemene, deosebite si asemanatoare, ca si noi, prietene Banu. Tot mai adânc, în ochiurile lui de ulei si parafina, acoperiti de vânele groase ale lesiilor. Unindu-ne cu el, îmbatrânind cu el, în putreziciune. Ruina unei lumi vâscoase, turmentate, batracianul umed, fara schelet, obisnuit demult doar cu aceasta invazie fluida, care-i absoarbe si pastreaza caldura."[4] The getaway from this underworld is the dreamy estate they all plunge into. The technique of duality becomes again the narrative tool to accentuate the limitations of life. As a result, "Atrium" becomes an exponent of the postmodern novel, having dreamy, but also

[3] Ion Simut, *Ambiguitatile exilului,* în *România literara* – editia online, nr. 15, 2008: "an interesting experiment of narrative technique"(As translated by Amelia Groza).

[4] Norman Manea, *Atrium. Roman*, Ed. A II-a revazuta, Polirom, Iasi, 2008, p. 252: "[the river was] welcoming us, here, under the shore, in a flat volute: a heart, two pits, communicating: twin valves, different and similar, like we are, my dear friend Banu. Deeper and deeper, in its waterholes filled with oil and paraffin, covered by thick strings of lye. We're being united with it, getting old with it, in its own rottenness. The ruin of a slimy, whirling world, the wet amphibian, no skeleton, being used to this fluid invasion that absorbs and keeps its heat." (As translated by Amelia Groza).

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existentialist influences, and the captive concept passes to the next level – from self to society.

To go even further, a third level in defining captivity is being reached– the artist's struggle to survive censorship. Norman Manea tries to explain the role of the writer and of writing in his novel "Cartea Fiului" – "The Book of the Son", by opposing his two conflicting sides - the artist (in the first half – "Simona") and the engineer (in the second half – "August"). His attempt seems to be successful, since the writer is able to continue his literary destiny, thus crossing the border set by censorship. In a society that was developing under communism, he can only do that under the mask of the engineer, auctorial voice is limited but not smothered.

"Zilele si jocul" – "The Days and the Game" ends the cycle entitled *Variations on a Self Portrait* by bringing in the limelight the same character, under different masks. The characters seem to be copies of the same pattern and hiding under a mask seems to be the final solution in delivering the truth to the reader.

From the traumatized captive, to the drifting adolescent and the undercover writer, Norman Manea sets himself limits, and it's him again that goes beyond borders. In order to express his mind and soul, the author experiments and manages to create the bildungsroman of the Romanian of Jew origin, that grew up deported and under anti-Semitic communist rule, and now struggles to accomplish his mission as a gifted writer, by clearing restraints.

2. August the Fool and the Game of the Masks

In order to be able to understand Norman Manea's writings, and especially his novels it is necessary to first understand the context. The socialist dream remained a utopia in Romania. It was not even close to what it was supposed to be. Literature became the only way of escaping the failed system that was spiraling downwards. Books were a gate, but only for experimented readers. And readers were trained well. The system was afraid its many flaws were going to be revealed, so every measure was

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taken to prevent this from happening. Literary discourse was being institutionalized. That is how literature became limited and calling things by their names was forbidden. Writers realized what a powerful weapon the words were and took a stand – an unnamed stand, though obvious to the authorized reader.

Norman Manea was one of those writers that overcame the excessive boundaries imposed by the totalitarian regime. Given the times he began writing in, his open mind and desire to escape the system, it becomes obvious why he developed a particular discourse technique – the game of the masks.

Imagine a hunter chasing its prey, where the system is the hunter and the writer is the prey. The prey runs chaotically so that the hunter looses its track. Throwing the enemy off the track – that is all it comes down to. And that is exactly what Norman Manea did. How else could he have been able to withstand the system for so long? Even though he felt being treated like a suspect all this time, by both sides – the hunters and the other preys, his fellow writers – he managed to stay on his track and accomplish his literary destiny. The engineer turned novelist, and the novelist hid under the engineer's mask, but he made it. The game of the masks turned out to be successful.

"Anii de ucenicie ai lui August Prostul" – "The Years of Apprenticeship of Augustus the Fool" was published. In order to describe Augustus the Fool or A.F. in his becoming as an artist and in his relationship with his audience, "fragmente din presa vremii"[5], full of socialist advice and praises, were artfully mixed with scientific moments from the life of ants, a true metaphor of the totalitarian society. A.F. can be anyone, but more than that, as Norman Manea said, he can illustrate "viata artistului, un profesionist al himerelor."[6] There are a lot of things to be said about

[5]Norman Manea, *Anii de ucenicie ai lui August Prostul,* ed. a II-a revazuta, Polirom, Iasi, 2005, p. 22: "the newspapers of those times" (As translated by Amelia Groza).

[6] Norman Manea, *Nota autorului* (la prima editie, aparuta la Editura Grove Press, New York, 1992), în *Despre clovni: Dictatorul si Artistul,* ed. a II-a

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August the Fool and his sides, but he describes himself the best: „porecla ascunde si releveaza individul, pseudonimul separa identitatea civila de incerta si suspecta multiplicitate de personaje pe care Scribul le descopra într-însul si le smulge, trudnic, pentru a le oferi lumii."[7]. The coded messages, the double language, going around censorship with total subtlety, no elements or structure specific to a novel, and A.P.'s destiny turn "The Years of Apprenticeship of Augustus the Fool" into a true anti-novel and a reversed bildungsroman. The volume that would fulfill the character's destiny is published long time afterwards, along with the second edition of "The Years of Apprenticeship of Augustus the Fool" and is called "Despre Clovni: Dictatorul si artistul" – "On Clowns: the Dictator and the Artist". Norman Manea himself says that both of his books "sugereaza un dialog între vârstele creatoare ale autorului si mediul sau social"[8].

The game of masks, all this hiding under other facades, dissimulates the truth from being discovered by the censors and serves to fulfill the need of escaping the totalitarian regime. Censorship „poate deveni însa extrem de eficace atunci când, la rândul ei, înceteaza sa mai lucreze dupa reguli. Acest tip rar de cenzura haotica, total imprevizibila, cu adevarat Kafkiana, a fost realizat în unele tari foste comuniste din Europe de Est, cum ar fi Romania lui Nicolae Ceausescu. Efectele psihologice ale cenzurii de acest tip asupra scriitorului sunt descrise cu acuratete de romancierul Norman Manea, vorbind despre romanul sau *Plicul*

revazuta, Polirom, Iasi, 2005, p.12: "the life of the artist, a professional of chimeras" (As translated by Amelia Groza).

[7] Norman Manea, *Nota asupra editiei*, în *Anii de ucenicie ai lui August Prostul*, ed. a II-a revazuta, Polirom, Iasi, 2005, p. 229: "the nickname hides and, also, reveals the individual, the pen name separates the uncertain civil identity from the multiple characters that the Scribe discovers in himself and strenuously pulls them away to be shown to the world". (As translated by Amelia Groza).

[8] *Idem*, p.7: "imply a dialogue between the author's creative ages and his social environment". (As translated by Amelia Groza).

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negru"[9]. Censorship had and still has repercussions on the writer's feelings and thoughts. In an interview with Bruno Corty, for the October 29th, 2009 issue of the Figaro magazine, Norman Manea says about Romania: "La Roumanie est une étrange combinaison de burlesque et de byzantinisme. Toute vérité est sous la table et le peuple porte des masques qui ressemblent parfois comme deux gouttes d'eau aux visages qu'ils cachent. Vingt ans après la chute des tyrans, on découvre, avec l'ouverture des dossiers, que nombre de gens qu'on respectait étaient malhonnêtes. On découvre que 80 % des prêtres à qui les gens venaient se confesser étaient des informateurs des services secrets. Aujourd'hui, la Roumanie est une démocratie kafkaïenne où se mélangent rhétorique, démagogie et populisme vulgaire"[10]

The novel "The Black Envelope" thus becomes the climax of the games of the masks. It develops a psychological mystery that, under the mask of Tolea, the main character, aims to uncover parts of Norman Manea's portrait - the intellectual confined to mediocrity, suffocated by the society he lives in. In this novel, the writer, hidden under the looser and clown played by Anatol Dominic or Tolea, tells a truth that turned out to be upsetting for

[9] Matei Calinescu, *A citi, a reciti. Catre o poetica a (re)lecturii*, Polirom, Iasi, 2003, p. 283: "can become extremely effective when, on its turn, ceases to work by the rules. This rare kind of chaotic censorship, totally unpredictable, truly Kafkian – so to say, has been applied in some of the ex-communist countries in Eastern Europe, like Nicolae Ceausescu's Romania. The psychological effects of this type of censorship are accurately described by Norman Manea, when he speaks about his novel *The Black Envelope*". (As translated by Amelia Groza).

[10] http://www.lefigaro.fr/livres/2009/10/29/03005-20091029ARTFIG00474-la-roumanie-est-une-democratie-kafkaienne-.php, as of December 2010: "Romania is a strange combination of burlesque and bysantinism. All truth lies under the table and people wear masks that sometimes are as similar to the faces they hide as two water drops. Twenty years after the fall of the tyrants we discover, once the personal files are free to the public, that numerous people that we had looked up to had been dishonest. It turns out that 80% of the priests the people had confessed to, had been secret services informers. Today Romania is a Kafkian democracy where rhetoric, demagogy and vulgar populism mix together". (As translated by Amelia Groza).

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the totalitarian society Norman Manea was living in at that time, so "The Black Envelope" was nothing like it had been when it was first written. Censorship had done its job to such a point that it became auto-censorship. The writer seemed to have been defeated. The manuscript had returned to its author scribbled, modified or cut more than eighty percent by the censor. Norman Manea was told to review the whole novel. He had been asked, among others, to include in this novel a anti-fascist movement, even though such a thing had never existed in Romania, to eliminate the negative perception onto daily Romanian's life or transform character's sad, suicidal feelings into happiness and optimism. What other proof is needed to testify for the institutionalized discourse? And still, the message, even though distorted, got through. Norman Manea won the fight thanks to his creative game of the masks. Talking about his novel, the writer says: "M-am bucurat în clipa când am vazut romanul proaspat aparut? Fusese o nastere grea, nesperata. Pruncul infirm, desi nu asa îl visasem era al meu, totusi. Legatura noastra adânca, plina de rani era a timpului si locului în care împreuna, încercasem – chinuindu-ne, mutilându-ne – sa ramânem deasupra."[11] "The Black Envelope" is the last novel published by Norman Manea in Romania, in 1986, before he left the country for good. He had to, in order to escape limitations, to be able to express his creative self freely and to turn into his reader's accomplice in deciphering his novels. The artistic effort to capture the theme of the totalitarian society amounts to an exorcism ritual. The writer had played his final match with the system.

[11] Norman Manea, *Despre Clovni: Dictatorul si Artistul*, editia a II-a, Polirom, Iasi, 2005, p.131: "Was I happy the moment I saw the novel freshly printed? It had been a difficult, unhoped for birth. But the baby, even though crippled, was mine. Our deep connection, scarred, belonged to the time and the place we had grown up together in, we had tried – torturing and mutilating ourselves – to stay on top". (As translated by Amelia Groza).

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3. The Self From Under the Mask

Taking the road of the exile, Norman Manea separates from his country, but not from his memories or from the Romanian culture and language. If until now he had been living an interior exile expressed through the game of the masks, it is time to face, express and assume it clearly. In 1992 was printed "Despre Clovni: Dictatorul si Artistul" – "On Clowns: The Dictator and The Artist", a volume that makes a stand from this point of view. Norman Manea pours his soul and frustrations into this book. The game of the masks is no longer needed. "On Clowns: the Dictator and the Artist" truly becomes the expression of a deliverance ritual. It also marks the beginning of the transition period in Norman Manea's life.

From 1992 to 2003 Norman Manea goes through an introspection time lapse. During all this time, liberated from the inward exile, he lives a not so happy period of his life – another exile, that this time comes from the outside. In this exile, submerged in his loneliness, Norman Manea creates his most important novel so far "Intoarcerea huliganului" – "The Hooligan's Return: A Memoir". The novel represents a big loop in the author's life – the death and rebirth of an artist. Without it, Norman Manea's evolution as a writer, and, the most important, as a human being would have not been possible. It marks out the passing from an era to another, from one kind of exile to another.

Norman Manea has never denied or praised his Jewish origin. And it not by mistake that the action of "The Hooligan's Return: A Memoir" gravitates around the Easter Holiday. The word "Easter", designating the Resurrection of Christ, has a Jewish origin. In the Jewish culture, Pasch (Pesach) means "passing", is etymologically related to Easter, and marks the Exodus from Egypt. By publishing "The Hooligan's Return: A Memoir", Norman Manea manages to escape the past, the same way "the chosen people" has escaped slavery in Egypt.

"The Hooligan's Return: A Memoir" reflects intense feelings. The game of the masks comes back, due to the power of ha-

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bit, and this novel is the story of different selves. In an alternating first-person – third-person narrative the reader has to decode and look for the truth underneath the words, to go back and forth in the text to find the real main character and the truths belonging to the author-narrator. Norman Manea becomes an alchemist, and his words – magic formulas that hide ideas, feelings, past existences, but also the secret of releasing a conscience, way too loaded by phantoms and regrets from the past. The novel is fragmented by different dual structures: America – Romania, Holocaust – communism, departure – return, guilt – resignation, life – death, father/son – mother/son relationship, yesterday – tomorrow, Romanian – Jewish, dream – reality, etc. All these oscillations are meant to help discover the personal and historical truth, the true self from under the masks, the writer's self.

Exiled from home, at Home, in his language – Romanian, Norman Manea enters a world that melts different cultures and civilizations, and life concepts to pull together a final novel, so far, the essence of his life "after-life": "Vizuina" – "The Lair". Holocaust, communism, post-communism, and terrorist attacks are the stage of a story about life, death, love, hope and the afterlife. The writer shapes a new dimension, the lair, where everything fuses, and trusts that self will be found. Escapeing the institutionalized discourse has given birth to a playful discourse, that has inherited a major technique – the game of the masks.

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