"OUR HOMELAND, THE TEXT": CRITICAL BELONGING AND SUBVERSIVE E(A)STHETICS IN NORMAN MANEA'S WRITINGS ON EXILE

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Abstract

In his seminal essay of 1985, "Our Homeland, the Text", George Steiner wrote: "The man or woman at home in the text is, by definition, a conscientious objector: to the vulgar mystique of the flag and the anthem, to the sleep of reason which proclaims 'my country, right or wrong.'" The aim of this essay is to explore, from the perspective opened by Steiner's lines, Norman Manea's sense of belonging, his attachment to the language-as-homeland, and his understanding of exile as a defining condition of the modern writer.

Keywords: *homeland, belonging, exile, displacement, subversiveness, e(a)sthetics.*

Norman Manea's *The Hooligan's Return* (2003) opens with two overlapping chronotopes: first from the vantage point of his window, then standing in front of the "42 storeys building" in which he lives, and then again *en route* to meet his fellow writer Philip Roth, the narrator thoroughly takes in "the stage set" of Paradise. Strange reminiscences of another, remote stage set disrupts his sense of presence: suddenly, the familiar place seems very much like "a Stalinist building". *It can't be*, says the narrator under his breath, *no Stalinist building ever reached such heights*. Still, the uncomfortable resemblance persists: *a Stalinist building nevertheless*, the narrator stubbornly repeats.

Through this crack in the doors of perception, the past ushers in and permeates "the stage set of posterity". The old buildings of Amsterdam Avenue are ghostly reminders of the Old World, and the dishes available at Barney Greengrass, a grocery store-*cum*-restaurant, "enthusiastically simulate the Eastern European Jewish cuisine", albeit lacking the real flavour of the past. This cognitive dissonance stems from the exile's double vision: after nine years in Paradise, he still draws comparisons between *here* and *there*. As the

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examples multiply, the present location becomes uncanny: the real is derealised by the irruption of the past.

In his essay *The Uncanny* (1919), Freud mentions two contrastive meanings of the word *heimlich*: on the one hand, it describes what is homely (or homelike), familiar, tame, comfortable; on the other, it refers to something that is concealed, kept from sight, withheld, so that others do not get to know about it. *Unheimlich*, translated into English as "uncanny", is rarely used as opposite for the second meaning; in its most common understanding, it designates something unfamiliar and therefore unsettling, either because of its strangeness or in virtue of its extreme novelty. However, by slowly unfolding these two different meanings, Freud concludes that the notion of something hidden, unconscious or withdrawn from knowledge makes *heimlich* and *unheimlich* fuse into one, so that the same word comes to designate a thing and its exact opposite:

> What interests us most [...] is to find that among its different shades of meaning the word *heimlich* exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, *unheimlich*. What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*. [...] In general we are reminded that the word *heimlich* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory are yet very different: on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight. The word *unheimlich is only used customarily, we are told, as the contrary of the first signification, and not of the second. Sanders tells us nothing concerning a possible genetic connection between these two sorts of meanings. On the other hand, we notice that Schelling says something which throws quite a new light* on the concept of the "uncanny", one which we had certainly not awaited. According to him everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light (author's emphasis) (Freud 2001 [1919]: 293).

This kind of ambivalence is the exile's intimate, withheld truth. In Paradise one may well be "better off than in whatever country", as the narrator ironically reminds his friend, quoting the words of the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, and yet life in exile is unreal. This is a world with no past, where "what really matters is the present moment", and which grants its inhabitants complete immunity: unlike "the first life", where people were inescapably attached to all kinds of trivial things, here one can "indifferently move on".

The irony is obvious, and yet there's more to this observation than that. The narrator constantly describes his life in exile as an "afterlife", "the life after death" or "the other world", and himself as a "survivor". Kataryna Jerzak rightfully states that the word "survivor" should be read here in its etymological sense, derived from the Latin *supervivere*. What the narrator implies is not only that he physically survived the concentration camp in Transnistria or the Ceauşescu regime, but also that he is somehow above or on the surface of life:

> To survive is to be beyond life, next to life, but not in it. This may not be an ideal situation for a human being, but it offers a writer, if he can harness it, an extra vision, a supplemental perspective. Such a writer is an inner outsider. He is, to all appearances, a participant in life,

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> but he is also elsewhere. As a writer he imports that elsewhere – landscapes, languages, people, events – and they intersperse with his here and now (Jerzak 2008: 83).

This is all the more true given that Manea was already fully equipped to deal with such a location. For him, "the condition of precariousness" is intrinsic to the writer's vocation. His position is a liminal one, at the frontier between life and art, fiction and reality. Regardless of his age, gender, ethnicity or language, the writer is – and must be, in Manea's view – marginal, nonaligned, peripheral, "someone dissenting even from dissent" (2003: 17). (S)he is rooted in "the fundamental ambiguity of art": belonging to life, like any other person, (s)he does so only partially, in so far as (s)he swings between the world (s)he contemplates and the one of his/ her creation, which is almost the same, but not quite[2].

This diasporic situation only sharpens the critical edge of the writer's work. Aware of the constructedness of reality, the writer is bound to question received ideas, clichés, and foundational myths. (S)he witnesses and enacts what George Steiner calls "the mortal clash between politics and verity" in search of a textual, poetic truth that must be preserved at all costs.

The search for truth is central to *The Hooligan's Return*, and Manea pursues it at both an ethical and textual level. Writing, even at its most "literary", is a summons to responsible response, to answerability in the most rigorous sense, hence the thorough separation between fact and fiction. In this unusual memoir, real and fictional elements fuse, but do not mingle: the passage from one type of element to the other is carefully delineated. Thus, for the averted reader, vagueness, metaphors, intertextual allusions, lacunae, and wordplay are strategies of unveiling, rather than concealing a multilayered meaning:

> Manea sees the careful separation between fact and fiction as an ethical obligation and, in this sense, his memoir is both historically and internally verifiable, in the strictest sense. Moreover, the reader feels that even when the author opens fictional "windows" on possibility or dramatizes meditative passages, the end is always the truth, including, to be sure, the personal truth, with its more complicated and ambivalent zones. The memoirist conveys the sense that he feels under a double obligation: to tell the truth, however painful, and not to simplify it, not to resort to formulas or clichés, not to trivialize it. The task of the genuine writer, as Manea knows well, is not to simplify but to *desimplify*. For the truth is never simple. (Călinescu 2008: 27-8).

This attitude is very similar to that of the scholar, the cleric, "the keeper of the book" as described by George Steiner in his 1985 essay "Our Homeland, the Text". It is worth mentioning that "scholar" or "cleric" is not employed

[2] "Scriitorul, evreu sau neevreu, se află, prin însăşi natura vocaţiei sale, în ambiguitatea funciară a artei. Aparţine vieţii, ca orice om. Totuşi, nu-i aparţine decât parţial? Tulbure pendulare... relaţie fluidă şi greu de fixat, pentru că din această lume, pe care o contemplă şi o suportă nu întotdeauna cu încântare, se naşte alta, care îi seamănă şi nu prea, care o cuprinde, dar nu cu totul, care îi caută esenţa, aflată poate adesea dincolo de ea, nu neapărat în miezul ei." (Manea 2008a: 46).

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solely in its traditional sense: Steiner uses these words to designate "the man or the woman at home in the text", be them writers or commentators. Fidelity to the text, "each seeking out of a moral, philosophic, positive verity", is in fact an expression of faithfulness to one's true self, a way of acknowledging one's origin and mission:

> A true thinker, a truth-thinker, a scholar, must know that no nation, no body politic, no creed, no moral ideal and necessity, be it that of human survival, is worth a falsehood, a willed self-deception or the manipulation of the text. This knowledge and observance *are* his homeland. It is the false reading, the erratum that makes him homeless (author's emphasis) (Steiner 1996 [1985]: 116)

Once again, Manea seems to fit the profile. Barely restored to a "fairy-tale normality" in post-war Romania, he struggles to regain the Romanian identity that was denied to him during the long years of deportation in Transnistria. This is also the moment of his encounter with "the word as miracle", one July afternoon in 1945, through the bias of Ion Creangă's folktales. Gradually discovering "new words and new meanings", he absorbed them "quickly and with great excitement": at the time, he was already dreaming "of joining the clan of word wizards, the secret sect" he had just discovered (Manea 2008b: 5).

Gradually, though, the one-Party system took over, and life began to be spelled in the official wooden language. The only way to protect oneself from its "deadening effect" was through reading, and later on through writing. Speaking of his first story, "Pressing Love" (1966), Manea states that it aimed at reestablishing a thematic and linguistic normality at odds with the ideological imperatives of the moment. The reactions of the official press was prompt: the text was condemned as "apolitical, absurd, aestheticizing, and cosmopolitan"– all serious and covertly antisemitic accusations. But it didn't matter: soon after, the young writer could hear his own voice in his own book, and the circle was closed: "I found the refuge I had so long desired. I was finally at home" (2008b: 7).

For "a native of the word", the real home is language: the native tongue, even if that tongue is Romanian, and the writer a Jew. But finding a home is not all – for it to endure, one has to defend it:

> I had protected my language as well as I could from the pressures of official speech; now I had to defend it from suspicious censors who would massacre or eliminate sentences, paragraphs, and chapters, in my following books (Manea 2008b: 7).

This tedious struggle ends in 1986, after months of strenuous efforts for the publication of *The Black Envelope*. This last battle took its toll, and Manea decided to leave Romania – a difficult decision for a writer rooted not in a space, but in a language. The prospect of leaving does not rejoice him: the exile is but a "suicide I preferred over the death at home":

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> The writer, always a "suspect", as Thomas Mann said, an exile par excellence, conquers his homeland through language. To be exiled also from this last refuge represents a multiple dispossession, the most brutal and irredeemable decentering of his being. [...] For the writer, language is a placenta. Language is not only a sweet and glorious conquest, but legitimization, a home. Being driven out of this essential refuge, his creativity is burned to the core (Manea 2008b: 2, 10).

Writing in exile is what Manea later comes to call "the fifth impossibility" which supplements the other four already inventoried by Kafka. The native language becomes a "nomadic language", a "house of the snail" carried over various borders. Cut from its vivid source, it takes refuge in the privacy of the migrant self: a secret, intimate idiom.

The image of native language in exile as "the house of the snail" is also present in Steiner's essay, but Manea did not borrow it from him: his reading of Steiner's text was posterior to his use of this precise metaphor. However, its functioning is largely the same: in both cases, the original language is the ultimate warrantor of identity:

> [...] writing has been the indestructible guarantor, the "under-writer" of the identity of the Jew: across the frontiers of his harrying, across the centuries, across the languages of which he has been a forced borrower and frequent master. Like a snail, his antennae towards menace, the Jew has carried the house of the text on his back. What other domicile has been allowed him? (Steiner 1996 [1985]:104).

Even so, the dislocation – in space, time, and language – is not altogether a negative experience. Its most important quality is that it provides a lesson in relativism and the opportunity of cross-cultural fertilization. The migrant writer reconciles the opposing meanings of *heimlich/unheimlich* and restores the unity anticipated by Freud: he defamiliarizes the imbricate geometry of space and time – the old home as well as the new, the past as well as the present – and at the same time he uncovers the secret articulations of authoritative principles.

In a certain sense, the migrant writer is always an anti-nostalgic, if by nostalgia we understand a sentimental idealization of the place of origin and of the personal and collective history associated with it. He constantly questions reality, irony and self-reflexivity are his most trustworthy allies, and his religion is what Steiner calls "critical humanism":

> The man or woman at home in the text is, by definition, a conscientious objector: to the vulgar mystique of the flag and the anthem, to the sleep of reason which proclaims "my country, right or wrong," to the pathos and eloquence of collective mendacities on which the nation-state – be it a mass-consumer mercantile technocracy or a totalitarian oligarchy – builds its power and aggressions. The locus of truth is always extraterritorial; its diffusion is made clandestine by the barbed wire and watch-towers of national dogma (Steiner 1996 [1985]: 116-17).

In *The Hooligan's Return*, Manea's elective strategy to discard the "masks glued to the face" and subvert the logic that forces him into one "ghetto of identity"

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or other is to allow his narration to accommodate a plethora of voices and vocal registers. Not only intertextual allusions abound, thus opening up a space of textual dialogue, but the characters get to speak for themselves as the authorial voice itself is fragmented and self-effacing. Instead of trying to restore a continuum of identity by means of a coherent narrative, the memoir follows closely the whimsical flux of reminiscences and constantly breaks the main plot with unpredictable repetitions and flashbacks. This (only apparently) random structure is in fact consistent with Manea's central theme: "the essential ambiguity of belonging and fixed identity" (Polouektova 2009: 459). Faithful to his subversive „aesthetics of uncertainty", Manea remains suspicious of certitudes even when it is he who utters them. As in life, the textual truth is hidden in the folds of ambiguity.

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