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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, "purtat 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 odihnitoare.” [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 firească, 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, emigrantului 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 anticomunist 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.

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