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October, Eight O'Clock – East-Central European Proustianism or Synesthetic Reappropriation of The Real

Abstract: This essay analyzes the innovative way in which Norman Manea redimensions the categories of Proustianism (involuntary memory, stream of consciousness) and begins with the investigation of a few representative short stories from the well-known volume *October, Eight O'Clock*. The *close-reading* follows the subjective narrative but undetermined voice, along an epic journey in which the protagonist regains his memory through a synesthetic and also traumatic adaptation to reality.

Key Words: Norman Manea, proustianism, synesthesia, trauma, stream of memory.

October, Eight O'Clock represents the book with which Norman Manea began his European and American literary biography. The Romanian reception (Cristea 1982; Georgescu 1982; Radu 1982; Crohmălniceanu 1982; Holban 1982) of the volume emphasized on the aesthetic dimension of the short stories, but the Western/American critique conferred them the value of an existential testimony (Dorian 1991; Winder 1993). What allowed for this double perspective of the critique was, on the one hand, a biographical episode of the writer (his deportation in a Transnistrian concentration camp, together with his family, when he was only five years old) and, on the other hand, the framing of a subjective, yet somehow undetermined, narrative authority.

The traumatic voice of the protagonist, who has a strange relationship with people around him and an intimate concern for objects, is gradually nourished by a rational, reflexive consciousness that investigates its own memory. Unlike

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Benjy, the retarded adolescent and Faulkner's narrator of the first part of *The Sound and The Fury*, the mind of the aged child from *October, Eight O'Clock* acquires a reasoning power towards the great happenings he had lived. It is an unconventional and unpredictable endeavour to which the reader must subdue himself and which helped John Bayley in decoding the way to the center of these short stories: "We grasp what is going on by a species of intuition that seems to relate both to our own experience and to one that is hardly imaginable: the paradox and opposition involved constituting a remarkable feat" (Bayley 1992). Delineating the poetics of reception, the English intellectual observes that the changing subjectivity, specific for the narrative authority, involves the readership alterity: "Certainly the power of his writing appears undiminished by the effect of the indeterminacy it can sometimes produce. That goes with the sense of a twilit of purgatorial existence, in which the most obvious features of tyranny and suffering have become metamorphosed into their personal equivalents. Mr. Manea is the most subjective of the sufferers, but just for the reason he can involve us totally in his own awareness of it and the images of it that live in his narrative" (Bayley 1992). In a relative contrast, for Richard Burghin, *October, Eight O'Clock* represents an emotional visionary trance from which a contradictory humanity is conceived, "[...] at once intensely autobiographical and curiously impersonal" (Burghin 1992).

The effect of impersonalizing the biography, without the subjectivity of the perspective to be compromised, but only undetermined, denotes a reconsideration of the mechanisms of authenticity. The refusal of the clichés that could ennoble the atrophy of the human and the complex understanding of guilt, both increased by an obvious literary consciousness, situates Manea's short stories in a general side of art¹. At the advice of the sceptic Samuel Beckett ("There is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, together with the obligation to express"), Norman Manea decided to bear a much more difficult commitment (Begley 1992).

A potential novel (Georgescu 1982; Dorian 1991) of the preservation of humanity, *October, Eight O'Clock* delineates the poetics of an infra-limit. Filtered by a psychology with seismographic sensitivity, the ruined universe is always hiding something fatal. Nothing happens on the surface, everything smolders to the final destruction. It is a secret panic, nourished by the anticipation of danger, in which Lucian Raicu identified the center of Manea's prose complexity: "a writer of crucial moments, deadlocks,

1 It is exactly what the Jewish participant to a Berlin public reading didn't understand or couldn't accept, in *October, Eight O'Clock*. The revealing seemed to him too ambiguous, irrelevant for the atrocities of the Holocaust, almost a mystification. What he wanted was the denouncing of the culpable ones, the truth.

disequilibrium and crisis situations, but all of these being inapparent I must add, difficult to be reasoned with a so-called normal perception, shown out of the blue, disturbing and affecting things that a rather imperturbable and less demanding consciousness would never consider as being out of the ordinary” (Raicu 1984). Here is the beginning of the powerful story *The Sweater*:

She would leave every Monday and return every Friday. Each time in tears, as though she were saying good-bye for the last time. Next time she might not find the strength to go – so much could happen in a week. A miracle, and she wouldn’t need to leave, to be separated from us. 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 favorite foods, as befits travelers returning from the other world. Or, perhaps, even before Friday, the day she was due back, this endless ashen she would come crashing down to swallow us or redeem us, this sky that we awaited to enter once and for all, so that everything might come to an end. (Manea 1992: 3)

A mother who bears too many responsibilities by herself asks the guards every single week to allow her to look for obscure jobs outside the concentration camp, in the villages of the Ukrainian steppe. Every Friday is a new beginning,

the ritual of the six piles of food (the potatoes, the beans, the flour, sometimes the cheese, the dried plums, the apples), carefully arranged, being a sort of equivalent of delaying the final sentence. Unlike the hopeless father, the woman still believes that a better world is waiting for them outside. Her faith attains the features of the desperate wish to survive. Her concerns are not the elaboration of a geography of the Heaven or the celebration of the immortal soul, but the self sacrifice for the ones she loves. The memory of a God who rescued His people from the Egyptian slavery, guiding it through the Canaan desert, leads to her terrestrial representation of the *Last Day*. Meaning a day of *Before*, with plenty of food and clean clothing. The ruins of the apocalyptic time described by Norman Manea contain both the signs of extinction and the hope of salvation. But opposed to the biblical image of the open sky which reveals the glory of an Almighty Yahweh or which spread the rage of the same divinity over the sinful mankind, in *The Sweater* the eschatology and soteriology are placed on the horizontal. The trains take the people to death, as other trains infinitely more comfortable could restore their humanity. And in such a dystopian reality, a shabby sweater, made from fabric scraps and taken from the bottom of the food bag, brings the revelation: “She had not had the chance to unfold it so that we could see it whole, but that did not matter: clearly it was real. Even our rescue now seemed closer, or at least possible, since we had been granted the

sight and touch of such a miracle" (Manea 1992: 5). The humble clothing epiphany triggers an entire scenario of identifying the future owner, the introverted child secretly wishing to be the lucky one. But he is very disappointed when his mother, smiling or crying, tells them that the sweater is for Mara, a Christian girl, who got there by an administrative mistake. An authentic and strong child malice invades the narrator's mind. While at first being a protegee, the girl shortly becomes a hatable rival who received a gift that was meant only for him: "I could not point out to her that it was too big for her, that it had a boy's crew neck. She could have seen that for herself, after all – she was old enough – but to do that she would have had to take it off occasionally and look at it." (Manea 1992: 7). But Mara does not have the chance to enjoy her fluffy and varicolored gift because she dies of poverty and hunger. And tragedies, unfortunately, do not ameliorate misery: "When they were ready to carry the coffin out of the house, Father reached over with his big hand, felt around, found it, pulled it to one side, and let it fall behind him. Mother saw; she looked at him for a long time, but said nothing: she accepted that it be saved" (Manea 1992: 9). From envy, the protagonist now feels remorse, taking upon himself a nonexistent guilt that will later bring him to delirium.

This syndrome of fatality is reiterated in *Death*, when the boy convulsively imagines that the needle of the bee that stung him was a real bullet, or in *Seascape*

with Birds, where a few squashed black currants are hallucinatory thought to be the blood from a deep wound. In *We might have been Four*, the threatening of death amplifies the fear of a family gathered for an unusual feast. The catch of a hen and its sacrifice, the panicked hiding of its internal organs and its feathers indicate the behaviour of a banished beast, veiled by a permanent silent and autosuggestive hope. "[We] were stronger than the dogs, the guards, the uniforms, the hunger, the lice, the bullets, the forest, and the base temptation of the meat of a stolen fowl" (Manea 1992: 23).

Escaping from punishment in real life, the child finds his peace in the arms of the mother. From now on, the sweater is solely his. The innocent cruelty of possession had taken control over him. But still, the revelation shades away, like in *The Balls of Faded Yarn* whose disappointing metamorphosis in gloves, mufflers or sleeves meets the child's rejection. Drained of all its emotional attraction, the sweater loses its glow, remaining only a safety bearer, a more and more colorless and adapted servant:

But I did not wear it to the doctor's burial; that would have been too much. It was during a terrible snowstorm, and I shook with fear and bitter cold. I had hidden it well so no one would find it. I forgot about it for quite a few days and set it free only much later, when the burials had multiplied to several every day. There was no reprieve anywhere, there was no avoiding. They died by the dozens; the curse fell at random,

precisely on those who least expected it. They no longer had time for me, nor I for myself; the terror had become universal, beyond measure, had swallowed us all. (Manea 1992: 15)

The image of a humanity disturbed by the curse of death brings a kind of deliberate penitence of the child who considers now that comfort is inadequate for sad moments. Only when death transforms itself into an almost insignificant thing, he considers it is not worth standing the cold anymore, and even guilt or malice, essential "virtues" in better times, start losing their consistency. The lucidity of catastrophe balances the perception of reality: the fabulous piece of clothing becomes again what it used to be since ever – *just* a sweater. Because only the tyranny of affection combined with a precarious existence made the boy consider the sweater as having a magical aura.

As we find out from the short story ironically called *Proust's Tea*, "there are, then, certain gifts whose only quality and only flaw is that they cannot be exchanged for anything else" (Manea 1992: 41). The shabby sweater, together with the lye soap or the crackers having the unique taste of hunger, redimension life, the human being integrating the objects/food in a circuit of normal living. Surviving means cultivating insignificant mystifications through which the individual can reconnect to a natural past otherwise unreachable. But sometimes psychological tricks surrender under physical authority. Taken by

surprise by the narrator while gorging with crackers and tea offered by the Red Cross nurses, "a little midget who inspired tenderness" (Manea 1992: 38), being in a train station with his mother and other ill-fated people returned from the concentration camp, illustrates the impasse of the surviving mechanism. Being struck with consternation, the Proustian scheme of involuntary memory does not yield results, "the aroma of that heavenly drink could not be reminiscent of anything; he had never experienced such pleasure (Manea 1992: 38). Hunger eroded the function of taste, generating the breakdown of the sensitivity infrastructure. The fairy world in which Proust's protagonist enters when dipping a madeleine in a lime tea cannot be reclaimed anymore, and before reinventing it mentally the boy must forget the terrifying episodes of his own childhood.

And if the heady sensation cannot revive the past, the behest of memory will do it in obedience to the Jewish tradition. The narrator takes advantage of the petrified boy who lifts his eyes up to the ceiling of the train station, a dirty stone sky, and hence bringing in front the ritual of preserving the humanity found in a process of alteration:

High up on the arched ceiling of the waiting room, where the light bulbs attracted billows of insects, Grandfather appeared as if on a round screen, and Grandmother, and his parents, and his aunt. They were warming their hands on the steaming cups, all of them

starting at the same point high above, in front of them. [...] Grandfather did not take his eyes off the little white cube of sugar that hung, as usual, from the ceiling lamp. They all had to stare at it intensely for some minutes before sipping the hot water. Those who remembered the taste of sugar, those, that is, who had had the time, before the disaster, to accustom their palates to the sweetness of the little white lumps, gradually felt their lips become wet and sticky. The brackish green drink become sweet, good, “real tea”, as Grandfather would say. [...] Then everyone raised his eyes toward the lamp from which a tiny parallelepiped of almost-white sugar hung on a string. They had to stare at it patiently for a long time, and had to sip the tea slowly, until everyone felt his lips, tongue, mouth, his entire being refreshed, mellowed by the memory of a world they must not give up, because, Grandfather firmly believed, it had not given them up and could not do without them. [...] Up there, above the din in which the poor wretches tried, uselessly, to return to another life, up there, in an open space, isolated from the huge waiting room, Grandfather, confident in a return that would not come to pass, could have assured them that the magic potion was indeed proof that the world had welcomed them back. But even this strange drink did not remotely resemble “real tea”. (Manea 1992: 30-40)

The analepsis implicitly leads to the well-known episode from the Old Testament where Moses, at the command

of God, makes a snake of copper that will heal any man bitten by a real snake, if he beholds the brass figure. The context is represented by the conflict between God and the People of Israel, discontented with the rough desert. Both cynical and compassionate, Yahweh plans a punishment symbolically consubstantial with the rescue. Like the brass snake, which had to remind the chosen rebels about the infallible attributes of God, the small piece of sugar hung by the lamp represents the guarantee for *another* reality, one that is worth living for. When any springs of humanity are threatened, the reclaiming of a lost taste acquires the significance of a crucial stage in saving one's own existence.

Representing a step forward as compared to the exploration of a peaceless self from *The Sweater*, where the child, witnessing unannounced deaths, is waiting for the tragic finale, *Proust's Tea* describes the traumatic portrait of the first years of living only after the recovering of sensitivity and, of course, of the necessary distance for autoscopy: “If, later, I lost anything, it was precisely the cruelty of indifference. But only later; and with difficulty. Because, much later, I became what is called ... a feeling being (Manea 1992: 41).

In a discussion about *October, Eight O'Clock*, Manea says that he tried to imagine Proust in Transnistria. Except that now, the grandfather's ritual and the mother's protection are no longer touching, but they represent desperate efforts to simulate the altered sen-

sitivity. The diminished interiority exposes perhaps the signs of abasement, the contrast between normality and downfall. In *The Balls of Faded Yarn*, the child is bewildered by the intensity of the colors: the mosaic that he amazedly and ceaselessly contemplates, until his dirty nails begin to pierce his skin; the windows covered with a blue paper that dispreads a fluid and suffocating quietness. The old and now so heavy universe becomes unbearable for the reclusive child and the other children's hostility is easier to

suffer than the blinding concreteness of the real. Only the magic of imagination conciliates between the sound of words and the stupefying shape of the behelded objects. The world known before deportation, completely erased from the memory when living the ruined reality of the concentration camp, and the world known never before by the child grown up ahead of time are synesthetically (re) appropriated before being socially (re) explored.

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