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SHORT GUIDE  
TO FICTION WRITING  
UNDER COMMUNISM.  
THE CASE OF ROMANIA

ABSTRACT

The study reviews the circumstances under which fiction was published in Romania under the 50 years of communism – censorship, writers’ associations, publishing houses – and illustrates them with Norman Manea’s essays in his volume *On Clowns: the Dictator and the Artist*.

KEY WORDS: fiction writing, Communism, Romania.

*[I]n a country where, until very recently, historiography and political philosophy were not allowed to question official ideology, literature often had to perform that function under the cover of its metaphoric indirection. (Călinescu 1991: 246)*

This study starts from the obvious fact that reading literature in countries under communism was a quite different experience than reading literature in the West. It begins by detailing the differences, starting with an analysis of the historical evolution of the role of the intellectual in East-Central European countries, as presented in Leon Volovici’s volume *The Emergence of the Writer in Romanian Culture (Apariția scriitorului în cultura română, 2004)* It continues with an analysis of ‘the political mission of writers in the “people’s democracies,”’ based on Lucia Dragomir’s study in the collective volume *The Socialist Transformation. Politics of the Communist Regime between Ideology and Administration (“Transformarea socialistă.” Politici ale regimului comunist între ideologie și administrație, 2009)* in order to identify how and why fiction writers there ended up committing, in Manea’s words, “the sin of dilettantism, (...) a remnant of the communist period, when the reader wanted to find in literature what he could not find in history, sociology, psychology, etc. books,” which led to the “extension of authority from a specific field to the wide, public one, and to an institutionalization of social prestige” (Manea 2010: 342). This will be illustrated by Norman Manea’s volume *On Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist (Despre clovni: dictatorul și artistul, Manea 2005<sup>1</sup>)*.

It has been often observed that the image of the writer in East-Central European countries carried, from its first instances, much more weight than its counterpart in Western Europe. The authors writing in the many national languages of the area were

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<sup>1</sup> All following quotations are from this edition.

also agents of the nationalist movements of 1848 and later. As Leon Volovici notes, “writing was seen, first of all, as a duty to the country” (Volovici 2004: 15). This was actually a two-way street: on the one hand, the concept of a ‘national poet’ appeared after 1821 (the year of the Greek Revolution) in connection with the poet’s “engagement with the movement for national emancipation and social changes” (ibid.: 34). On the other hand, “the dedication to national and social ideals became, at the time, the highest and most complete form of literary success” (ibid.: 63).

This view of the poet was by no means original. It fused the Enlightenment rationalist with the passion of the French revolutionary, the romantic genius and the mythical bards and prophets of antiquity. Nevertheless, it resulted in a myth, “an exemplary image of the writer as symbol of a collective artistic and social ideal” (ibid.: 100). It was precisely this overlapping of their social, political and literary preoccupations that made the East-European writer into “a witness of history, a heavy-hearted contemplator of human suffering and, at the same time, a ‘voice’ for his own nation” (ibid.: 103). The militant dimension has been inscribed in the making of East-Central European literature from its inception. Logistically, too, far from Western specialization, the 19<sup>th</sup> century writer here had to fill many roles: journalist, philosopher, historian, publisher, even printer and bookseller.

This legacy carried on into the 20<sup>th</sup> century when, during the inter-war period, many writers in the region were vocal in their support of the rightist nationalist movements. After the end of the Second World War, there was again no room for nuances, as the emerging communist regimes sought to make use of what Pierre Bourdieu denotes as the “cultural capital” (cit. in Gheorghiu 2007: 27) of already established writers – basically the only form of capital that could not be (easily) appropriated by the state. As Lucia Dragomir notes, “freed from the market constraints” (though it should be noted that even if the number of books published increased over the years, it remained at all times under the corresponding figures in the main developed countries, cf. Gheorghiu 2007: 295), “the writers were forced instead to become public servants,” which at the time meant to serve the ‘party propaganda.’ Their new functions were now “ideological and political, educational and propagandistic, legitimizing the new political regimes” (Dragomir 2009: 192).

Indeed, in 1948 the Romanian Ministry of Arts and Information went as far as to indicate the six appropriate topics for the new literature: the new stand towards work and public property, the socialist transformation of agriculture (i.e. collectivization), the glorification of the socialist state (i.e. USSR), the glorification of Romania, the fight against mysticism (meaning religion), and the unmasking of imperialism (meaning the West). The Ministry produced a rigid juridical and institutional context allowing complete control over the literary field (ibid.: 194). By 1948, out of the 100 publishing houses in existence in 1944, there remained only nine in Romania, all of them belonging to the state. The publishing houses received their editorial list from the Department of Literature of the Ministry, which in turn employed ‘reading committees’ that ensured that everybody kept the party line, “those who wrote about the present were appropriately beautifying the social and political transformations brought about by the change in the regime, while those who turned to the past were forced to translate in their work the vast process of rewriting history started by the communists” (ibid.: 197).

At the same time, the model of the USSR Writers' Union was copied, after the war, in all East-Central European countries under Soviet influence and the 'literary' method of 'socialist realism' was stipulated in the first article of the Union's statutes, which also indicated that the institution functioned under the direct guidance of the Communist Party (ibid.: 200). As Mihai Dinu Gheorghiu observes, "the corporatist character of this Soviet-type union was due to its monopoly over copy-rights, both legal and financial, even in the case of people who were not members of the union" (Gheorghiu 2007: 264). At this point, there could no longer be any literary practice outside the Writers' Union and, with the apparatus now in place, the party could exercise its censorship over everything published in the people's republics.

Censorship seems to start from the assumption that, as Czesław Miłosz puts it, "what is not expressed does not exist" (Miłosz 1953: 206). This meant that those in power were now in a position where they could impose their world view on everybody. The problem arose from the fact that, as Matei Călinescu notes in the case of Romania, the cultural policy of the Communist Party changed over the decades of communist rule. It started with a "massive Russification, but little by little, as the Soviet Union itself was de-Stalinizing in the mid-1950s, the Romanian party chief Gheorghiu-Dej instituted a policy of secret re-Stalinization along (pseudo)nationalist lines, which was to be continued by Ceaușescu in the form of an increasingly strident (pseudo)national communism combined with a primitive, grotesque cult of personality." Later on,

in the early 1960s the fundamental duplicity of the party toward the Soviet Union became the basis for a variety of forms of cultural duplicity, some encouraged by the party, some merely tolerated. In this general climate of duplicity and hypocrisy a narrow region of intellectual freedom (a freedom whose price, in moral terms, was not negligible, however) became accessible, particularly between 1964 and 1971 but in certain significant cases even after the so-called minicultural revolution launched by Ceaușescu in July 1971. (Călinescu 1991: 245)

This mini-cultural revolution was inspired by his visit to China (the North Korean example being on a much less inspiring scale).

Generally, as stated in a review of publishing patterns in Central Europe under communism,

the bounds of tolerance increased erratically as ideology died. By the late seventies the regime was concerned more with the sensitivities of the Kremlin than with the substance of debate in intellectual circles. Those who stepped out of line were dealt with fairly leniently; if sacked they would generally be found other means of making a living, albeit less comfortably. Academics who did not openly challenge the system were virtually guaranteed publication of their books, the quantity determined by their status in the hierarchy. Paid by the word, they could be luxuriantly prolix. (Davy 1995: 122).

From the point of view of literary forms accepted by the party, beyond its rejection of 'bourgeois' aesthetics (individualist art, art for art's sake, and isolation in an ivory tower), proletcultism could not propose any alternative aesthetics other than the exploitation of content (as detailed above) to the detriment of form. The last two decades of communist rule, however, saw a nationalistic turn even in the field of 'literary ideologies' (to use Gheorghiu's term). It took the form of proto-chronism, a trend that

sought to use ethnographic material (a natural move for the heirs of the ‘national bards’ of the previous century) in order to prove Romania’s precedence in a variety of cultural and even scientific movements. A similar trend in Poland triggered a return to legendary Sarmatian ancestors. (Miłosz had noted quite early, in his *Native Realm*, that “where nationalism is late in appearing, passionate attempts are made to relate it to a half-legendary heroic past”, Miłosz 2002: 23) The alternative to this extreme nationalistic approach was postmodernism, described by Gheorghiu as “a critique of modernity and a peek to the past” (Gheorghiu 2007: 317) in a context where the official politics pretended to be revolutionary and were in fact deeply reactionary; it could also be seen as a concession to the general state of mind, a free-pass granted by censorship in order to dilute in irony the critical discourse against the official power.

Consequently, the ‘prescribed’ world view or the ‘appropriate’ literary forms were by no means clear, even to those who were supposed to enforce it. This was, paradoxically, further complicated by the fact that, by the end of the 1970’s, the rules of censorship had become very blurry. As Matei Călinescu explains,

officially (but under communism reality itself depends on its official recognition) censorship did not even exist. Since it did not exist, it could not have principles or rules; and when (in spite of its nonexistence) it did reject a manuscript or parts of it, it could not explain why. Its verdicts were incomprehensible, mysterious, unappealable. Editors and authors had to guess the reasons of the invisible, nonexistent censor, make the corresponding changes, and try again. (Călinescu 1991: 247)

From the point of view of this study, the whole period is governed by the fact that, as Miłosz again notes, “Communism recognizes that rule over men’s mind is the key to rule over an entire country, the word is the cornerstone of this system” (Miłosz 1953: 154), which put a lot of pressure on intellectuals. At the beginning of the communist rule, at least, as Edward Taborsky observed as early as 1957, “while all the major components of the population behind the Iron Curtain have been taking part in the stiffening opposition to their rulers, including the ‘privileged children’ of Marxism-Leninism – the industrial workers, the main initiative, and the most persistent and challenging demands have come from the ranks of the intellectuals” (Taborsky 1957: 308). And the least censored form of expression available for intellectuals was fiction since, as Cornis-Pope notes,

Its role was increasingly cast in politico-ethical terms: literary discourse was often described by the writers themselves as a relentless ‘vigil,’ an obstinate ‘hunt’/‘quest’ for alternative forms of expression against the monologic discourse of power. (Cornis-Pope 1994: 132)

Paradoxically, fiction allowed the writer a much more direct relationship with his reader and, as Manea succinctly puts it, “the writer’s ideal was complicity with his reader” (Manea 2006: 173).

Consequently, the writers’ relationship with the communist authorities is very relevant, not only on a personal level, but also as a symbol of the general need and struggle for freedom of expression. However, as Matei Călinescu remarks, “the fear of repression, in a system of total censorship and total control of everyday life by an all-

powerful secret police, can hardly be understood in abstract terms” (Călinescu 1991: 246).

In a country where ideological pressure was stifling, Norman Manea offers an example of a more sinuous literary career under communism, which is summarized by his literary biographer, Virgil Nemoianu: in an attempt to stay away from the infectious lies of the communist system (“to protect myself against the political and ideological invasion of society”, Manea 2006: 172),

(...) he practiced engineering until 1974, but he started writing soon after graduation, making his prose debut in 1966 in the small avant-garde journal *The Tale of Word*, under the auspices of Miron Radu Paraschivescu, an erratic and heretical Communist poet. His modernistic writing style, as well as the many allusions in his texts critical of the social and political system, slowed down his public recognition. Moreover, his references to Jewish persecution (past and present) irritated the Romanian Communist authorities, who regarded him with suspicion. Nevertheless, after the publication of two volumes of short stories, *Night on the Long Side* (1969) and *First Gates* (1975), and two novels, *Captives* (1970) and *Atrium* (1974), he felt confident enough to dedicate himself exclusively to writing.

Nemoianu goes on to note that

[s]ome of Manea’s best works of fiction, notably *October, Eight O’Clock* (1981) and *The Black Envelope* (1986), appeared in the 1980s, albeit with great difficulty and marred by cuts imposed after long struggles with censors. The passages eliminated were interpreted as satirical allusions to a society shaped by communist totalitarianism. (...) In 1979 he was awarded the Literary Prize of the Association of Bucharest Writers, and in 1984 he won the National Prize of the Romanian Writers’ Union for fiction, (only to see the latter promptly withdrawn by the Communist authorities). (Nemoianu 2001: 251–252)

Manea himself does not claim much glory for his position of independence from the Party, since “in Romania the deal with the Devil had long ago become poor, even bad business, since the Devil had gradually lost its prerogatives, his resources, and wouldn’t even keep his word anymore” (Manea 1999: 80).

Manea left Romania in 1986, and his reception back in Romania, right after the fall of communism, was rather tense -- even more so after he published a couple of articles addressing the thorny issue of Romanian anti-Semitism during World War II and later, a sober look at the Romanian “cultural subconscious” (Manea 2004: 183). The visit he made in 1997 (the starting point of his novel *The Hooligan’s Return*) proved quite depressing for him, as he found the country in a not very encouraging ‘transition’ state. After that, he maintained his relationship with friends and publications in Romania, but without actually visiting the country again until 2008, when he was awarded the title of Doctor Honoris Causa by two prestigious Romanian universities: Universitatea București and Universitatea ‘Babes-Bolyai’ in Cluj-Napoca. This second homecoming proved more successful, as it was followed by another visit to Romania in 2010, when the writer was again the centre of interest for both mass media and the academic world.

The experience of writing literature under a communist regime left a deep mark on writers. They are deeply aware of how this experience endangered their integrity, as exemplified by Norman Manea's first new book produced in the West, *On Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist*, which creates a powerful picture of the social, psychological and cultural context in which his books were written and read – one of the first American reviews calls it “an eloquent and explicit account of a writer's struggle to hang on to his sanity and honor in Ceaușescu's Romania” (Begley 1992). It may explain, at least in part, the Romanian critics' reactions to Manea's career in the West which was, up to a point, similar to that of Czech critics towards Kundera.

This volume of essays was first published in English, in the author's translation, in 1992, at the same time with Manea's first collection of short stories published in the United States, *October, Eight O'Clock*. In its entirety, the collection of essays looks at Romanian politics, literary ideologies, moral conundrums and cultural trends from a very involved and personal perspective. The author's intention is to clarify for his western readers the fine points of intellectual life under communism since, as Matei Călinescu remarks in his review of the volume, “although Manea's essays are on the subject of Romania, they illustrate issues that are not confined to that country. Many of his observations will interest the student of modern Eastern Europe as well as the student of communism and its institutions” (Călinescu 1994: 111–112).

In his introduction to the first edition, Manea explains that his interest was drawn to the image of the writer in a totalitarian society, since “in any political system that uses culture as a weapon (honoring the artist with out-of proportion privileges or punishments), the writer constantly faces traps meant to compromise him and to gradually destroy his integrity and thus his very identity” (9). This makes the writer “an extreme case in an extreme situation, thus becoming a symbol for the deadlock of the whole society” (12). Still, as he mentions in the preface to the German edition, what he offers is first of all his personal experience: “I did not want to speak for any group, just for the strictly personal experience I represent” (Manea 2004: 328).

The volume goes from general to particular. The first essay, ‘Romania: Three Lines with Commentary’ is addressed firstly to a western audience, as a kind of presentation of Romania as the author knows it and his readers do not. The first approach is political, an attempt to explain the finer points of totalitarian regimes, starting with a distinction between Nazism and Communism:

Nazism was in agreement with itself when it did what it did; its followers, at least in the first stages, chose it ‘knowingly’ and ‘legally.’ Communism is rather in disagreement with itself, when it comes to a summing-up of the relation between project and reality – a system imposed by coercion, which forced large masses to follow it. This disagreement between the ideology and the practical necessities of governing, between the proposed ideal and the reality that denies it also produces its relative capacity to redress, to restructure and mystify. (16)

In this context, Manea claims, the succession of changes in the party's policy towards writers, as illustrated by ‘personal’ events – “the raw material of the calendar and of the biography” (19) – can be very relevant (here, like Miłosz and Kundera before him, he acts as a witness in order to win the trust of his readers). And he

illustrates his comparison between Communism and Nazism with an episode that demonstrates the insidious and (by the mid-'80s) already shameless, almost natural anti-Semitism of the authorities, although it went against the claimed internationalism of the communist movement -- a complete break between theory and reality.

In defining his cultural background, Manea moves from considerations on communism and totalitarian systems in general to the more specific cultural concept of Central Europe, from both a geographical and a historical approach. Almost twenty years after Kundera's article 'The Tragedy of Central Europe,' Manea pleads for an inclusive, rather than exclusive use of the term but, focusing in the end on the cultural elements, he has to admit that "'real socialism' in Romania in the '70s and '80s has recorded important changes from the 'European' norm" (32). While culture was considered by many in Romania a form of resistance to political pressure, it also involved many morally ambiguous compromises, both from the point of view of the official ideology and of those who were supposedly 'resisting' it. The example given here is the exhilaration produced in all circles (including the highest ranks of the Party) at the first publication in Romania, again in the '80s, of Mircea Eliade's *A History of Religious Ideas*. Eliade's position as a highly respected academic in the West seemed to justify the enthusiasm in an officially atheist country that also persisted in ignoring his fascist youth. Elaborating on the moral ambiguity that had become the norm in communist Romania, Manea quotes the testimony of one of his American friends who, after a visit to Romania, expresses his failure to understand how the good and the bad can be collaborating so easily in this country. On his part, and against Kundera's exaltation of culture, Manea exposes "a culture obsessed with the aesthetic, taking an indulgent ironic distance from the summons of the ethic" (46) as a direct result (and support) of this moral ambiguity.

The Post-Scriptum indicates to the western reader at least one reason for which writers have accepted the compromise: "the reader was expecting from literature what he could not find in newspapers, in history or sociology books; he would read between the lines, looking for iconoclastic charades. The writer accepted this distortion as the unavoidable price of his solidarity with his audience" (51). Unfortunately, Manea continues, the ambiguities resulted from reading fiction for information on history or sociology seem to have survived the changes of 1989, with uncomfortable results in the public arena.

The title essay of the volume, 'On Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist' takes the western readers from the general considerations on communism, ethics and aesthetics to an actual example of the conundrums of writing truthfully in a communist regime, and as such it can practically be read as an exorcism or as therapy. Manea begins by stating that "In a totalitarian state, the day-to-day details, words and gestures carry warped meaning that can only be deciphered by the local citizens, citizens of the underground. The code seems lunar and fascinating though, to anyone who lives in a normal society" (74). In illustration, he offers us the censor's report on one of his novels (*The Black Envelope*, eventually published, with many cuts, in 1986), with his own comments, almost like a translation. The fact that he had seen this report is already extraordinary, as officially Romania had no censorship since the end of the '70s. The main point here is duplicity:

duplicity as recipe for salvation. Duplicity of the author, duplicity of the reader, duplicity of the publisher, duplicity of the censor and of the substitute? Duplicity as a communication relay. The author writing under a totalitarian regime wants the tricks, allusions, encodings, as well as the raw, direct and brutal images he uses to reach his reader. They are addressed to the reader in a kind of sad implicit solidarity. But he also hopes, at the same time, that his message is ignored by the censor. Duplicity rests heavily on the captive writer. (111)

The finer points of any totalitarian ideology, Manea explains, can become irrelevant for the literature produced under such a regime. The end-result is always an encrypted type of writing, which almost defies the understanding of anyone not personally familiar with the world described in it.

Profoundly aware of the difficulties and even risks involved in writing honestly under communism, Manea's essay, 'Felix Culpa' focuses on the moral imperative for the intellectual. Observing that "the number of intellectuals who found themselves on the 'wrong' side, on the side of totalitarianism is not at all negligible in our century" (145), he gives the example of Mircea Eliade, who had not, to his death, recanted his youthful allegiance to fascism. The article was first published in 1991 and it produced outrage in Romania, as it was seen as an attack against not only one of the rather few internationally acclaimed Romanian intellectuals, but also against what was at the time being turned into a mythical 'golden age' of Romanian culture – the inter-war period (completely ignoring its very strong fascist movement, or interpreting it in positive nationalistic terms).<sup>2</sup> The essay insists on the complexities and differences in doctrine between various types of totalitarianism: fascism, communism, Islamic fundamentalism; it "illuminates a deeper affinity between the overt and shamelessly candid inhumanity of Nazi-like ultranationalism and the Communist farce of 'humanist' and 'internationalist' pretences" (Barańczak 1992: 47).

Moving from one type of totalitarianism to another, 'The Story of an Interview' provides a perfect example of the extreme duplicity of every-day life in communism. One of the author's friends is under pressure from the secret police to inform on him. He signs a statement that he would do this, and immediately afterwards informs Manea of the fact. A couple of years follow in which the two friends meet regularly and agree on what kind of information the 'informant' should offer the secret police. The whole charade ends with the 'informer' fleeing the country, leaving Manea to wonder which one of his friends had taken his place.

The interview in the title was published in a literary magazine at the beginning of the '80s and it contained some critical remarks from Manea against an anti-Semitic article published in the 'cultural' magazine sponsored by the secret police. It caused vehement reactions from those whom Manea calls 'the commando unit' – and here, like Miłosz 40 years before him, in *The Captive Mind*, he offers four portraits of perverted intellectuals. And they were, indeed, quite exemplary since, after the fall of communism, Matei Călinescu also gives their names as examples of extreme nationalism:

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<sup>2</sup> The only one to go against this trend was Leon Volovici with his study *Antisemitism: The Case of Romanian Nationalist Ideology and Intellectuals in the 1930s* (1991).

These writers – Eugen Barbu, C. V. Tudor, Ion Lăncrănjan, Adrian Păunescu are among its leading figures – have adopted a populist-nationalist, viciously xenophobic program, anti-Hungarian, anti-Semitic, anti-Gypsy, and broadly anti-intellectual. What is more, they have managed to attract a fairly wide following among a disoriented, frustrated, politically illiterate populace. (Călinescu 1991: 247)

The only solution to the overwhelming duplicity required by the system, as all three authors discussed in the present study had come to conclude, is exile. Manea focuses on the multiple meanings of what has become a fairly common reality of our times, and its implicit assumption of an original identity that is getting more and more difficult to define lately. He insists that what has been called ‘internal’ exile, in one’s own country – a refusal of the intellectual to be an active participant in the system – is not efficient, but merely alienating: “As the contrast between the ideal and reality was growing sharper, as the interdiction to uncover and discuss this contrast was deepening, the terror and economic bankruptcy, hypocrisy, duplicity were becoming the basic rules of assimilation, that is of alienation” (270). In Manea’s view, the late attempts of intellectuals in communist Romania to separate themselves from the system’s authority figures do not justify uncensored admiration.

Consequently, the last essay of the volume, entitled ‘Blasphemy and Carnival’ unmasks “the sanctification of representative cultural personalities,” arguing that “the quasi-religious canonization of non-religious value (...) translates an excessive need for myth, illusion, subterfuges” (279). Manea exemplifies with three cases: Andrei Siniavsky’s attempt to ‘clean up’ Pushkin’s image of nationalist debris, his own comments on Mircea Eliade’s failure to clarify his position towards fascism, and the most famous case of Salman Rushdie’s ‘unorthodox’ references to the Koran. In each of these cases, he argues, “the natural intellectual practice, either under the form of moral interrogation, aesthetic study or epic creation, was granted – for the simple fact that it was defying the patterns and conventions of spiritual comfort – the rank of blasphemy.” This, to him, is left over from the closed, authoritarian society, where “blasphemy is obsessive, serving the artificial coherence imposed by the regime” (299), and, he fears, this may be noticeable in his literature, when read in the West.

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