Theatricality and Totalitarianism. Case study: The Black Envelope (1986) by Norman Manea

Abstract

In my paper I shall approach the phenomenon of communist totalitarianism in relation to the theatricality developed by the inhabitants of the countries in the socialist camp, in a society under constant surveillance by the political police. At the same time, I shall look at the ways in which theatricality permeates and is reflected in the novels of the age, particularly in Norman Manea’s novel The Black Envelope, first published in Romania in 1986 in a censored version. In The Captive Mind, the Polish writer Czesław Miłosz devotes an entire chapter to exploring the forms of histrionism developed by the inhabitants of the Sovietized countries. Similar ideas are conveyed in an interview of Matei Călinescu, a Romanian-American literary critic and prose writer, who describes life under Ceaușescu’s neo-Stalinist regime as being governed by „Pseudo”. In this Orwellian universe the totalitarian, tyrannical fiction rivals literary fiction. The fiction-to-fiction relation between literature and the totalitarian world is significantly problematised in N. Manea’s writings.
Keywords

theatricality, communism, Norman Manea, censorship, captive mind

In *The Captive Mind*, Czesław Miłosz’s famous essay on „popular democracies” ([1951] 1955), an entire chapter is devoted to exploring the forms of histrionism developed by the inhabitants of the countries in the socialist camp as a response to political pressure and constant surveillance (pp. 51–77). The Polish writer’s comment affords a surprisingly deep insight into the phenomenon of totalitarianism in Central and Eastern Europe. The author singles out excessive theatricality as a dominant feature of collective psychology, massively widespread and recognisable in the peoples subservient to communist ideology. This reminded Miłosz of the Ketman method used in the Muslim East, a method described by Count Arthur de Gobineau¹ in his book *Religions et philosophies de l’Asie centrale* (1863). Ketman refers to the ability of a person of a certain faith (in this instance, followers of Zoroastrianism) to dissimulate their true religious, existential beliefs, by feigning compliance or allegiance to their enemies.

In Czesław Miłosz’s view, what distinguishes the theatricality peculiar to the inhabitants of the countries in the socialist camp is the fact that it is not only a mass play, but also a conscious one, at least to the point of acquiring and internalizing, through a great deal of practice, the reflexes necessary for a flawless performance:

all human behavior contains a significant amount of acting. A man reacts to his environment and is molded by it even in his gestures. Nevertheless, what we find in the people’s democracies is a conscious mass play rather than automatic imitation. Conscious acting, if one practices it long enough, develops those traits which one uses most in one’s role, just as a man who became a runner because he had good

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¹ Secretary of the French delegation in Persia between 1855 and 1858 and minister plenipotentiary, from 1861 to 1863.
legs develops his legs even more in training. After long acquaintance with his role, a man grows into it so closely that he can no longer differentiate his true self from the self he simulates, so that even the most intimate of individuals speak to each other in Party slogans. To identify one's self with the role one is obliged to play brings relief and permits a relaxation of one's vigilance. Proper reflexes at the proper moment become truly automatic (Miłosz, [1951] 1955, p. 52).

Czesław Miłosz draws an important distinction between the so-called „acting in everyday life” (in the terminology made popular in the 1960s-1970s by the American sociologist Erving Goffman) and forced acting, imposed under a totalitarian regime – in which, as a result of constant surveillance under the watchful eye of the secret police, a „retheatricalizing” or „overtheatricalizing” of everyday life takes place, which reveals a major crisis in individual and societal existence2. A comparison with the world watched by the all-seeing eye of the „Big Brother” in George Orwell’s 1984 can hardly be avoided.

A similar distinction is made by Matei Călinescu (1995), an American-Romanian literary critic and writer, who, in an interview given to the prose writer Gabriela Adameşteanu after the fall of communism, described life under Ceauşescu’s neo-Stalinist regime as being governed by „Pseudo”, and distinguished between the „theatrical elements” intertwined naturally with our everyday life and „total duplicity”, which one had to resort to in any situation in order to survive under the regime in question (p. 64).

C. Miłosz and M. Călinescu take radically different stances on the valorization of the phenomenon of (re)theatricalizing everyday life, which is specific to the countries in the socialist camp. Before going into more detail, I shall also point out a similarity:

2 In Totalitarian Framework and Narcissistic Functioning (2004), Radu Clit, a French clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst of Romanian origin, states, from the psychotherapist's standpoint, that, under the communist regime, „every person played different roles in different situations. This happens in every type of society, but totalitarianism overly accentuates differences” (p. 308). (In France, his work was published under the title Cadre totalitaire et fonctionnement narcissique. Effets psychiques collectifs et individuels du pouvoir d'état communiste est-européen (2003).)
both thinkers envisage the phenomenon as consisting of two stages – the emergence of theatricality, triggered by historical adversities, respectively the perpetuation of theatricality, after mastering the appropriate responses. Moving from one stage to another can happen smoothly, discreetly, by organic adaptation to necessities – in the way described by C. Miłosz in *The Captive Mind*, or, on the contrary, abruptly like a catastrophe, as it results from the interview of M. Călinescu.

In his analysis infused with fine irony and self-irony (the author admits having been drawn to the communist movement in its early years, like many other intellectuals of his generation), C. Miłosz tends to give precedence to the quasi-euphoric time of relaxation, when man’s inner joints give way under external pressure, and the role played through fear of the hostile eyes of the authorities becomes second nature. Actually, this does not refer to a moment, difficult to pinpoint as such, but to a lengthier process: while it does not disappear (quite the opposite in fact), forced acting or, rather, the awareness thereof becomes inconsequential, as the agent’s interest shifts in time from the external form to the disguised content, from the expressive to the introspective. Partially relieved of the burden of self-surveillance (after the self-identification with the imposed role), the individual even finds reasons to be gratified, as the play seems to perpetuate at the expense of the enemy, by „fooling” him. What Miłosz is trying to suggest is that a certain complicity between executioners and their theatricalized victims arises in the power situations under consideration – a complicity with roots deep into the innermost centre of the being, which are also responsible for the emergence of totalitarianism. (They mainly refer to the shock of the two World Wars, which led to the collapse of Western values.)

The sincere or feigned adherence to communism, which C. Miłosz, not accidentally, designates as „The New Faith”, takes place, in the author’s opinion, against the crisis-ridden backdrop of the individual identity being called into question: „He who practices Ketman lies. But would he be less dishonest if he could speak the truth?” (Miłosz, [1951] 1955, p. 76). Hence the attraction of the New Faith: by subjecting man to pressure, the New Faith gives him a sense that this centre exists.
By contrast, forced acting, used under extreme circumstances, seems to M. Călinescu (1995, pp. 64–65) to be nothing less than „a form of torture”, which subjects the body to „tremendous stress” – this being supported by the polygraph evidence which is admitted in Western courts of law. When he can no longer bear the „pressure of the fake”, M. Călinescu observes, the individual comes to seek excuses for lying: the lie which he once told consciously now becomes a „sincere lie” or, in other words, lying to others is gradually replaced by lying to oneself (p. 65). Unlike C. Miłosz, the Romanian thinker sees the time of giving way as a dramatic one – the difference being accounted for to a certain extent by the time gap between the comments in question, the different personalities of the two authors and their specific experiences of communism, as well as by their nationality. M. Călinescu argues trenchantly that lying, „total duplicity”, destroys everything which is „solid” in man or which gives the impression of solidity (pp. 64–65). Unlike Miłosz, he does not think that the practice of total dissimulation could foster the illusion of solidity, but, quite the opposite, it humiliates man, causes him to lose self-respect. Moreover, in his opinion total duplicity endangers the very life of the body, being „biologically difficult to bear”, since „man is an animal programmed to tell the truth”, that is to say man is possessed of a nature from which he can deviate in certain circumstances, but not all the time (pp. 64–65). Man’s values collapse – are in crisis – under ideological and political pressure, and with them, man’s inner structure, on the ruins of which the so-called „pseudo-conscience” can install itself brutally (Călinescu, 1995, p. 65).

The contrast between C. Miłosz’s and M. Călinescu’s views reveals, among other things, the ambiguity and paradox of acting, which, by using disguises, asserts that which it appears to deny, denies that which it appears to assert, conceals what it reveals and vice-versa – in short, it is an amalgam of contradictions, fuelling illusions which it concomitantly destroys. Within acting both the germs of compromise and those of resistance are at work, at the same time. In this respect it is significant that the Central and East European novel features two main groups of characters emblematic for what life governed by „Pseudo” was like in the socialist camp: the group
of declared or eccentric histrions, characters with a recognized penchant for acting, who defy the system with their provocative tricks, therefore embracing the fake and turning it into a weapon against the regime (Woland&co, in particular Koroviev, in Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Maester and Margarita* [1940; published only in 1967], Ostap Bender, the protagonist in Ilf and Petrov’s novels, Zacharias Lichter in Matei Călinescu’s *The Life and Opinions of Zacharias Lichter* [1969], Vicol Antipa in George Bălăiță’s *The World in Two Days* [1975], Anatol Dominic Vancea Voinov in Norman Manea’s *The Black Envelope* [1986]), or, on the contrary, characters who adapt (Babis Vătășescu in Constantin Țoiu’s *The Fall into the World* [1987]) and even take advantage of the „system” (Muți Grigoriu in Petru Dumitriu’s *Dustless Road* [1951] and Pius Dabija in Petru Dumitriu’s *Family Chronicle* [1956], Pavel Zemanek in Milan Kundera’s *Žert* [The Joke, 1967], Niki in Gabriela Adameșteanu’s *Wasted Morning* [1983]); and the group of the afflicted or of characters with a divided sense of self who, finding it very difficult to endure the double life imposed by the regime, go through a soul-searching process which results either in their discovery of the truth about themselves, or in renunciation and taking refuge in self-deception, or in arriving at inconclusive answers („the divided” characters in the novels of the dissident Paul Goma, most protagonists in Alexandru Ivasiuc’s novels, Dan Toma in Augustin Buzura’s *The Faces of Silence* [1974], Chiril Merișor in Constantin Țoiu’s *The Gallery of Wild Vine* [1976], Nelly and her daughter, Lenka, in Christa Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster* [Patterns of Childhood, 1976], Iustin Arghir in Bujor Nedelcovici’s trilogy *The Sleep of the Customs Officer* [1981], the leading character in Tadeusz Konwicki’s novel *Mala apokalipsa* [The Small Apocalypse, 1979] etc.). Of course, there are intermediate types (such as, Andrei Platonov’s „idiots”, Marin Preda’s „oddballs” or Milan Kundera’s „Voltairians”, Augustus the Fool in Norman Manea’s *The Apprenticeship Years of Augustus the Fool* [1979], Candid Dezideriu and his wife Olimpia in I.D. Sirbu’s *Farewell, Europe!* [1985, published only in 1991-’92] etc.).

However, the theatricality of the communist world influences the forms of Central and East-European literature in much more diverse and subtle ways, leading to – in the case of the novel – theatricalization, which also affects the novelistic narrative. Thus,
a "theatralizing" method commonly used by the Romanian prose writers of the age is the "placing into the abyss" (*la mise en abyme*), through which ingenious specular effects are obtained, which meet the need for maximum visibility of the textual message and the subtextual one, which is often subversive. Also called at a certain point, very suggestively, a "mimodrame" of the narrative ("mimodrame du récit") by Lucien Dällenbach (1997, p. 69) who theorized the concept, the above-mentioned technique is the source of an endless play of mirrors, whence the (reader’s, as well as the character’s) constant feeling that people and things act in the novel just as they would do on a stage: they are watched by an all-seeing eye.

In the case of less conformist writings one can speak of the revival of baroque-mannerist techniques of (distorted and distorting) reflection of the models proposed by the literature subservient to the Communist Party (models intended to be "classical"). Actually, the Baroque and Mannerism introduced in the history of art acting as a worldview. The prose writer’s discourse often shifts from the metaphysical projection of "the world as a stage", directed by some remote gods, to the historicized projection thereof: the world is depicted as a play directed by a great puppet master, identifiable in the early realm, yet unnameable most of the time, because of censorship, as he is the Dictator himself. Most novelists, aware of the latter's position as director of the Great Play of the communist world, resort to the oblique method of pointing the finger at the Dictator, thus reiterating the well-known Baroque motif, together with its associated metaphysical connotations (a case in point is Norman Manea’s novel *The Black Envelope*, as will be shown later).

Regarding the themes analysed, another way of theatricalizing the epic genre under communism is characteristic of investigative literature. Claiming to be rooted in a poetics of truth, many novels by Romanian authors of the communist period approach the topic of the inquiry into the past carried out by one or several
characters – inquiry which thoroughly engrosses them. Undertaking to reconstruct a scenario, the course of somebody’s past life, in other words to do, by following certain clues, a reenactment (for oneself/ internal), the characters in question must mentally step into the shoes of the once agents, try to “get into character”, in order to be able to understand what happened in the past. The process is similar to acting. N. Manea’s The Black Envelope fits into this genre, i.e. the mystery novel.

**Literary Fiction vs. Totalitarian Fiction in N. Manea’s Work**

„The pressure of the fake” (in the words of M. Călinescu) borne by the inhabitants of the communist camp corresponds to the gap between the „Old Man” and the „New Man”, the one envisaged in the party doctrinal documents. The constant pressure leads to the accelerated derealization of reality, which gives way to totalitarian (tyrannical) fiction. For this reason, the relation between Eastern European literature and life under communism can be described as one between two fictional worlds.

The fiction-to-fiction relation between literature and the totalitarian world is significantly problematized in the writings of prose writer and essayist N. Manea (born in Romania, to Jewish parents, in 1936, moving to Germany on a scholarship in 1986 and settling in the USA permanently in 1988). In his view, the Dictator, as a maker of fictions, has always exerted a morbid fascination on the artist, who is inclined to see in the former a kind of twin. The Dictator and the artist come together, as N. Manea observes uneasily in the collection of essays gathered under the title On Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist (1992) (which appeared in Romanian in 1997), because both feel the need to imagine fantastical realities, cardboard worlds. In the same work the writer also contends that, while being founded on terror, the communist system has not been able to build a monolithic society, but one „characterized by ambiguity, duplicity, masks and falsehoods” (Manea, 1992, p. xi).

In The Black Envelope (1986), N. Manea’s most famous Romanian novel (and the last one published in Romania before the author’s self-imposed exile), the techniques used, namely parody, satire,
intertextuality, are directed at the language of the state apparatus, the stylistics of power, that is the propaganda which contributed substantially in the last decade of Ceausescu’s regime to fabricating the myth of the „Romanian spring”. The pirandellian-bulgakovi-an-type novel has as its main character the writer Mynheer, who is trying to write a book and/or a play. The problem is that Mynheer has to overcome censorship and the temptation to fraternize with the paper pushing „devil”, the representative of state authority. The twisted phrase, with frequent comebacks, reflects the stylistic as well as existential uncertainty of the character-writer, who has to fight both state censorship and self-censorship, which compels obedience, a servile attitude towards the regime. Mynheer shifts part of the responsibility for his words and actions onto his characters, whom he calls and who call themselves – in line with the mechanism of specular reciprocity – his „substitutes” (Manea, 1986, pp. 21, 45, 53 etc.). Sometimes the author and the characters rebel against interconditionality. Things get more complicated as the characters created by Mynheer have models in „real” life, who in their turn claim the right to an authentic life, unadulterated by substitutes and all types of simulacra. All these complications are meant to emphasize the fact that life guided by totalitarian fiction means nothing more than a fictitious, divided, theatricalized existence.

Mynheer must be seen as the author’s alter ego. Actually a gripping saga of the author’s experience of communist censorship surrounded the publication of The Black Envelope, which resulted in some passages being altered or deleted from the text prepared for print. Thus Manea himself was subject to censorship (and self-censorship), similarly with his fictional double. In short, the novel sent by the writer to Cartea Românească publishing house was deemed unfit to print in its original form. Why? As N. Manea (2012) himself explains, „my allegorical novel The Black Envelope gave strong political accents to daily life under socialist misery and terror at a time when the propagandists and censors were encouraging the

4 In the revised version of the novel, published in English: „substitutes” (Manea, 2012, pp. 18, 70 etc.).
'aesthetical' approach to writing in order to abandon daily reality for a more magnificent one” (p. 233). Consequently, a second censor was called in by the publishing house, in order to help the author (and the publishers) out of the impasse (!). The second censor prepared a report with recommendations for Manea, all of them in keeping with the Zhdanovist sub-aesthetics (that is, socialist realism), which was revived in the last period of Ceaușescu’s dictatorship. After the fall of the communist regime, the report in question was made public by N. Manea (1992, pp. 63–90) in the previously mentioned collection of essays. In the report the censor recommended, among other things, an optimistic outlook, in other words renouncing „a one-sided, preponderently negative view of daily life and of the social and moral climate in which the fortunes of the characters evolve” (p. 78). He also recommended correcting passages in which the national past of sympathizing with fascist, antisemitic movements was incriminated, and redirecting those criticisms towards the so-called imperialistic societies of the rotten West. In other words, the writer was required to present a cosmeticised reality. However, he somehow managed to get around this requirement, paying a price though (as we shall see later).

After going into exile, the writer revised the book, trying to recover its original, uncensored version. In the revised form, The Black Envelope became well-known throughout the world starting in 1995, being published in many languages. The first Romanian edition of the new, uncensored version came out in 1996. The metanarrative frame of the novel is missing in the revised version and thus, also the narrator-character Mynheer. A significant change as a result of which „the metanovel turned into a complex polyphonic novel”, as noted by the literary critic Claudiu Turcuș (2016, p. 123) in his monograph on N. Manea. At the same time, the author removed wordiness and redundancies which made the first edition rather heavy reading. Also, „in the second version, the anti-communist allusions develop overtones unfathomable back in 1986” (Nemoianu,

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5 Andrei Zhdanov, leading figure of the Russian Communist Party, chief propagandist and ideologist who supported social realism.
2019, p. 91). Nevertheless, in what follows I shall refer, as I have done previously, to the first, uncensored version of the novel.

From the very first pages of the book, one is struck by the author’s frequent recourse to satire and parody, the cultivation of ostentation, extravagance, tragic-absurd buffoonery. With regard to both form and content, N. Manea relies on the aesthetics of exposing convention, which is why:

The style is implosive, verbose, revels in digressions and mental periphrases, never names things directly (...). Aristotelian logic is replaced by the dynamics of contradiction (...), better able to capture a multiform, non-notional, random reality in motion. The author of the narrative is extremely mobile, denying the principle of the excluded middle, through a continuous shift between the roles of narrator, actor or spectator of the other, of collective commentator (a kind of public opinion), omniscient author or a minimalist one, who tells a story as through a haze (of memory, dreaming, creation) (Braga, 2002, p. 349).

Paradoxically, there is a feeling of seething, of powerless agonizing which overwhelms, including the characters. Repetitions, comebacks, withdrawals, recantings, elliptical phrases, the absence of the verb or of connecting words, the large number of adjectival epithets, all these language features manage to convey, according to literary critic Corin Braga (2002, p. 349) the “effects of the dissociating pressure” exercised by the confined, claustrophobic environment of totalitarian society, on the characters’ psychology, “on the novel at all levels, on the triad protagonist – narrator – author”. The discourse adopts, polemically and parodically, the phraseology of Ceausescu’s propaganda. Speaking allusively mocks but also propagates the triumphalist tone of state officials, being itself a “clown” that simultaneously exposes and conceals himself, behind tricks played with bittersweet nonchalance – a clown confining himself to acrobatic gestures, refusing to divulge his secret.

Due to the “effects of the dissociating pressure” foregrounded in the novel and analysed by the literary critic Corin Braga, not only linguistic masks, but also typological ones emerge. Sensing the power of words (Manea, 1986, p. 12), a character in The Black Envelope...
sees on the page how some masks spring from the others: „words which instantly came real, upon their simply being uttered”6. A wide thematic, of pirandellian origin, of the author’s encounter with his characters, is developed starting from such passages. At the same time, The Black Envelope is closely related with M. Bulgakov’s unfinished Театральный роман (Записки покойника) [Theatrical Novel].

**The Devil and the Good Lord**

As I mentioned earlier, the narrative in The Black Envelope recreates the setting of Ceausescu’s intensely proclaimed and much-sung „Romanian spring” of the early ’80s, with small, deliberate omissions, which correspond to the gap between appearance and essence. A succession of masks, of divided, theatricalized, drifting individuals with pulverized identities parade against this backdrop which flaunts its idyllic kitsch, in a style heavily loaded with the cliches of the age. The joy, the celebration of „spring”, the confidence in the „bright future” are mimicked vigorously, explosively, the festive mood dictated by the authorities is acted out mechanically. The (imposed) routine troubles the spirits, engenders mutations, turns the individual into a dissembler with an equivocal existence, in between chimera and reality, compelling imposture and encouraging parasitical artistic velleities (see the case of the character who introduces himself as „Titian”, like the painter by the same name). Thus people live in a great fiction, doubly potentiated, from the top down and from the bottom up: the „Romanian spring” is the Dictator’s fictional, grandiose projection, which also happens to be inhabited by gifted artists (such as the writer Mynheer), who, in their turn, people it with their own fictional projections – the so-called „substitutes” (such as Mynheer’s favourite character, the clown Anatol Dominic Vancea Voinov). Fiction engenders fiction. The dictator and the artist come together because both feel the need to imagine utopian cardboard worlds, as for both of them „the chimera of reality” is „more real than reality itself” (Manea, 1992, p. 55) – hence their secret complicity and, yet, there

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6 „The words became real as soon as she spoke them to herself” (Manea, 2012, p. 33).
is a difference, which is the remorse, the deep sense of guilt felt by the latter. Whereas the former, the dictator, is „obsessed with the impossible“, the latter, the artist, is „an outsider, a pariah, a melancholy dreamer and an unwavering researcher, an undecided mime, a man obsessed by irresolvable questions“ (Manea, 1992, p. 55). (The latter characterization fits Mynheer perfectly.) The character Titian in \textit{The Black Envelope} sums up the situation in a response with a value of poetic art, evoking the compromises made by his brilliant namesake, who painted his powerful patrons – the sponsors – in situations meant to flatter their vanity, but which, upon taking a closer look, revealed the opposite, the „artist’s impertinence“ – became, thanks to colour, „virtuosity“? (Manea, 1986, p. 428).

N. Manea’s novel relies on mirroring (and the full range of mirror reflections), on schizoid specularity with a metaphysical-romantic grounding, which calls the self into question, multiplies the facets of the character and, most importantly, magnifies his role-playing, leading to complicitous recognitions, confusions, distancing, and so on. Thus, Titian is only one of Mynheer’s alter-egos, together with Anatol („Tolea“) Dominic Vancea Voinov, Irina, Matei Gafton, Ianuli, Toma etc. The infinitely expansive specularity reflects the bipolarity of the world, which is disputed by God and the Evil One, who are themselves two entities facing each other in a mirror, twin, complicitous, although antagonists, who have their imitators among the mortals:

If the Benefactor is also a poor wretch like us, as it is written in the book of our identity books, that we are built in His image and likeness, not perfectly identical, but even that is enough ... then the other, the Evil One, the partner with whom He shares the power and the duties, [...] His Majesty the Prince of Sin, twin and bastard, usurper, well, he also resembles some human shape. After all we are built in the image and likeness... 8 (Manea, 1986, pp. 258–259).

\footnote{7 „But color! Color is the painter’s impertinence, his virtuosity“ (Manea, 2012, p. 277).}

\footnote{8 In the revised version, the passage is changed as follows: „If the Benefactor, the Great Cardsharper, doesn’t wish it to be so, there’s nothing to be done: you can’t force the wheel of fortune. But you can: yes, you can if you persevere. Even the Invisible One gets bored and gives way in the end; after all, He’s built in our}
This is what the character Anatol Dominic Vancea Voinov ponders on. (It is worth noting that in this passage Norman Manea avoids the terms „God”, „Devil” or „Bible”, which were banned during the late Ceausescu era, because of their mystical connotation.) For instance, while aspiring to write a book modelled on the Bible, Mynheer also dreams of being a „usurper”, inspired by the playful cunning of the Devil-clown, expert in parodying divine creation. This evidences the reversal of values in totalitarian societies and the perversion of art, which has to resort to devious tricks or stratagems to avoid complete submission to political power which, on the authority of its own self-proclaimed worthiness, substitutes itself for God. (Bulgakov’s Maester and Margarita remains unparalleled when it comes to the illustration of these realities.)

Come to the cabaret!...

All elements of The Black Envelope – the setting, the characters, the theme of the artist’s ambiguous relationship to political power – seem to have been intended as a homage to the film Cabaret (1972), directed by Bob Fosse. The book Mynheer is writing is also aimed as a counterpart of the politicized cabaret show, „diabolised”, by force of circumstances, in the above mentioned film. Mynheer plays the part of master of ceremonies, who directs the actors’ coming on and getting off stage, introduces the performers and the acts, keeps the interest of the audience alive during the show. However, unlike Fosse’s masterpiece, which is unidirectional, N.Manea’s novel looks at the two totalitarianisms which marked the history of the 20th century, namely Nazism and communism. For this reason, the names of the leading characters, Mynheer and Anatol Dominic Vancea Voinov, have to be linked with the spaces which exported them, Hitler’s Germany and the Soviet Union, respectively. Thus the protagonists become, by a symbolic transfer, representative of the generations that
experienced firsthand both right-wing and left-wing totalitarianism (similarly with Norman Manea).

Anatol Dominic Vancea Voinov occasions the writing of dozens of pages of genuine literary physiology, centred on a repentant ham actor in a prison-like world – the communist camp. With his „blunders and exaggerations”, as Mynheer describes him, he is the perfect „replacement” – „the representative” (p. 21). Anatol Dominic Vancea Voinov knows how to turn suffering (because, like most of the characters, Tolea suffers from the effects of incarceration, which is the speciality of psychiatrist Marga, another collaborator of the secret police) into a colourful, sophisticated show, that would antagonize his acquaintances and the authorities.

A former teacher in a provincial town, dismissed and sent back to the capital ostensibly on a charge of homosexuality, but really for political reasons, employed as a receptionist at „Tranzit” hotel – the name is a „metaphor for the protagonist’s precarious condition” (Braga, 2002, p. 347) –, constantly under suspicion because of his complicated political file (a brother, Mircea Claudiu, who emigrated to Argentina, because of being forced to undergo a typical communist staged trial based on „delation”9; a sister, Sonia, who also emigrated, to Switzerland etc.), Tolea has every reason to think of himself as an outcast, a pariah with a recognized and assumed role of phàrmakos or „scapegoat”10 (Manea, 1986, p. 53). His resistance to the persecutions of the regime is rather formal, ineffective – a „serene pact”, an „exalted complicity” (Manea, 1986, p. 83). The character relies on the aesthetics of shock, in a mannerist fashion, because this somehow exonerates him. Like Alcibiades, who in eessayst Ion Vartic’s view (1977, p. 108) is the „subtle precursor” of dandyism, Anatol Dominic Vancea Voinov resorts to „tricks to pull the wool over the eyes of his viewers, evading any certain, definitive judgement”, which is bound to diminish „to the point of erasing his true awareness of his true faults” (Vartic, 1977, p. 110). „By his remarkable ability to metamorphose, by the endless reshaping of the shapes he

9 Trials of political opponents for unmasking traitors of the regime based on the delation or denunciation of their actions or attitudes hostile to the communist regime.

assumes” (Vartic, 1977, p. 111), traits which he shares with the extravagant Athenian, Tolea invites multiple, successive speculations, all unaccommodating, reductive, never quite satisfactory. Like a true dandy, Dominic moves through an environment which represents him: the similarities „can extend up to a symbolic identification, to the possibility of substituting one for the other” (Vartic, 1977, p. 113). (Other dandy-like traits: effemination, vague sexual preferences, hence the mistrust of Tolea, suspected of engaging in homosexual relations. It is no accident that one of the character’s cultural models is the Alexandria-born poet Konstantinos Kavafis).

All possible metamorphoses cannot compete with those of the regime itself, which – through its fanaticized devotees, such as the diabolical Ianuili and his spouse, also known as the „Megawhore”11, most likely a scathing imitation of Elena Ceauşescu – is under Circe’s spell. This explains, as Irina observes, Mynheer’s unrequited love, „anything she would have tried would have seemed merely a timid, failed simulation in the grandiose repertoire of Circe the scumbag” (p. 458). For the same reason, the inquiry in the family’s traumatic past, triggered by a letter from his brother in Argentina, does not bring relief to Anatol Dominic Vancea Voinov. He fails in the morbid fascination for Octavian, his father’s persecutor and executionner, and for the latter’s wife, Venera. Octavian, being in love with Tolea’s sister, who was going to marry another man, had tried, in despair, to blackmail her father, sending him a threatening letter („the black envelope”) which bore the triplecross symbol of the Iron Guard (the Romanian far-right movement of the interwar period). That story had taken place in 1940, at a time when the Iron Guard was greatly feared. The blackmail victim, namely Tolea’s and Sonia’s father, had died afterwards in unclear circumstances, by drowning either accidentally (a fatal moment’s distraction, caused, anyway, by the distress over the threatening letter he had received), or intentionally (a quick, self-inflicted death being preferable to one at the hands of the legionaries and to the terrifying prospect of an imminent encounter with them). As for Octavian, who was behind the sinister blackmail, his failed love affair led him to retreat permanently into

11 „Megawhore” or „Superwhore” (Manea, 2012, p. 292).
the obscurity of a deaf-mute association, an explicit imitation of the often-invoked organisation of the blind in *Sobre héroes y tumbas* [On Heroes and Tombs] (1961), the famous novel by the Latin-American writer Ernesto Sábato, and, also, „an allegory of human condition in the perfect stronghold” (Braga, 2002, p. 349), of the „new man” created by annihilating the human being.

Obviously, Anatol Dominic Vancea Voinov’s extensive reflections on the theatricality of Argentinians are only a pretext for an equally extensive autoscopy. However, libidinous death wishes push Tolea to consume himself definitively in a final spectacular act, as he recreates, in much more sumptuous staging, the last moment of his father’s life. The protagonist’s death poses a dilemma not only for Mynheer, but also for N. Manea himself. The only glimmer of hope in the novel is conveyed by Irina’s trance-like whisper, „the great hospitable night which forgives and frees us”\(^{12}\) (p. 106).

**Conclusions**

As soon as *The Black Envelope* was published, N. Manea reviewed the novel with very critical eyes, as he would later admit in *On Clowns...*, the rereading causing him vexation at „the warping effect of all that encoding, obfuscation, stylistic excess and opacity, devitalization, circuitousness, and waste” (p. 88). In his opinion, these were the feat of the censors and censorship „by delayed action and remote control, even when I thought I had fooled and beaten them” (Manea, 1992, p. 88). The critics appeared to be much more lenient. (In *Norman Manea. Aesthetics as East Ethics*, Claudiu Turcuș offers a compelling overview of the critical reception of the two versions of the novel – see pp. 118–123.) I shall only cite the opinion of the Romanian-American critic Virgil Nemoianu (2019), who dismisses the idea that the reasons for the so-called „illegibility” of N. Manea’s writings are the constraints of censorship (as the author himself claims) (p. 89). Nemoianu argues that N. Manea’s style has always been

\(^{12}\) In the revised version the character who looks forwards to the liberating night is Tolea: „the great hospitable night which forgives our laughter and swallows up our dead bodies” (Manea, 2012, p. 268).
the same, even „at a time when the party pressure on literature” was „at an all-time low”, which is, at the beginning of his literary career, and it has not changed even after the author’s exile, „either in terms of difficulty or the esopic convention” (p. 89). „Actually, the author’s style has an elective affinity for the formula of the Nouveau Roman”, Virgil Nemoianu argues (2019, p. 89). Because they were „marxist sympathisers”, its representatives („George Perec, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, J.M.G. Le Clézio ş.a.”) were massively translated in Romania during the 1960s and 1970s (Nemoianu, 2019, p. 89).

While N. Manea’s style has remained impervious to political intervention and censorship, as Virgil Nemoianu claims (a claim which can hardly be disputed, actually), the theatricality of his authorial outlook and of the characters he created is the product and reflection of his long acquaintance with „the totalitarian circus” (Manea, 1992, p. 52), as I have attempted, and hopefully managed to show in this review. In this respect, I believe that The Black Envelope is one of the most representative novels for the culture of duplicity specific to totalitarian regimes and, in particular, for the last, neo-Stalinist stage of Ceausescu’s dictatorship, when the „pressure of the fake” had become unbearable.

References


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