

RECOLLECTION OF THE NATIVE SPACE AS
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PRETEXT: NORMAN MANEA,
THE HOOLIGAN'S RETURN

IRINA GHIORGHIASA
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi

Abstract:

The paper focuses on the particularities of an autobiographical work, Norman Manea's *The Hooligan's Return*. In this work, the writer uses elements that are considered as defining for this type of writing and dramatic innovations in the way of organising the narrative material. An original idea Manea develops in a metaphorical way is that the native space is subsumed to the language space. This idea acquires complex meanings in this autobiographical text, built by evocation and intertextualization.

Keywords: *autobiography, native space, intertextuality, narrative formulas*

1. Preliminaries

In subjective narrative “point of view” is a key concept. The narrative perspective, defined by Burkhard Niederhoff as “the way the representation of the story is influenced by the position, personality and values of the narrator, the characters and, possibly, other, more hypothetical entities in the storyworld” (Niederhoff, 2)¹, is in this case subordinated to a narrator who tells a story from his point of view. The voice telling the story goes through a process of individualization which involves the distinction between “I” as speaker/agent and “me” as character/actor (according to the distinctions between narrator and protagonist reviewed by Michael Bamberg) with all possible consequences

¹ According to this author, the concept is “especially pertinent to narrative” (Niederhoff 2). The narrative perspective can be altered in a narration, because not only the author can narrate, but also one of the characters. In the case of subjective narration, the narrative perspective favors the receiver's access to the ethical dimension of the speech, which refers to the “values” transmitted by the narrator.

arising from this dissociation at a terminological level: “Acts of thematizing and displacing the self as character in past time and space become the basis for other self-related actions such as self-disclosure, self-reflection and self-criticism, potentially leading to self-control, self-constraint, and self-discipline.” (Bamberg, 15).

Autobiography, recollection, life-writing, autofiction are forms of narrative organization involving narration in the first person. Self-confession literature transfers the focus from fiction to confession and valorizes the aesthetic value of authenticity, to the detriment of literature. For Philippe Lejeune, “the autobiographic pact opposes the pact of fiction” (Lejeune, 21). Taking into account the degree of fiction or of literarity of texts, Ion Manolescu proposes their classification into fiction literature (poetry, short fiction, novel, etc.) and usage literature (advertisement, advertising slogan, propaganda, etc.). Between these two categories lies what is called in general terms “frontier literature”, including memoirs, diary, literary letters and essays. Using hybrid forms and formulas in terms of formal organisation and story, this type of literature highlights the author’s personality, his or her undisguised presence in the text.

In the case of autobiographical literature, the distinction author-narrator-character does not have the meaning emphasised by the text analysis which is included in the category of fiction. The pretext of this type of literature is real life, integrated into narrative formulas. Autobiography has gained popularity as a form of organization of narrative discourse in the late eighteenth century, and autobiographical works explore the idea of authenticity and self expression opportunities. Moreover, the researchers who do not grant autonomous status² to autobiographical works propose general analysis paradigms of authenticity and sincerity level, self-analysis techniques, methods of self exploration, etc. In contrast, scientists such as Georges Gusdorf, Philippe Lejeune and Tzvetan Todorov support the idea of an autonomous autobiographical genre. Philippe Lejeune adds several key features to autobiographical narrative: the form of language (“retrospective prose narrative”), the subject treated (“private life” or “inner life”), the situation of the author, the narrator’s position and the identity contract (autobiographical pact) (Lejeune, 22). In other words, autobiography represents a “retrospective prose narrative, made by a real person about their own existence, when he/she emphasizes his personal life, especially the history of his personality”(Lejeune, 12). The author’s intention to understand and to express understanding of his own life must materialize into a unitary construction, which conveys a certain vision of the world and of the relationship between the self and the world. It should be noted that one of the main features

² Jean Starobinski (1976) and George May (1979) refer to a constituting genre or to an explosion of genres, thus sharing Tomashevsky’s views (1973).

of autobiographical literature is its retrospective nature; Bamberg refers to it as “reflected life”, as opposed to “lived life” (Bamberg, 24). Placing the self in the center of the narrative discourse has significant consequences both at content level (respect for truth, verifiable nature of information delivered, creating an image of the self in finding and redefining its own identities), and at formal level (documentary character, identity between authorial self and narrative self, subjective account).

Exhaustive definitions of autobiographical literature and its traits are difficult to formulate, on account of the diversity of ways in which the author’s “pact” with himself and finally, with the reader, can take shape.

2. A particular autobiographical model: Norman Manea

The Hooligan’s Return is Norman Manea’s novel in which autobiography includes many narrative formulas. Situated between what could be defined as metafiction³ and autobiographical authenticity, this work develops a particular narrative technique. Although the narrative feature prevails in memoirs, the novel includes several pages of fiction and elements specific to the “moral essay genre.” (Călinescu, 361) Representation is, however, in compliance with the “autobiographical pact” (Lejeune, 29). Fictitious elements (presentation of dreams, imaginary encounters/situations) are obvious to the reader invited to discover an autobiographical universe which is divided between the faithful account of the truth and the temptation for (self) reflective speculation. From this perspective, Norman Manea’s novel is an autobiographical work. Some features of retrospective diegesis associated with achrony, an inseparable relationship between private/internal life and social/external life, the narrator’s complex status (objective and subjective) - highlight the real autobiographical experiences and also the symbolic meanings acquired by certain sequences included in analepses and flashbacks.

The third-person narrative that opens this autobiographical novel – “The man in the room is contemplating, from the vantage point of the tenth floor, the hustle and bustle of Paradise” (Manea 9, my translation) - appears at the beginning of each fragmentation of the discourse caused by evoking the events that change the protagonist’s relationship with his native space. The dissociation between I “narrator” and I “narrated” (equivalent to the distinction “I” - “me”) becomes the identification of “I” narrated with “the other”: “*The boy* watched his parents with the same astonishment he watched the strangers .” (Manea 87, my translation); “The old lady did not seem thrilled by the question she had been

³ According to Onega and Garcia (1996), metafiction can be defined as a way of writing, or more precisely as a way of consciously manipulating fictional structures, of playing games with fiction. (30)

asked, but she was obviously delighted with the harmony of the moment, the respite of this vicinity and the *interlocutor's* interest (my emphasis)" (Manea 116, my translation) This dissociation is motivated by the need for a distance between the forms of narrative manifestations of the self and the evoked events, and also by the creation of the "release into the abyss" effect, in order to evoke distinct temporalities (childhood, adulthood). The change to subjective narration is made naturally, without warning the reader; "the man" contemplating "the bustle of Paradise", "the boy" who confusedly watches the people who are awaiting for him when returning from Transnistria, "the interlocutor" who is actually the old lady's son, naturally assume, at a certain time, the continuation of the story and the narrative preserves its unity, despite the radical change of perspective. The objective narrator is substituted by the authorial voice, while the anonymous character whose story is told becomes in its turn a narrator identifiable with the author.

Following the same line of text particularities, are "the masks" assumed by the subjective narrator – "the clown", "August the fool", "the hooligan". From all the masks, the most important is that of "the hooligan", the author having the opportunity for intertextual references and extensive explanations of autobiographical circumstances, and also for meditations on a collective destiny (of the Hebrew population in interwar Romania). "The hooligan" narrator/alter ego is not the person who commits gratuitous acts of physical and/or verbal violence, but a misaligned/an outlaw/a dissident. "My *hooligan* sees himself as an eternal *outsider*, an intruder, a suspect and a marginal, a damaging clown August the Fool, forced to undergo the trauma of an insane century, a History of bloody seizures. The eternal exiled, exiled again and again, wherever he might be." (Adameşteanu 304, my translation)

The intertextual references to Mihail Sebastian's essay, *How I Became a Hooligan* (1935) and to Mircea Eliade's novel, *The Hooligans* (1935), are a way of reiterating one of the fundamental themes of the book - the exile: "Not only The Danube, but also Bukovina can name the biography which you do not belong to anymore. The language, the landscapes, the ages are not cancelled automatically due to external adversities. The love for Bukovina province does not abolish Jormanian. Where were Jormanian and Romania united and where were they separated?" (Manea 24, my translation) In Norman Manea's novel, a series of themes, emotions and attitudes from Mihail Sebastian's essay can be found, like in a palimpsest, especially in the pages making reference to the author's states of mind. Other literary references, for instance to I.P.Culianu's works, are made through the taking up of certain terms with a particular significance (e.g. Jormanian) and through the description of certain excerpts from *The Translucent Parchment* or *Sin Against the Spirit*. The intertext is however broader. The author makes reference to the assassination of I.P.Culianu but also to the hallucinatory universe of Federico Fellini's films, through the character

August the Fool, whose tragic mask is worn by the narrator. All the intertextual references come to show the multiple facets of exile, which is the defining event of the author's entire existence. Besides this, the Holocaust and living in a totalitarian system represent other two coordinates of autobiographical narrative, revealing a special relationship between the author and his native space, left twice for reasons beyond the control of the protagonist.

The deportation to Transnistria has left deep scars in the heart of a 5-year-old child, all the more so as returning to the country, along with surviving relatives, means only a return to apparent normality. The communist regime triggers the author's decision of self-imposed exile, wanted, but always postponed. His hesitation in adopting the final alienation solution is justified by the fascination exerted on the creator's conscience by "the language and illusions I was provided with. Not only that, of course, but the whole good or bad biography, whose essence they were." (Manea 180, my translation) Exile is represented in a metaphysical – "the exile begins as soon as we are born" (Manea 54, my translation) – and concrete-historical key – "My great country ... This is what I was trying to describe to the listener, the greatness of Dada country that I didn't want to leave and where I didn't want to come back." (Manea 27, my translation) The recollection of the native space emerges obsessively throughout the novel, becoming a way of exploring inner emotions. The retrospective approach is organized on the principle of achrony that allows the presentation of memories in order of their emotional importance. At the same level, achrony provides temporal dislocations which can create ever deeper openings into the evocative consciousness, but also possibilities of reconstruction by the imagination of those moments in which the narrator did not participate (his parents' love story presented in the chapter *Beginning before the Beginning*).

All the real events associated with the period before the final exile take place in a precisely defined space in terms of geography, whose boundaries are drawn whenever the foregrounded images of father, mother, grandparents or cousin Ariel are evoked. Each face occupies a particular place in this space where natural human relationships are built.

3. Images of the native space in the autobiographical evocation

The native space as a pretext for introspection is recalled in two distinct ways in Norman Manea's novel. One of them accounts for the realistic, authentic dimension, the other refers to the symbolic, metaphorical dimension as a hallmark for the author's personality.

The real geography displays places of Eden childhood: Bukovina, an Austrian province, evoked excitingly by the mother's aunt, Lea Rimer, and by Mr. Bogen, "mother's new cousin" (Manea 81, my translation), Fălticeni – "The

Eden was called Falticeni” (Manea 131, my translation) –, a magic space which brings about the parents’ encounter (after the famous “fair”) and the joys of the child, Suceava – “the town that housed my childhood and adolescence” (Manea 53, my translation) – Ițcani, Burdujeni, Iași, Focșani (from where more distant relatives come to their parents’s wedding). Later, Ploiești and Bucharest are other two places mentioned in a realistic manner, which contribute to the final outlining of the author’s destiny. Within this category of real space are also the territories across the Nistru, the Styx’s deportees to TRANS-NISTRIA/TRANS-TRISTIA: “The River Styx was called Dniester, its destiny was also renamed, according to the resonance of the time. Ataki, Moghilev, Sargorod, Murafa, Berșad, Bug.” (Manea 85, my translation) The return to the native space is associated with the exalted emotion of rediscovering Homeland which will become gradually beyond recognition.

Much more important for restoring the memoirist profile is, however, the symbolic dimension of the evoked spaces. Renaming them by references to I. P. Culianu’s texts (*The Translucent Parchment* and *Sin against the spirit*) highlights the suffering of the one who does not recognise the native space as a matrix of the self. The Homeland cannot be Homeland after coming into possession of Ana Pauker and of “The white clown”. The Homeland becomes Jormania, Utopia, Dada Country. The physical alienation (the departure to the New World) from this reality erases neither memories of the native space associated with happy childhood, nor the gray reality of the red Utopia, where the ordering principle of society was monitoring the citizens closely. The fears remain after the Homeland has become “post-communist Romania ” (Manea 350, my translation), as evidence of a consciousness that can forget neither the deportation experience, nor the experience of censorship.

All these spaces are dominated, however, by a unique image, the true native space. For the author, home/native space is not, ultimately, a real territory. Beyond the actual geography and the “invented” geography, the native space is associated with striving for “something else”, for “the house that only the Book promised me. Exile, a saving disease? A come-and-go to and from myself. [...] I had finally found the real home. The language promises not only the re-birth, but also the legitimacy, the real citizenship and real ownership” (Manea 195, translation) A chapter representing an intermezzo essay invites readers to participate in a game of imagination. The pretext – a friend’s message on the back of a postcard: “I wish that one morning we would all wake up speaking, reading and writing in Romanian. And that Romania should be declared the American national language (with a world making the strange things of today, there is *no* reason for something like that NOT to happen.” (Manea 304, my translation) In *The Snail’s House*, the game of imagination goes further, until the dissolution of the meanings of metaphors that give the language the status of “snail house” – “It only remains for me to get my tongue, home with me. Snail

house.” (Manea, 195, my translation) – or The Promised Country in Heidegger's acceptance. The decision to leave his geographically localized native space does not mean leaving “the house”. It is this meaning of “language as home” that reconciled the memoirist with himself and it is this image, of a lifeless Homeland, that he eventually conveys through writing.

However, the last sentence of this autobiographical narrative is tinged with nostalgia. Writing is the only consolation to the “snail house” existence. However, the man who gives substance to the autobiographical evocation is left in limbo. In “the City of everyone and anyone's”, “addresses of the past” (Manea 30, my translation) melt in the address of the present: “At home, at my address in New York, of course. Yes, the Upper West Side, Manhattan” (Manea 360, my translation).

4. Conclusions

The Hooligan's Return autobiographical narrative is constructed by bringing together elements considered to be defining for this type of writing, as well as dramatic innovations in the way of organising the narrative material.

A fundamental idea structures the whole self-referential discourse - that of searching for the equilibrium of the native space, seen as a space of belonging and of individual affirmation. The balance is lost, though, with the author's decision of living in exile, and his attempts to recover his inner life/ (feelings) /emotional life are unsuccessful. The native space subsumed to the language space acquires complex meanings in this autobiographical text, built by evocation and intertextualization. Intertextuality is, moreover, a particular feature of this novel in which the reader discovers multiple levels of reading and of decoding the meanings.

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