



## Caponeu

### Working Papers

Citation:

Nicolaescu, Brîndușa. 2025. "A Political Novel between the Periphery and the Center: Norman Manea's *Plicul negru* (1986) / *The Black Envelope* (1995)." In *European Centers and Peripheries in the Political Novel (Caponeu Working Papers)*, edited by Kyung-Ho Cha, Ivana Perica, Aurore Peyroles, and Christoph Schaub, 100–114. <https://www.caponeu.eu/cdp/materials/european-centers-and-peripheries-in-the-political-novel-caponeu-working-papers>.

Bekhta, Natalya. 2025. "Response to Brîndușa Nicolaescu." In *European Centers and Peripheries in the Political Novel (Caponeu Working Papers)*, edited by Kyung-Ho Cha, Ivana Perica, Aurore Peyroles, and Christoph Schaub, 115–119. <https://www.caponeu.eu/cdp/materials/european-centers-and-peripheries-in-the-political-novel-caponeu-working-papers>.

28 January 2025



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094658.

Co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed in this publication are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

These working papers are based on presentations and responses, given at the workshop *European Centres and Peripheries in the Political Novel*, which took place at the Leibniz-Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung (Leibniz Center for Literary and Cultural Research) on June 6–7, 2024. The workshop was organized by Kyung-Ho Cha, Patrick Eiden-Offe, Johanna-Charlotte Horst, Ivana Perica, Aurore Peyroles, and Christoph Schaub.

These working papers are produced as part of the activities of the research consortium *The Cartography of the Political Novel* (Caponeu), funded by the European Union and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). <https://www.caponeu.eu/>

© 2025 copyright with the authors, editing © 2025 with the editors

This work is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). For details go to <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to any content (such as graphs, figures, photos, excerpts, etc.) that is not part of the Open Access publication. These may require obtaining further permission from the rights holder. The obligation to research and clear permission lies solely with the party re-using the material.

**Brîndușa Nicolaescu**  
Faculty of Political Science  
University of Bucharest  
brindusa.nicolaescu@fspub.unibuc.ro

### **A Political Novel between the Periphery and the Center:**

#### **Norman Manea's *Plicul negru* (1986) / *The Black Envelope* (1995)**

*The Return of the Hooligan* (2003) and *The Lair* (2009), Norman Manea's highly acclaimed novels written in exile, transmute his artistic endeavours and political struggle as a dissenter under Ceaușescu's regime. Less known, but equally important and a very powerful political text, is the novel *Plicul Negru* (1986), for which he doggedly fought with the communist censorship.

We distinguish two main types of genetic rites in Norman Manea's writing. The first is represented by the process of writing and rewriting before the exile, on the one hand caused by the pressure of censorship and on the other hand generated by the desire for continuous chiselling. He has written and rewritten texts that grew from his own texts, such as the political short story *The Interrogation* (2005), which originated in an excerpt from the novel *The Book of the Son* (1976). The second creative trigger refers to the rewriting of his novels after his exile in 1986: *The Black Envelope*, *Atrium*, *Captives*, *The Book of the Son*.

The novel *The Black Envelope* serves as a link between the two processes. The story of this book is provided by two sources: first there is a testimonial essay, *Censor's Report*, included in the volume *On Clowns: The Dictator and The Artist: Essays* (Manea, 1992), with explanatory notes of the censored author, then there is Matei Călinescu's article from the *Boston Sunday Globe* on June 11, 1995, which was translated into Romanian by Liviu Petrescu and included as an afterword in the third revised edition of 2003.

After the first edition in 1986, Norman Manea rewrote the book in exile, but the manuscript was published first as an English translation (1995) before it was handed to the Romanian publisher Editura Fundației Culturale Române (1996), and then again to the same Romanian publishing house where the first version of the book came to light, Editura Cartea Românească (2003). The fourth and fifth editions were published by Polirom (2007, 2024). Therefore, we could speak of two variants of the same novel, the *editio princeps* and the revisited text which was reedited in Romanian four times, and in translation, in more than ten countries.

Therefore, we can discuss two versions of the same novel: the *editio princeps* and the revisited text, which was re-edited in Romanian four times and received translations in more than ten countries.

### **Writing under Censorship and Self-Censorship**

The inescapable pressure of censorship, which was dominating the literary scope of Romania in the 1980s, interfered with the process of writing and rewriting in many

aspects, all the more so as it actually led to self-censorship at some point. It not only stimulated continuous searches for reformulations, additions, opacities, but eventually put its stamp on the author's writing to such an extent that the Aesopian language contributed to the formation of a convoluted style, with which the readers at the time were familiar. *The Black Envelope* therefore underwent a double rewriting—the one imposed by censorship, then the one (self-)imposed by the need to adapt to different kinds of readers—not only American or European (via translations), but also the Romanian public, basically the contemporary audience unaccustomed to the labyrinth of the metaphorical discourse.

The censor's report of *Plicul Negru* received by Norman Manea in 1985 and published after his emigration is among the few accessible texts of its kind from the period. It sheds a light on the practices of the political apparatus and gives a valuable insight into the writer's laboratory, whose creation, in the early 1980s, was under the pressure of a more perfidious compulsory self-censorship than ever before: the institution of censorship, the Department of the Press, had been officially abolished, increasing the confusion. The rationale behind the abolition was that self-censorship and mutual surveillance were already enough after three decades of totalitarian rule. However, as the number of disturbing texts increased, the Council for Socialist Culture and Education's Reading Service implemented alternative intermediary measures.

Moreover, the tortured publication of this book took place after the consolidation of the cultural mini-revolution started by Nicolae Ceaușescu with the famous theses of July 1971 and finalized with the theses of 1983. It legitimized the communist party's intensification of its leading role in the educational and cultural fields; for example, it

provided for strict control of publishing policies, in order to support the publication of militant, propagandist books and to prevent the publication of those that did not conform to the ideology of socialist neo-realism (Deletant 2006, 176-178).

The history of this novel, from its submission as a manuscript up to its publication, involved various stages: first, in the spring of 1985, the writer handed the manuscript assembled from hundreds of tortured pages to the publisher Cartea Românească. It was only in December that he received a reply, with a crushing series of suggestions that substantially crippled the text by no less than eighty percent, in other words, the book was declared unpublishable. Despite numerous hesitations, the writer attempted to make some modifications, but the censors rejected the manuscript once more, deeming no real change had occurred.

At the time, Norman Manea was weighing three alternative options: hope for political change, publishing the book abroad, or the last resort of giving up and postponing the publication for posterity. On the other hand, the urge to get the novel published even under those circumstances became a challenge he needed to face, and tested his resources to the limit. Struggling with the fear of another negative verdict, the writer was thinking of giving up: "As I wrote I was struggling with the impossible around and within myself. Every day I resolved to stop writing [...] And yet I wrote! A single obsession focused my worries: that my book should not be co-opted by the system!" (Manea 1992, 69)

After resuming the ordeal of making the requested changes, without, however, basically resolving them, as the author admitted, the manuscript was verified by another reader, a substitute reviewer, unofficially commissioned by the publisher to help with the

publication of the book. In those ambiguous times, when authors received anonymous censoring reviews, Romanian publishing houses were forced to find creative ways in order to preserve a certain standard for their publications (Manea 1992, 72). The last page of the *editio princeps* book, 480, reads: “Lector: Magdalena Bedrosian”, about whom Norman Manea writes in the note on the 2005 edition of *Anii de ucenicie ai lui August Probst*: “I owe much to my editor and friend Magdalena Bedrosian, not only an acute reader, but also a moral support, an understanding interlocutor with a book that is not at all in the spirit of the political prose of the time”<sup>1</sup> (Manea 2005, 6). As none of his books are; fortunately, there were still honest intellectuals in the book publishing industry whose solidarity helped nonconformist writers like Manea to publish their works.

Norman Manea received the final suggestions for changes in April 1986. The censor eventually submitted the revisited text for publication, after a meeting with the deputy minister of culture. In the summer of 1986, *The Black Envelope*, published in an unexpectedly large print run of twenty-six thousand copies, sold out in a matter of days, the public success was followed by favourable critical and literary acclaim, and the literati assured the writer in particular that the substitute version had retained its critical sharpness and literary originality.

The public success of such novels was no surprise at the time. In the authoritarian regime under which writers like Norman Manea needed to write in order to be published, while anticipating the censors’ requests, they relied on the readers’ wise complicity. They resorted to metaphorical artifices in the hope that they would be decoded by the reader, remaining opaque to the censor at the same time. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Translation mine; all translations in the text from Romanian into English are mine.

improvised hermeticism was useful because –ideally –it acted to fraternise with the reader and circumvent the censor. Expecting their readers to read between the lines, the writers were writing between lines: “the influence of persecution on literature is precisely that it compels all writers who hold heterodox views to develop a peculiar technique of writing ... between the lines” (Strauss 1988, 24).

As a result of the forced codifications that led to stylistic excess, opacity, and detours, the text became partially distorted by the very tricks it used to avoid being censored. On the other hand, a gain was also the achievement of the aforementioned goal: the book was no longer recoverable for the system, nor was its substitute, which had passed through the censors’ strict examination to become publishable. Under dictatorships, writers of fiction must assume a double folded mission, both ethical and aesthetical (Turcuş 2016), in line with their readers’ political expectations: “Readers in Eastern Europe looked to literature for what they could not find in the newspaper or in history or sociology textbooks. They chased truth between the lines, while the author accepted the distortion of his artistic work” (Manea 2012, 78).

### **Insights into the novelist’s writing lab**

The censor’s report gives many insights into the original manuscript of the novel, which has never been published as such: whereas the 1986 *editio princeps* did not reproduce the original version because of the censorship, the 1995/1996 editions did not mean a return to the original text either. The latter is a much shorter text, by a



process of reduction that Matei Călinescu appreciatively called “the cryptic writing, the main stylistic feature of *The Black Envelope*” (Călinescu 2003, 274).

In order to see to what extent Norman Manea complied with the numerous indications in the anonymous censor’s report, we can trace their trajectory through an applied reading of the two versions of this novel: 1986 edition and the 1996 edition. This report, which is quoted in full in *On Clowns...*, is an invaluable document for understanding how the famous secret word police functioned in terms of concrete intervention in the text. It is almost astonishing, however, that repeated recommendations (the censors sent the manuscript back three times) could not change many allusions or scenes with an obvious critical, overtly political direction. What Norman Manea has managed to achieve, in essence, by this resistance to repeated pressure from the censors, is that he has protected his work from being turned into non-literature by breaking the balance between historical constraints and the writer’s freedom, a balance so difficult to maintain when political constraints are represented by the elaborate operations of an active, effective, institutionalised censorship (even after its apparent abolition).

The report begins with a brief introduction to the book’s characters and the scenes that develop around them, written in a dry and repetitive manner, but not without a certain synthetic skill of reviewing. After a little more than three pages of presentation of the novel, there are clear ideological recommendations, aimed at the structural revision of the book, a prerequisite for publication. The thorniest issue seemed to be the allusive comparison between two dictatorships – the Antonescu’s Fascist regime and the contemporary Ceaușescu’s totalitarian nationalist regime. In this regard, the

recommendation was to direct the idea of the resurrection of the forces of evil not towards the country itself, but towards the contemporary Western world. However, the published novel did not make any of these direct recommended changes.

The reviewer strongly advised against any note on murders and deportations in Romania, and it asked to revisit the image of the rows of the dead that Dominic often evokes. Nonetheless, Manea did not abandon the image in question. Anatol Dominic Vancea Voinov's vision of his father, very possibly assassinated by the Romanian Legionnaires, is connected with a metaphorical string of characters carrying candles in the night, an intertext observed by Matei Călinescu as descending from *O făclie de Paște* (*An Easter Candle*; Caragiale 1892), a classic text on anti-Semitism in Romanian literature. Both Leiba Zibal, Caragiale's protagonist, and Anatol's father, are successful Jewish wine merchandisers and both are portrayed in dramatic circumstances: the former is almost killed by a revengeful servant, Gheorghe; the latter is believed to be murdered by a resentful rejected suitor, a member of the Iron Guard.

The censor also drew attention to the titles showing that there was an anti-fascist movement in Romania, suggesting a revision of the bibliographical records of the retired journalist Gafton – but the addition operated by the novelist is accompanied by critique, because, after reading in an academic journal a list of intellectuals considered to have thought against fascism, a second character, a highly educated lady, expresses her doubts about it. Although the report objects to the exaggerated, one-sided importance of the study on which Matei Gafton is working, intended to keep alive the memory of the past evil (i.e. the fascist abuses), Norman Manea does not only ignore the criticism, but also comments on this in a twist, again as if justifying his choice and his defiance to the

reader: "Mr Gafton thought about the studies he had been working on, unpaid, for many years. He wanted to keep his memory alive (...) he was warned that people don't like to be reminded of their troubles. They prefer to forget" (Manea 1986, 47-48).

There is a news story in the novel that various characters discuss heatedly: the neighbours' attack on a single woman living in an apartment with her cats, followed by its burning and devastation. Obviously, the episode does not go unnoticed by the censors, all the more so because the militia, when called to the scene, does not intervene. It is the re-launching of evil, the threatening relapse of the past, that Gafton speaks of in his study (moreover, the victim's family suggests towards the end of the book that she was burned in Hitler's crematoria). The symbolism of the Holocaust is reprimanded by the censor, the motivation of the fable being considered a diversion. Nevertheless, the motif of devastation is repeated several times throughout the book, even mentioning the interference and duplicity of the authorities.

Most of the recommendations, in the wooden language of the time, refer to the necessity of reconfiguring the novel which is "one-sided, predominantly negative view of daily life". The main overt requirement concerns "its ideological message", which "would find fuller expression and be enriched by a plea for involvement, for integration into a stable, authentic society, and by the positive development of characters in that direction" (Manea 1992, 78). In the censor's opinion, the novelist has to make an improvement of the text by dropping some chapters, comments, excessive statements in terms of caricature, irony, grotesqueness, and supplementing them with some positive, affirmative insertions which would contribute to a more nuanced vision. As the censor rightly notes, the novel is fraught with human degradation and immorality, and a series

of typical characters of the everyday grotesque proliferate. In contrast, the protagonists, trying to preserve their dignity and moral integrity, face inadequacy and inadaptability—the dominant characteristics of Norman Manea’s anti-heroes. The report recommends the protagonist should understand that living in pretence and indifference is not a solution: there should be at least a vague possibility of integration in life. The simulation of a madness à la Hamlet, in his attempt to elucidate the death of his father is not accidental; all in all, the visits of the father’s spectre would be the first sign of a hallucination that later turns out to be pathological. In the end, at the censor’s request, the suicide of Anatol’s lover, Irina, is not explicitly mentioned by the novelist (unlike in the original manuscript); on the other hand, there are enough explicit references to a generalised insanity, which seems to devour the protagonist’s destiny: Tolea fraternises with the patients of Dr Marga’s psychiatric hospital, in an allegory of the entire alienated society of the time.

Therefore Tolea’s integration did not take place, nor could it have, given that the very structure of this character did not allow such an evolution. In other words, even the vaguest simulacrum of integration would have led to his elimination altogether. Dominic Anatol Vancea Ivanov’s task is to give substance to the idea of alienation of the whole society, his end in Dr. Marga’s psychiatric hospital (clearer in the new edition, but also quite discernible in the first edition) seems to be the only way, a solution that shows precisely the disintegration of the human being incapable of adaptation. After all, even the censor in the introductory passage of the report seems to have understood the personality of the protagonist, in an explanation for his mental condition, based on the unfavourable historical context, the family drama, the character’s psychological

sensitivity. "At heart (...) he is a tired, sad, lonely man. A discontented and disillusioned man who tries through false carelessness and caricature to resist, to refuse to adapt to a life of conformity and compromise" (Manea 1992, 79).

The author does not comply with the moralizing recommendations, advice, or even direct requests, which drew attention to the deep flaws in the moral profile, human relations and general atmosphere within the working collectives depicted in his prose. Although the censor accurately notices and disapproves of the collective portrayal of the miserable employees of the Tranzit hotel (made up only of uneducated, primitive people, loafers, rumour peddlers, snitches, wage-earners, who cover their business by arranging rooms for the occasional amorous encounters of their bosses of all kinds), Norman Manea again evades the injunction and the overall impression of the published novel stays the same as described in the report.

The reviewer mentions the imperative need for an addition: to include secondary characters, or even a main character, as positive images of life, e.g. the image of Bucharest in the beautiful days of spring could offer numerous sequences, luminous, background characters. In response to this suggestion, the writer seems to have deliberately resorted to irony, caricaturing the language of propaganda: "The merry street. The women were blooming and somewhere far away, in the woods (...) birds were heard, really"; "our chic Bucharest, graceful and slender, pretty, feminine and spirited, petit Paris, once upon a time..."; "cheerful spring, (...) the newspapers were also cheerful, always optimistic, full of information and appeals written with that pedagogical confidence in a perpetual spring. People certainly deserve the bright future, as well as the victories of the present, day after day" (Manea 1986, 7-8).

If the censor also asked for a revision of the image of the urban landscape, presented only through negative, depressing, grotesque aspects: dirty and smelly streets, tired and aggressive people, primitivism, overcrowding in trams and trolleybuses, queues at grocery stores, mud, darkness, this is exactly the atmosphere that the novel gives off in its published form. Transport is congested, long-awaited and slow-moving. The urban space is mixed, contaminated; a relevant illustration is the entrance to the shabby headquarters of the mysterious Deaf-Mute Association, with narrow, filthy steps and a dark corridor. The Association of Deaf-Mute Silence, ruled by an almighty network (a metaphor of the Romanian Securitate) may be interpreted, as the author also admits, as a literary reference to Ernesto Sábato's "Report on the Blind" from the novel *On Heroes and Tombs*. It also functions as an epitome of the voiceless, the ordinary people who are anonymised and oppressed by the totalitarian state.

The main narratological difference between the two versions of this novel is the presence of Mynheer, *Autorele*. In *editio princeps* the character was standing for the auctorial voice: the Author's "substitute" is in the process of writing the novel, in an attempt to parallel the reader's endeavour of reading a text which is in the making. The 1995 edition yields the usual omniscient narrator, without including Mynheer at all – a somehow regrettable renunciation, according to Matei Călinescu, which I agree with.

But one of the central themes of the novel, that of substitutes, prevails in the second edition as well: from healthcare to entertainment, from victuals, like bread and coffee to books and education, all sectors of the social ensemble are tinged by inauthenticity and a mischievous substitution of cause for effects, "the main purpose of which was to redirect public dissatisfaction away from the Communist party and

Securitate” (Manea 1992, 65) toward those aspects produced by the mechanisms of power. It is precisely substitution that is strongly amended by the censor, who is precisely aware of its function in the novel, namely to suggest the idea of generalised mendacity that characterised the whole of society: “Let us be clearer about the thesis of substitutes, used on countless occasions, not only in those concerning the relationship between the characters and the writer, the characters and their models in life. These are formulations in which the notion is extended to the whole of social life, to living falsely” (Manea 1992, 80). We find, however, plenty of examples, some of them quoted by the censor, that the writer has kept in *editio princeps*, for example: “joy reproduced mechanically, like a simulacrum. A substitution, only, manipulating substitutes, of emotions, unnatural resources of reactivation” (Manea 1986, 45). [Anatol:] “I am only a substitute. A remnant.” (Manea 1986, 53). “We all become something else. If not the reverse of what we really are” (Manea 1986, 183). “A substitute [Tolea], by the very premises of the distribution available to the author Mynheer not merely by the historical conjunction called the substitutes of matter and materials and morals and means” (Manea 1986, 302). In the new edition the reference is no less explicit: “It’s a world of substitutes, this circus of ours” (Manea 2012, 14).

In *editio princeps*, so massively censored, the author managed to keep many subversive phrases and fragments: e.g. the passages referring to the striking contrast between the world “before”, with its certain values, and the Ceaușescu’s regime, contemporary to the reader of the 1980s. The reflections on the human condition are also direct enough to retain their revealing intent. Only the new edition gave the possibility of returning to more direct references, such as an allusion to the dictator’s

stammering and the correspondent nickname used by a mentally ill patient: “do you know what the doctor said? If only the comrade were as healthy as you are—you know who he meant! Comrade Jabber-Jabber, Dr. Marga calls him” (Manea 2012, 95). On the other hand, maybe the most astonishing slip of the censors refers to the direct use of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s birthday, 26<sup>th</sup> March, which was dropped in the second edition, maybe because of its obscurity for the contemporary reader. It is the very date of the beginning of the story, when “cosmic events are happening”, an ironic defiance of the political context in which the novel had been written, calling for the reader to complete its meaning: “the 26<sup>th</sup> of March, here! Indeed, the last Thursday of March, the stunning young sign in the zodiac...” (Manea 1986, 11).

All in all, Manea’s obstinacy in maintaining the integrity of his text is remarkable, as the changes demanded repeatedly by the censors did not turn *The Black Envelope* into a servile, obedient book. It still remained a “frowning” text, a word repeatedly used by the narrator to express the general discontent of the time: “Frowning... Scowling (...) the street, the world, the universe. (...) And books are frowning too!” (Manea 1986, 97)

### **Bibliography**

Caragiale, I.L. 1892. *Păcat..., O făclie de Paște și Om cu noroc, 3 Novele.*

București: Editura Gutenberg J. Göbl.

Călinescu, Matei. 2003. “Postață”. In *Plicul negru. Roman*, by Norman Manea, 273-276.

București: CarteaRomânească.

Deletant, Dennis. 2006. *Romania under Communist Rule.* Edited by Romulus Rusan.

Bucharest: Civic Academy Foundation.



Manea, Norman. 1986. *Plicul negru. Roman*. București: Cartea Românească.

Manea, Norman. 1992. *On Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist*. Translated by Cornelia Golna, Irina Livezeanu, Anselm Hollo, Alexandra Bley Vroman. New York: Grove Press.

Manea, Norman. 2005. *Anii de ucenicie ai lui August Proştul*. Iași: Editura Polirom.

Manea, Norman. 2012. *The Black Envelope*. Translated by Patrick Camiller. Yale University Press. Kindle Edition.

Strauss, Leo. 1988. *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. University of Chicago Press.

Turcuș, Claudiu. 2016. *Norman Manea. Aesthetics as East Ethics*. Translated by Carmen Borbely. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

**Natalya Bekhta**  
Tampere University  
natalya.bekhta@tuni.fi

**Response to Brîndușa Nicolaescu:**

**“A Political Novel between the Periphery and the Center:**

**Norman Manea’s *Plicul negru* (1986) / *The Black Envelope* (1995)”**

I would like to make two points in my response. One of them pertains to the question of the political novel more generally and the second point is a comparative one. While I’m not familiar with contemporary Romanian literature, from Brîndușa’s paper I see very interesting comparative parallels that can be drawn to the case of Ukrainian literature. To read Ukrainian literature, and Romanian it seems to me, in a comparative context and in translation requires a lot of explanation of the context – of politics, of movements, of literary field, of the language games, active in a particular historical moment, and so on. I recognize this in Norman Manea’s *The Black Envelope*, even if I don’t understand a lot of allusions.

**1.**

I’ll begin with the question of the political novel. Based on the workshop programme, a kind of strong *ostensive* definition of the political novel seems clear. For example, Norman Manea’s *The Black Envelope* is a political novel because it is a critique of Ceaușescu’s Romania, a critique of political apathy and falsehoods in a society under

an oppressive regime – “a stark criticism of a world that has become stultified,” to quote Brîndușa’s description.

At the same time, how analytically useful is the category of the political novel for reading *The Black Envelope* or for comparing it with other novels in the corpus of the political novel? Its corpus could also look otherwise, if we, for example, would consider the novels that perform a political function from a rhetorical point of view – novels that are written not in opposition to a certain political regime but as part of propaganda, in the neutral sense of the term. This list would include a lot of Soviet socialist literature in the service of glorifying the USSR and critiquing the decadent bourgeois world. So, in a sense, the kind of novels that Manea’s censor was asking him to write. Would they be political novels as well?

The same question can be expanded further via the WReC (2015) theory of world literature (or, more properly, world-literature): If modern literature has the capitalist world-system as its ultimate *political* horizon – a horizon, particularly visible from the European and other peripheries, then on what grounds can a theory of specifically *political* literature be most convincingly developed?

It is an interesting hermeneutic problem: Based on the WReC’s approach, we could read for the workings of the current world-economy in all modern literature. Similarly, based on Fredric Jameson’s (1981) interpretative method, we could read for the ‘political unconscious’ in any narrative work – in fact, with Jameson we would argue for “the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts” (1). To paraphrase Jameson’s own comment from another context – what then becomes of deliberately and fully self-conscious political novels? Are they unconscious expressions of something else still or do they not need decoding or reinterpretation?

## 2.

I don't have an answer to this question but one further consideration. The position of a writer in Romania in 1980s offers an interesting comparison to the position of a writer in post-1990s Ukraine – and perhaps in post-Soviet Eastern Europe more generally. These two historical points demand a politically-engaged position but in different senses of politics.

I think it's possible to describe contemporary Eastern Europe as a world-literary region where *the social function* of literature is very much foregrounded, visible and active; 'political literature' in this context may be better re-described via Pascale Casanova (2011) as 'combative literature'. Which is to say, all literary production, more or less, in a society in a state of turmoil, in a state of so-called transition to the market with its rampant commodification of every aspect of life, in a state of the decades-long struggle for fair social institutions, in a state of struggle for national self-definition or pure survival amidst Russia's colonial advances. In short, in a situation where politics is not at all perceived as its own separate domain, away from the private sphere and away from art.

A social demand put on literary production and on writers as public figures in this situation is huge – the demand is that they speak to us about the confusing and tragic reality, that they make sense of it, that they address the topics we deem relevant and vital. For example, just last week [25 March 2024], 4000 people came to a poetry evening in Kyiv to listen to Serhiy Zhadan read from his new book; this week [1 June 2024], a three-day literary festival *Book Arsenal* attracted 35 000 people, with this year's theme being "Life between literature and death". Numbers of readers are growing, book sales are growing, bookshops are opening in a country in the middle of a brutal war.

One might say, this is an escapist exercise, a coping mechanism for people living through a tragedy; well, but today there are better escapist channels than poetry, I would say.

The reason why literature, and poetry specifically, occupies a prominent social place in contemporary Ukraine is, I think, quite simply its truth function, its sense- and meaning-making capacity. And this is a demand society puts on its literature and its writers – a demand similar in some sense to the one from the censor to Norman Manea in so far as the writer finds himself in the position of needing to accept or resist such socio-political imperative.

The fact that Manea's *The Black Envelope* had to be so vigorously censored discloses precisely its capacity to reveal something about the society he was writing about. At the same time, as Brîndușa discusses in her paper, his worries were that his book could get "co-opted by the system" and become just like any other book "in the spirit of the 'political' prose of the time". May we then approach the style of *The Black Envelope* as a formal outcome of Manea's need to re-assert his autonomy as an artist and to re-assert the quasi-autonomy of the literary work in aesthetic, and not political terms? Put simply, is his opaque, cryptic, indirect style a move away from politics, even as it comes about as a response to the political situation, in which he wrote?

At this point, I would add another angle to the political novel, which is literary politics in the sense spelled out by Serhiy Zhadan (in reference to his translation of Bertolt Brecht's work): Political literature is not necessarily directed at a political regime but inwardly, at trying to understand your own role in a society and, in the best case, share this understanding with the rest, to make this understanding communal.

All this brings me back to one of the opening questions: Would the kind of novel that Manea's censor was asking him to write be more political than the one he wrote? Political, however, in the unfavorable terms since it would've been in the service of the

wrong kind of power. And is there a-political literature? There surely are *differently* political works of literature, not to mention approaches to its interpretation. How do we work with a category, then, that seems to have no outside to itself or no gradation? Put simply, again, how do we *discern* between the kind of political novel that Manea's censor would've wished for and the kind Manea wanted to write?

### **Bibliography**

- Casanova, Pascale. 2011. "Combative Literatures." In: *New Left Review* 72: 123-134.
- Jameson, Fredric. 2013 [1981]. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Routledge.
- WReC (Warwick Research Collective). 2015. *Combined and uneven development: Towards a new theory of world-literature*. Liverpool University Press.
- Zhadan, Serhiy. 2021. «Бідний Б. Б.» [Poor B. B.]. In: Bertolt Brecht, *Pokhvala dialektytsi*. Translated by Serhiy Zhadan. Meridian Czernowitz: 7-25.