

Identity Reconfigurations, Memory and Personal History in Norman Manea and Saul Bellow's 'Spoken Book'

Simona Antofi

University of Galati, Romania

Nicoleta D. Ifrim

Dunarea de Jos University of Galati, Romania

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Simona ANTOFI, Nicoleta IFRIM,

"Identity Reconfigurations, Memory and Personal History in Norman Manea and Saul Bellow's 'Spoken Book'"

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Abstract: In their paper, "Identity Reconfigurations, Memory and Personal History in Norman Manea and Saul Bellow's Spoken Book," Simona Antofi and Nicoleta Ifrim analyze the book of interviews *Settling My Accounts Before I Go Away: A Words & Images Interview*, a two-authored mirror-like writing in which two biographical courses and two scriptural identities engage in dialogue. Their aim is to define a double reading effect embedded into the self-oriented narrative: a collective history of the Jewish exile from the communist totalitarian space (Soviet and Romanian) towards the "promised land," with literary, cultural and political insertions; then, the legitimation of an implicit "identity pilgrimage" of the two writers in dialogue, with peculiarities stemming from each one's existential path, in permanent reference to dominant history. Aside from the latent "Jewish question," which subtextually directs the existential and cultural choices of the two writers-confessors, the intercultural dialogue with the European and American literary space also marks the becoming of some problematic identities projected onto the inside of their own "life stories."

Simona ANTOFI and Nicoleta IFRIM

"Identity Reconfigurations, Memory and Personal History in Norman Manea and Saul Bellow's 'Spoken Book'"

Born in the small town of Burdujeni (now, a suburbia of the city of Suceava), in 1936, Norman Manea and his family were deported to a concentration camp in Transnistria, during Antonescu's dictatorial regime, returning to the country in 1945. His identity is problematic from the onset, as Jewishness overlaps the compensatory nature of Romanian literature and exercises in spiritual surviving during the communist dictatorship, reflected in writings à clef (let us mention only a few: *Captivi [Captives]*, *Anii de ucenicie ai lui August Proştul [The Apprenticeship Years of Augustus the Fool]*, *Plicul negru [The Black Envelope]*¹). Norman Manea takes the path of exile in 1986, choosing to leave behind the Romanian "penitentiary colony" in which, besides the manifestations of totalitarianism, Jewishness had again become an ethnic stigma. The writer first relocates to Berlin, with a DAAD scholarship, then to the United States, as a beneficiary of a Guggenheim fellowship, continuing to write qualitative literature in Romanian (translated later into English), and being awarded prestigious distinctions – in 2006, Médicis Étranger, the most important French prize awarded to a novel written in other language than French, for *The Hooligan's Return*, Nonino International Award for Literature for his *opera Omnia*, in 2002, the prestigious MacArthur Grant (the American Nobel), in 1993. The *writer in residence* status at Bard College (since 2011, he has also taught European literature there) allows him to revise and reconfigure the pre-exilic identity traumas and his own identity placement in reference to the adoptive cultural space, a permissive and tolerant, yet often rigid and alien-cautious, "multiethnic conglomerate." The necessary process of identity self-clarification has been felicitously associated with the narrative interview or "the spoken book," which draws near two destinies and identity profiles with a mutually mirroring effect. His conversations² with Hannes Stein (*Cuvinte din exil/ Conversations in Exile*), Leon Volovici (*Sertarele exilului. Dialog cu Leon Volovici/ The Drawers of Exile. A Dialogue with Leon Volovici*) or Edward Kanterian (*Curierul de est. Dialog cu Edward Kanterian/ The Eastern Courier. A Dialogue with Edward Kanterian*) and, last but not least, Saul Bellow, reflect a mutually revealing pluri-identity dialogue which brings together issues of multiple identities, identity cleavages (Jewishness, for instance, is also colored with Romanian, American, German or Russian elements), contemporary issues, the Holocaust and the gulag, democracy and its forms, the role of literature in a hyper-standardized consumerist society. Cultural and affective memory binds together the discrete pieces of individual history and may compose, when transferred and sublimated in a book, an exemplary faith, giving a superior, aesthetic and ethical, profoundly human, meaning to suffering.

A reference book for Norman Manea's self-identity writing, *Întoarcerea huliganului / The Hooligan's Return* builds the profile of an antihero defined as outcast by reference both to others and to the specular image of the authorial self as it results, prismatically, from his (de)forming reflections in the various hypostases of otherness. The symbolic hooligan of Norman Manea – a failed sample of the community – relates, first, to the Romanian writer of Jewish ethnicity Mihail Sebastian, with whose autobiographical volume, *Cum am devenit huligan / How I Became a Hooligan*, Norman Manea's book is in explicit dialogue. In the context of an interwar Romania, characterized by great ideological convulsions – see the mentioned extreme right option of Mircea Eliade, Sebastian's hooliganism must be understood not only as a form of social and human stigmatization on ethnic criteria, but especially as a form of open assumption, on the part of the writer himself, of the intellectual's freedom of thought in a totalitarian society. The issue debated by Manea's autofictional volume brings together the idea of the individual's outer and inner freedom, of Judaism, of the ethnic clichés in the perception of the minority and of the revolt against any form of coercion as a mandatory state of the honest intellectual.

Norman Manea's narrative dialogues with various personalities and voices of the current multicultural space resume and diversify this delicate and complex issue of the contemporary world. That is why the structure of the spoken book and the theme of the dialogue between Norman Manea and Edward Kanterian (*Curierul de Est. Dialog cu Edward Kanterian / The Eastern Courier. A Dialogue with Edward Kanterian*) brings back into discussion with honesty, interpretive balance and close argumentation, the issue of ethnicity as it is redrawn in the current multiethnic European context, in relation to the American

¹ Manea, Norman. *Captivi [Captives]*. Polirom, 2011; *Anii de ucenicie ai lui August Proştul [The Apprenticeship Years of Augustus the Fool]*. Polirom, 2010; *Plicul negru [The Black Envelope]*, Polirom, 2007.

² Manea, Norman. *Cuvinte din exil [Conversations in Exile]*, translated by Orlando Balas, Polirom, 2011; *Sertarele exilului. Dialog cu Leon Volovici [The Drawers of Exile. A Dialogue with Leon Volovici]*, Polirom, 2008; *Curierul de est. Dialog cu Edward Kanterian [The Eastern Courier. A Dialogue with Edward Kanterian]*, Polirom, 2010.

socio-economic space and the mutations that occurred after 1990 in the Romanian socio-cultural space. The volume *Cuvinte din exil / Conversations in Exile*, proposes a writing constructed on the same pattern – the dialogue is now with journalist Hannes Stein – through which Norman Manea (re)formulates his options of literary ideology and rewrites his biography, with the tools of confessional dialogue and not with those of literature. With clear echoes at the level of the writer's representative book, the autobiographical novel, *Întoarcerea huliganului / The Hooligan's Return*, *Cuvinte din exil / Conversations in Exile* functions as an implicit *mise en abyme*, a resizing through the filter of the Romanian translation and the selection operated by the journalist Hannes Stein, an interviewer determined to bring into discussion a series of stereotypes of perception on the *cursed Jewish issue* that the Romanian writer of Jewish ethnicity exposes. In the volume entitled *Sertarele exilului. Dialog cu Leon Volovici / The Drawers of Exile. A Dialogue with Leon Volovici*, the well-known Romanian literary critic and historian of Jewish ethnicity expresses his admiration for the openly-dissident attitude of Norman Manea in relation to the totalitarian regime in pre-December Romania, and the written communication between the two reveals the existence of the hidden structures of Jewishness, the ethnic heritage carried with oneself and extrapolated in the semantic mechanisms of writing. There, a specific mentality, a way of being in the world and a system of values are preserved and then brought to the surface and carried by a language, Romanian, which is also built on its own network of structures of the imaginary and of the collective mind.

In the volume of memorialistic essays and narrative interviews *Laptele negru / The Black Milk*³, signed Norman Manea, the scriptural exercise which resembles an intertextual literary journey consists in the transfer of the cultural-biographical memory preserved individually as a memory of literature. The reading of the volume impels to an *ad-hoc* hermeneutics and poetics, meant to highlight the means by which literary texts dear to the writer undergo identity re-signification, while reunited on the map of inter-cultural dialogue at whose center is the *hooligan* profile of the perpetual exile. And *Textul nomad / The Itinerant Text* proposes, in the opinion of Norman Manea, a cultural debate that "probably reflects the alerted sensitivity of the exile, disputed by the trinomial nature of his plurivalent identity, in a time of unrest and acute global tensions, his relation to different realities, often contradictory, but not unrelated, which define him – and which, naturally, also act as sources for his writing, be it prose or journalism" ["*reflectă, probabil, sensibilitatea alertată a exilatului, disputată de trinomialul identității sale plurivalente, într-o vreme de neliniște și acute tensiuni globale, raportarea sa la realitățile diferite, adesea contradictorii, dar nu lipsite de legătură, care îl definesc – surse și ale scrisului său, firește, fie că ar fi vorba de proză, fie de publicistică*"] (Manea, *Textul nomad / The Itinerant Text* 6) (Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are ours). The major themes of *nomadic writing* are listed by the protagonist of the *narrative interviews* that make up the volume, reverberate in all of Norman Manea's spoken-books and propose, to the informed reader, a reading pact and a key to the text. It concerns the *biography of writing*, marked by the stages of the symbolic *nomad's* identity searches, and the Romanian language – *snail house*, "wherein the nomad seeks his expression" ["*în care nomadul își caută expresia*"] (6).

In this context, the Norman Manea - Saul Bellow dialogue recalibrates and recontextualizes this issue from the perspective of the similar-identity dialogue between the Romanian-speaking and writing Jew and the descendant of a Russian Jewish family, English-speaking writer, both acclimatized to the multicultural atmosphere of American democracy and preserving, each in his own way, the triple identity-ethnic, of the country of origin, and of the adoptive country. The volume of conversations between Norman Manea and Saul Bellow – descendant of a family of Russian Jews immigrated from Sankt Petersburg to Canada – holds a privileged position. First of all, because Saul Bellow, married, at some point, to a Romanian woman, visited Romania during Nicolae Ceausescu's dictatorship, and was able to sketch, from the outside, the icy, bleak image of Bucharest and of the Romanian society at that time, in the novel *The Dean's December*. Then, because both novelists originate, either directly or indirectly, from Eastern Europe, from two states faced with the most aggressive forms of leftist totalitarianism. Moreover, one of Bellow's characters from the novel *Ravelstein*, Radu Grieblescu, seems to portray a representation of Mircea Eliade, the Romanian historian of religions, whose legionary affinities determined Norman Manea to write the essay *Felix culpa*. At the same time, the American/Canadian socio-cultural space allows them (perhaps more in Manea's case) to free from a certain perception of themselves as Jews carriers of unjust stereotypes and identity clichés. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the two share the same view on the functions and roles of literature, seen as a form of confession with ethical relevance and superior aesthetic validation.

³ Manea, Norman. *Laptele negru [The Black Milk]*, Polirom, 2014.

Published in Romania in 2008, in Nadina Vișan's translation, *Settling My Accounts Before I Go Away: A Words & Images Interview* projects a dialogue of destinies, in which the autobiographic imprint marks two juxtaposed existential paths, Saul Bellow's and Norman Manea's, brought closer by the similar experience of displacement, but projected in different ways in this "spoken book." The present study proposes a different approach from that of a previous paper, published in 2014 (see Antofi, "Înaintea despărțirii – Norman Manea și Saul Bellow în căutarea adevărurilor(ne)scrise"/"Settling My Accounts Before I Go Away - Norman Manea and Saul Bellow Looking for(Un)Written Truth"), attempting, this time, to identify the textual mechanisms of identity projection relevant for the two writers in dialogue. The previous paper analyzed, from the point of view of (post)exilic studies, how affective memory can generate the underground dialogue with itself and the World, reformulating the individual history of Saul Bellow and then resizing, thanks to the specular virtues of the interviewee's writing in response, the story of Norman Manea's life. Such concepts as "homelessness," "exilic traumas," and "quest for identity" were brought into discussion for re-shaping the status of the migrant profile embedded in Manea's narratives. The analysis perspective proposed now is visibly different, following the process of re-definition situated at the intersection of two identities (and perspectives on the self and on the Other), reformulated as pluri-identity discourse – since it carries the identities in dialogue and the common symbolic-identity space which is thus established, as well as the biographical or creative ages, translated and re-created as text. The textual forms of "negotiating identities" are followed (see Strugaru, "Choosing to Be a Stranger"), which particularize Manea's self-reflective discourse, to be then validated at the level of Bellow's re-narrated experience, involving, equally, "temporal embodiments – in this case, tragic historical occurrences such as the Holocaust and Cold War nuclear catastrophes – enable spatial reshufflings and their narrative corollary – fictional maps. Here, Manea is in distinguished company, for exile literature has often played with extant political maps and ingeniously so, especially when it has dealt with geographies with complicated and contested histories and identities" (Mironescu, "How does Exile make Space?" 294).

The writing form chosen by the two masters reshapes the specificity of the author-characters relation, through the double (re)distribution of authorial and characterial functions. It generates "a greater power of seduction (through dialogue, directness of style, polemic nature, limitation of literary conventions, in short, through communication on the spot) and, with that, an increased degree of visibility in comparison with other forms of confession" ["o mai mare putere de seducție (prin dialog, prin directitatea stilului, prin caracterul polemic, prin diminuarea convențiilor literaturii, pe scurt, printr-o comunicare sur le vif) și, prin toate acestea, un grad sporit de vizibilitate în raport cu alte forme de confesiune" (Eugen Simion, *Cartea vorbită/ The Spoken Book*16)]. In other words, the specificity of confession consists in making the generative sources so ambiguous that the roles of the one who confesses, the one who triggers the confession and the one who writes it down overlap, the authorial mark gliding from one character to the next. This way, the *scripter* is given the *responsibility* of the writing (as the interlocutor can also be fictitious) in which the two characters may be absent altogether, being reconstructed through the power of seduction of remembering, through "simultaneity, directness of style, spontaneity" ["simultaneitatea, directitatea stilului, spontaneitatea"] as well as through "fragmentariness and mobility of themes" ["fragmentarismul, mobilitatea temelor"] (Simion, *Cartea vorbită/ The Spoken Book*15).

Defined by the theoretical space of critical thinking and textual-discursive analysis, the *narrative interview* shapes *life stories* of the two protagonists as bearers of marks of the confessor-ego, a role successively assumed by the interviewer and the interviewee alike. On the one hand, Norman Manea, Jewish writer, writing in Romanian, exiled from communist Romania, first to Federal Germany and then to the United States, lives the trauma of exile and post-exile, and faces the cultural-linguistic interference of his adoptive spaces. On the other hand, Saul Bellow, Jewish novelist of Russian origins, born and raised in America, legitimates, via confession, his own "American Jewishness." The narrative interface of the interview acts towards constructing juxtaposed "identity mythologies," on three levels of meaning – the reconstruction, through the mechanisms of memory, of Saul Bellow's biography, Norman Manea's perspective on the history of the American writer, with personal comments inserted with the questions, and, rather paradoxically, the validation of Norman Manea's own life story through reference to Saul Bellow's significant identity experiences.

In Rob Evans's terms, this *entretien discursif – biographique*, a result of the biographic and ethnographic-linguistic mixture, validates a pattern of identity-quest writing, seen as a "complex discursive game of the Self and the Other" ["jeu complexe de discours de soi et de l'Autre"] (Evans, *L'entretien auto/biographique*193). In this pattern, the identity profile of the interviewee/ interviewer overlaps a collective image of the group of belonging, with its history and specific socio-cultural reverberations. Moreover, in his opinion, the narrative interview with identity themes mirrors, within the limits of confession, the relation between the self and the world, "the explanation of the principles

of constructing the subject's relation to the world and to oneself" [*explication des principes de la construction du rapport du sujet au monde et à soi-même*] (198). This implicitly generates a double self-reflexive rapport: a specular mechanism of self-search/ knowledge of the interviewee, and the legitimation *à rebours* of the quasi-biographic identity profile of the interviewer, also projected onto the mirror-writing. Particularly interesting are, in the context of these dual identity dislocations/ relocations, the temporal reconfigurations that personal memory clips from the dominant histories, giving them new valences of meaning once biography is written, as already said, by two hands (See also Antofi, "*Înainteă despărțirii*"). Thus, the recoverable intention of the biographic avenues – specific to the aim of the narrative interview as strategy of identity rewriting – reveals the retroactive mechanisms of confessional scaffolding in a discourse particularized by the fact that trauma itself converts dates and deictic marks into an emerging textual identity, as Didier Demazière remarks. The *biographemes* of this identity reorder a *temporal grammar*, validated as "figures of biographic times" [*figures du temps biographiques*] (Demazière, "Quelles temporalités travaillent" 6).

The localization in the textual space, the mnemonic resort to significant contents revealed by the identity data of the ego, now converted into textual data, turn functional as the strategies of confession clip from personalities, events and images provided by the personal history of the narrator. Thus, they create an internal scaffolding of guided writing, deliberately elicited by the interviewer's questions. The questions advance a simultaneous discourse, a catalyzer of the interviewee's answers, guided so as to accentuate the identity becoming of the first author. Structured by the secondary author (the interviewer) in a mechanism which triggers selective confessions, the questions represent a first retrospective reading of the options, writings and literary or existential patterns of the first author (the interviewee). It is a genuine "work on oneself" [*travail sur soi*] (7) generated, in its complexity, through the juxtaposition of two feverishly sought-for identities (oneness and otherness), under the camouflage of a pluri-identity discourse in which the creative or biographic stances of the interlocutors are confronted through dialogue. Moreover, due to the temporal storyline (as Demazière believes), two scriptural, dialogic characters are constructed (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 156), as the stages of remembering overlap creative stages and cultural ages. These characters live through a double re-reading, burdened with meaning, of the personal history, and are carried on by a permanent process of self-explanation and projection of ulterior significance, which aims at clarification.

From this dual game of the *idem-ipse* relation (see Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another/ Soi-même comme un autre*) a dual narrative is born, with an identity stake configured since the beginning of the dialogue of Norman Manea and Saul Bellow. It is a confessional spectacle which outlines the premises of a narrative of double (human and intellectual) formation, in which the stances of narrative identity (also dual, according to the dialogic pact maintained by writing, and engaging the two identity reconstructions, of the interviewer and the interviewee) diachronically project "a logic of concatenation: the founding coherence is no longer in sameness, but in the flow and the intelligence of the sequence of events" [*une logique d'enchaînement: la cohérence fondatrice n'est plus dans la mêmeté mais dans le coulé et l'intelligence de la suite des événements*] (Kaufmann, *L'invention* 152). Actually, "it adapts itself perfectly to the (contradictory and changing) structure of the modern individual, building his necessary unity not by impossible totalization and fixation, but from inside, in an evolutionary way, around the narrative, the organizing thread. Everyone tells the story of his life which gives meaning to what he lives" [*elle s'adapte ainsi parfaitement à la structure (contradictoire et changeante) de l'individu moderne, construisant sa nécessaire unité non par une totalisation et une fixation impossibles mais, de l'intérieur et de façon évolutive, autour du récit, fil organisateur. Chacun se raconte l'histoire de sa vie qui donne sens à ce qu'il vit*] (152). The memory mechanisms keep on the game of reconstructing identity in dual hypostasis and, in the logic of the biographical, the choice of personal truth validates the "egocephalocentric ideology." [*l'idéologie égocéphalocentrique.*] This choice "selects, adapts, manipulates the segments of information that can find their place in its identity configuration" [*il sélectionne, adapte, manipule les segments d'information pouvant trouver place dans sa configuration identitaire*] (Kaufmann, *Ego* 238), while the egocephalocentric ideology represents "an entire corpus of thoughts organized around the most secret folds of the intimate, not only a social product, but a genuine institution on the course of formation, dictating more effectively its rules, which seem to originate in the depths of the self" [*tout un corpus de pensées, organisé autour des plis les plus secrets de l'intime, est non seulement un produit du social mais une véritable institution en cours de formation. Dictant d'autant plus efficacement ses règles qu'elles semblent provenir des profondeurs de soi*] (236).

Camouflaged in the textual interstices of the interviews, this self-centered ideology triggers recurrent attempts at identity redefinition both for Norman Manea, who carries, during his exilic (before 1989) and migrant (after the fall of the national-communist regime in Romania) experience, the obsessive

nostalgia of his double origin – Romanian and Jewish, and for Saul Bellow, the American Jewish writer of Russian descent. Actually, as Ksenia Polouektova notes,

Self-narratives, then, are essentially instruments of self-(re)invention, but they are also inherently therapeutic: in addition to reconciling the authors to what has been "lost" (and gained) in translating their pre-exilic self into an exile consciousness, they prompt the exile to confront and to contemplate the inescapable otherness within, the conflation of inner and outer adversities wrought but the spatial and temporal dislocations and discontinuities of the exilic condition. ("Is There a Place Like Home?" 466)

The four interviews are included in *Words&Images: the Jerusalem Literary Project*, which aims to do "detailed interviews with important contemporary Jewish authors, exploring the connections between their work and their Jewish identity" [*"interviuri detaliate cu cei mai importanți autori evrei contemporani, explorând conexiunile dintre opera și identitatea lor evreiască"*] (*Înainte de despărțiri/ Settling My Accounts Before I Go Away* (henceforth, *Settling My Accounts...5*). The dialogues of the two writers reveal their problematic identities, being relevant for the Romanian contemporary reader, called upon to decode situations and inner states with an impact on the way in which identity may be restored and culturally reshaped. Norman Manea illustrates the profile of the Romanian intellectual rebelling against the political system, who definitively rejects the dominant political ideology and leaves, at the age of 50, the country whose totalitarian regimes exert various social, political and cultural mechanisms of annihilation of his humanity. Awarded the Nobel Prize, Saul Bellow was born to a family of Russian Jews who immigrated to the United States. He was married, at some point, to Alexandra Bagdasar, a Romanian woman, and visited communist Romania in a period which had a negative impact on him, making him aware of the suspicion and fear omnipresent in the Romanian society of that time. For Antoaneta Ralian, who translated Saul Bellow's works into Romanian, his novels project the inner torments of the intellectual in a world burdened with a profound crisis of values, which can be assimilated, within the specific geo-cultural coordinates, with the socio-cultural space of the national-communist age, in a Romania where the captive writer's consciousness is irrevocably subject to alienation and estrangement though inner exile – as is the case with Norman Manea's writing, before his leaving the country. Consequently, the two intellectuals construct, in their books, scriptural para-identities corporealized in characters with a role in exorcising personal traumas and anguish, as Antoaneta Ralian rightfully remarks in the case of Saul Bellow's narratives.

They are infused with a subtle yet savory humor, tintured with bitter irony of poignant malice which targets its arrows at him, the self-satirized author. Because Saul Bellow is present in each and every of his book, not only as an author, but also as a character, in the way in which the Renaissance artists used to place their self-portrait in a corner of the painting. Bellow transfers his self to a key character or even to the protagonist of each novel, lending numerous autobiographical episodes, ideas, avatars, existential anguishes, impressions or phrases to him. Moreover, in repeated instances, even his physical traits: his baldness, his eye bags, his irregular teeth. He is the naive intellectual Citrine ('cavalier of the Legion of Honor') from Humboldt's Gift, he is the tormented dean Corde from *The Dean's December*, Chick, the acid biographer of *Ravelstein*, he is Herzog, the intellectual prototype with his stores of philosophical, theological and political ideas which, tested in moments of crisis, prove unusable; he is the septuagenarian Sammler, who lucidly and detachedly confronts the New York jungle. These are as many hypostases, para-identities of Saul Bellow, and also as many attempts at exorcising.

[*infuzate de un umor subtil dar savuros, tincturat de o ironie amăruie, de o picantă malițiozitate care-și îndreaptă acele și spre el, autorul autosatirizat. Pentru că Saul Bellow este prezent în fiecare dintre cărțile lui, nu numai ca autor ci și ca personaj, asemenea pictorilor renașcențiști care-și introduceau portretul într-un colț din figurația tabloului. Bellow își transferă sinele asupra câte unui personaj cheie sau chiar a protagonistului din fiecare roman, împrumutându-i multiple episoade autobiografice, idei, avataruri, spaime existențiale, impresii și expresii proprii. Ba, în cazuri repetate, chiar și trăsăturile lui fizice: calviția, pungile de sub ochi, dinții neregulați. El este naivul intelectual Citrine ("hahaler al Leziunii de Oroare") din *Darul lui Humboldt*, el este frământatul decan Corde din *Iarna Decanului*, Chick, acidulatul biograf al lui *Ravelstein*; el este Herzog, prototipul intelectualului cu depozitele lui de idei filozofice, teologice sau politice, care, testate în momente de criză, se dovedesc inutilizabile; el este septuagenarul Sammler, care se confruntă lucid și detașat cu jungla newyorkeză. Sunt atâtea ipostaze, paraidentități ale lui Saul Bellow, și tot atâtea încercări de exorcizare.*] ("S-a stins și Saul Bellow"/ "Saul Bellow has now passed away too")

Complementarily, Norman Manea's books project scriptural para-identities through another commonly used textual mechanism, the "allegorizing exilic identities," as mentioned by Doris Mironescu, in *The Hooligan's Return*, Manea's 2003 memoir within which the appeal to personal memory turns the textual space into one unfolding "topogenetic" identity-focused role:

Allegorization takes over by way of elaborate metaphors suggestive of exile and its multiple transgressions, exilic identity and its troubles, and old and new countries, abodes, and localities. Literary allusions frequently work in Manea as analytic prisms through which he scans an erstwhile intimate and homely stomping ground, breaking up past sites, incidents, and representations thereof into less habitual, less "homey", and even *unheimlich*, "uncanny" and unsightly zones of physical expanse, meaning, power, and responsibility. There are situations, though, in Manea and other writers, when a similarly prismatic, decomposing flashlight is focused on the character and on exiled, dislocated subjectivity more broadly. ("How does Exile make Space?" 298)

The same mechanism of para-identity projection is found in the interview-book of the two writers, in which Norman Manea and Saul Bellow, converted to scriptural characters of their own life stories, relive personal experiences, cross cultural ages and spaces, which results in the fortifying identification of the marks of a particular mythology of identity. The constant of the Jewish descent of the two authors – one writing in Romanian, the other, in English, is what brings their destinies together and legitimates the similarity of their identity courses through the same "poetics of the Relation, according to which identity, as a whole, extends in relation to the Other" [*poétique de la Relation, selon laquelle toute identité s'étend dans un rapport à l'Autre*] (Édouard Glissant cf. Dufoix, *La dispersion* 355). This is a type of rhizomatic identity, as glossed by Glissant, generated within a "cultural dispersion" which overlaps the two patterns of Diasporadynamics, as defined by Khachig Tölölyan and analyzed by Stéphane Dufoix:

The first would be a Jewish-centered definition of the diaspora, according to which the forced migration of a clearly identified population in the country of origin results in maintaining a collective memory within a distinct community in relation to the host society, and in maintaining contacts, both between dispersed communities and with the country of origin, when they still exist. After 1968, Tölölyan borrows from Walter Conner another, much more open, definition – "the fraction of a people living outside the country of origin (homeland)" – a definition that makes it impossible to question the existence, real or not, of a collective subject, since emphasis is laid more on representation than on action.

[*La première serait une définition judéo-centrée (Jewish-centred) de la diaspora, selon laquelle la migration forcée d'une population clairement identifiée dans le pays d'origine se traduit par le maintien d'une mémoire collective dans le cadre d'une communauté distincte par rapport à la société d'accueil et par le maintien de contacts, tant entre les communautés dispersées qu'avec le pays d'origine quand il existe encore. Après 1968 se mettrait en place une autre définition, beaucoup plus ouverte, que Tölölyan emprunte à Walter Conner – "la fraction d'un peuple vivant en dehors du pays d'origine (homeland)" –, définition qui permet de ne plus s'interroger sur l'existence, réelle ou non, d'un sujet collectif, puisque l'accent est plus mis sur la représentation que sur l'action*].(390)

Borrowing Bhabha's view, we could assert that the two writers' dialogues essentially project an identity dilemma emerging from each one's existential trajectory, translatable through the actualization of the Lucretius-Ovid dyad as prototype for generating the migrant rhizomatic identity: "The problem consists in whether the crossing of cultural frontiers permits freedom from the essence of the self (Lucretius) or whether, like wax, migration only changes the surface of the soul, preserving identity under its protean forms (Ovid)" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 224). It is, in our opinion, the hypostasis which validates the identity narrative written by two hands, which stems from the dialogues of the two writers facing *the new world* from the perspective of the migrant/ exiled intellectual, bearer of a personal history which he obsessively overlaps on the cultural-collective history of the host space. Personal mythology is shaped from this permanent confrontation, being reconfigured by the confessional nature of the interviews, which points to the (non)similarity between European geo-cultural spaces and American mentality, and to the metamorphoses of the memory-carrier *self*, which constantly becomes *the other*, in a complex game of identity. This game is framed within the limits of mutuality between interviewer and interviewee, now projected as characters in dialogue, which find both *the self* and *the other* in the proposed scriptural biographies, as well as in the adventures of the creative spirit mirrored by the writing.

The juxtaposition and interference of the two identities in dialogue potentate a dual effect of memory, becoming a textual mechanism of recovery and mutual confrontation of identity hypostases. The two intermingled scriptural voices direct the entire textual setting towards "the projection of in-betweenness" (Falaut, *Imagining Home* 14). The interviewer, Norman Manea, proposes a core questionnaire which supports the visible architecture of the spoken book, and which essentially rewrites its own identity narrative. Here, in a melting pot space, the affective memory of the writer in a camouflaged dialogue with himself coexists with identity reminiscences brought forth by the interviewee (Saul Bellow), who

validates, to various extents, through similarity and the sense of shared experience, his own discourse of the Self. On the other hand, from the perspective of the affective sequencing of biographic events and situations selected by memory, the American novelist's identity narrative selects *biographemes* and elaborates a *temporal grammar* of an exemplary destiny of a creator, which doubly resonates with the Romanian readers' horizon of expectation. Firstly, it outlines the path of becoming for the writer Saul Bellow and validates it in the shape of an exemplary identity narrative. Secondly, it reflects *à rebours*, through an effect of the mirror-writing, the story of Norman Manea's life, which (re)acquires meaning through the response-narrative of the interviewee.

The interview is prefaced by the sequence *Thoughts about Saul Bellow* (Manea, *Înainte de despărțirii/ Settling My Accounts...*7-35), in which Norman Manea presents Bellow in two hypostases: the successful American writer and the Jew born to a family of Russian migrants. In fact, this is a key for the reading of the "spoken book." Starting from the explanation of Saul Bellow's relation to the Romanian cultural space (his friendship with Mircea Eliade, his visit to Romania, reflected in the novels *Ravelstein* and *The Dean's December*), Norman Manea elaborates a poetics of autobiographic writing and its identity stakes, providing a key to access the dialogued text. At the same time, he quotes from Cynthia Ozick, who rightfully remarked:

When we deal with a novel, we are not concerned with the author's personal life. A novel, be it autobiographical, is not an autobiography. If the writer provides the information that one character or another is borrowed from real life, the readers are still under the obligation – imposed by the magic of literature itself – to cover their ears and move away. Or, it's like Tao: you say what it is and it's exactly what is not... The original disappears; the simulacrum, a wonder full of strength, is what lasts. Even if we can't always respect the terms of the 'bewitching obligation', we understand, at least, that it is important for us, as readers, not to give ourselves over to the gossip in literary media or outside of it.

[*Când avem de-a face cu un roman, nu ne privește viața personală a autorului. Un roman, fie și autobiografic, nu este o autobiografie. Dacă scriitorul oferă informația că nu știi care personaj este luat din viața reală, cititorii au chiar și atunci obligația - o obligație impusă de vraja literaturii înseși - de a-și astupa urechile și a se îndepărta... Literatura este subterană, nu terestră. Sau este ca Tao: spui ce este și tocmai asta nu-i... Originalul dispăre; simulacrul, o minune plină de forță, e ceea ce dăinuie. " Chiar dacă nu întotdeauna putem respecta termenii "obligației vrăjite", măcar înțelegem că este important, ca cititori, să nu ne lăsăm în voia bârfelor din presa literară sau din afara ei].(Manea, *Înainte de despărțirii/ Settling My Accounts...* 9)*

In the same context of biographical or historical "truth" translated into literature, into fiction, regardless of its formula, Norman Manea brings up "an interrogation not at all minor – how honest can be a writer in assuming guilt and responsibility" [*"o interogație morală deloc minoră - cât de onest poate fi un scriitor în a-și asuma o vină și o responsabilitate"*] (10) in periods of serious confusion of values, approaching the issue of the moral conscience of the intellectual or, on the contrary, the forms of betrayal, of standing in with the dominant regimes. Triggering a debate in a nutshell, with the starting point in the "insoluble Jewish problem," a latent reference to the interviews which covertly validate the existential and creative options of the two, giving the intrinsic specificity of their worldview, the Romanian writer approaches sensitive, yet relevant, topics for their "literary pacts": Mircea Eliade and his choice for the Iron Guard, Céline's ideological extremism ("incredibly talented and incredibly wacko" [*"extraordinar de talentat și extraordinar de țăcănit"*])(14), Eugen Ionescu, Matei Călinescu, Norman Manea himself, the author of the essay *Felix culpa*, debated at large by the reception critics and, last but not least, Saul Bellow, with his *Ravelstein*. In which case, "there are other reasons to be cautious when we read texts placed between fiction and 'reality'. If we give in to simplifications and deceitful 'information,' we ignore the contradictory suggestions and the essential ambiguities of the novel. In *Ravelstein*, Bellow includes dates and facts identifiable in the relation between Radu and Eliade, but also provides information that flagrantly contradicts the connection" [*"există și alte motive să fim precauți când citim texte aflate între ficțiune și 'realitate'. Dacă cedăm acestor simplificări și 'informații' amăgitoare, ignorăm sugestiile contardictorii și ambiguitățile esențiale ale romanului. În Ravelstein, Bellow include date și fapte regăsibile în relația dintre Radu și Eliade, însă furnizează și informații care contrazic flagrant conexiunea"*] (10).

The history of the relation between the two authors is foregrounded in the latter part of the *Thoughts about Saul Bellow*, with two elements of confluence of their literary and human becoming: Jewishness, as formative element of a stable identity core, and the shared view on literature and its formative functions, both of them interiorized and generative of interpersonal affinities against the background of the spaces recovered by personal memory – Norman Manea's "lost Bukovina" ["Bucovina pierdută"] (21) and Saul Bellow's Bard College. These geographies, real and symbolic at the same time,

are part of each author's personal mythology and supporting elements of the identity narratives in the interviews. As a matter of fact, Georges Gusdorf, who proposes this concept in the critical analysis of autobiographic writing, considers that, in such a discourse loaded with identities recovered through memory,

to the history of personality is opposed [...] a myth-history rather true than real. [...] The separation between the remembering I and the remembered I allows the intervention of the mythical instance, reshaping the reality so as to deem it more similar to an identity which the subject recognizes beyond distortions and misunderstandings of the event. [...] The truth of the self, the truest of the truths, is a mythology of the self" ["à l'histoire de la personnalité s'oppose [...] une mythohistoire, plus vraie que le réel. [...] L'écart entre le moi remémorant et le moi remémoré permet l'intervention de l'instance mythique, remaniant la réalité du vécu pour la rendre plus semblable à l'identité que le sujet se reconnaît par-delà les déformations et les malentendus de l'événement. [...] La vérité du moi, la plus vraie vérité, est une mythologie du moi"]. (Autobiographie 48081, 483)

Actually, as Norman Manea notes, Saul Bellow's books fragmentarily project pieces of a huge identity jigsaw, fictional mirrors of this personal mythology, a literature "in which the Jewish spirit discovers a new, free, American voice, a new serenity and a new apprehension, a new kind of humor and a new sadness, also about its way to reformulate the great unanswered questions of life" ["în care spiritul evreiesc își descoperă o voce nouă, liberă, americană, o nouă seninătate și o nouă neliniște, un nou tip de umor și o nouă tristețe și despre felul său de a reformula marile întrebări fără răspuns ale vieții"] (Înainte de despărțiri/ Settling My Accounts... 15-6). As in his fictional oeuvre, Bellow's memory-focused discourse "comments on some of the century's major cultural events and issues: the urban experience of European immigrants, especially Jewish immigrants; the socio-cultural ascendance of an influential Jewish middle-class; the ideological seductions of Marxism and Modernism; the tensions between residual European intellectual culture and emergent popular culture" (Aarons, "Introduction: Saul Bellow in His Times" 1). This reading grid elaborated by Norman Manea functions in rebound as a validation tool for his own identity profile, that of a Romanian writer exiled to America, who finds himself again in the book of the master, whom he otherwise included in his course, entitled *Contemporary Masters*, which he delivered at Bard College in the year 2000. As Manea declared, Saul Bellow's image from his books "seems that of a man obsessed with his identity, determined to scrutinize every aspect of the ego, to avoid nothing in the process of self-analysis" ["pare a unui om obsedat de identitatea sa, decis să scruteze fiecare aspect al eului, să nu evite nimic în procesul autoanalizei"] (Înainte de despărțiri/ Settling My Accounts...27-8), a lucid writer with an exemplary fate, skeptic in his confrontation with the world and history: "When I chose my path, I knew that society would stand against me. I also knew that I would win... and that it would be a small victory" ["Când mi-am hotărât drumul în viață, mi-am dat seama că societatea va fi împotriva mea. Am știut că am să câștig... și că va fi o victorie mărunțică"] (34). This perspective on the man and writer Saul Bellow seems to implicitly catch a glimpse of the identity core of the Romanian writer, the one who attends the master's funeral, a last meeting which triggers dilemmas and questions.

I was looking at the coffin of the man who had not believed in the omnipotence of death, being certain, as his mentor, Rudolf Steiner, that something was bound to follow, that it was not possible for everything to end so absurdly, so definitively. I threw, like everybody else, lumps on the coffin, until the grave filled and our friend completely sank into the Earth from where he had come, or perhaps he instantly reincarnated into another being. [...] I was looking at the birds around us, at leaves and squirrels and day bugs. I was wondering which of these ephemeral incarnations or reincarnations could now receive my increased number of questions.

[Priveam sicriul celui care nu crezuse în atotputernicia morții, convins, ca și mentorul său, Rudolf Steiner, că trebuie neapărat să urmeze ceva, nu se poate sfârși totul atât de absurd și definitiv. Am aruncat și eu, ca și ceilalți, bulgării de pământ peste sicriu, până când groapa s-a umplut și prietenul nostru s-a adâncit cu totul în Terra din care venise sau se reîncarnase, poate, instantaneu în altă ființare. [...] Priveam păsările din jur, și frunzele, și veverițele, și gângerile zilei. Mă întrebam care anume dintre toate aceste întrupări sau reîncarnări efemere ar fi să primească acum sporitele mele întrebări]. (34-5)

The narrative interview begins with an atypical actualization of the well-known enunciation scheme, as the interlocutors are here two textual masks/hypostases and, at the same time, human profiles quickly identifiable as such through their specific biographic information that revisits, retrospectively, the relevant stages of the biographic course of each one of them, correlated with fundamental themes of self-formation. This double Bildungsroman *ad-hoc* proposes two paths of formation which cross both tangentially and mirror-like, reflecting and clarifying one another. Invited to remember his significant

biographic ages, in view of sketching his identity, Saul Bellow simultaneously opens *narrative* and *history*, setting the storyline. The listing of the spiritual ages is acquired through biographemes which, corroborated with the explicit identity stake of the dialogue, allow the outlining of a symbolic temporal grammar with individual significance and, by reflection and implicit reacquisition of meaning, with obvious impact on the biography of the Romanian Jewish writer. Forced to become a polyglot to be able to integrate in the Canadian migrant community and also to preserve the necessary traces of his primary identity, the child Saul learns Hebrew and quickly interiorizes the functioning mode of the institutionalized forms of Canadian plurilingualism. At the same time, the affective memory and the attempt to preserve biographic episodes in close connection with his parents' cultural heritage (Belîi, Saul Bellow's original name, means white in Russian) correlate the Jewish identity with the far-away Russia, with nostalgia for the country left behind, which his parents still show and, simultaneously, with a textual architecture similar to that in Norman Manea's novel, *The Hooligan's Return*.

Thus, the questionnaire put together by the interviewer, Norman Manea, and the answers of the interviewee, Saul Bellow, begin to outline a double (auto)biography. The shift question/ comment – answer/ comment gradually turns into a mutual biographic reflection, as a result of a telescoping process associated to this discourse type, simultaneously directed to the exterior and the interior of the two interlocutors. And it also turns into a symbolic dialogue which engages two hypostases/ identity projections, as results of the writing of the spoken book, and also of the similitudes extant both at the actual biographic level of the two Jewish writers, and also at the level of the elaboration of two (or more) post-exilic *paper homelands* (see Sălcudeanu, *Patria de hârtie. Un eseu despre exil / The Paper Homeland. An Essay on Exile*). Another consequence of the symbolic identity/biography shift, determined by the Q&A structure of the book, is that it creates semantic depth, because, constantly brought back and correlated to the scriptural ego, but also to the profound ego, the primary meanings of the two individual histories are defamiliarized and intensified. Correlative with their performative value, the verbs *to say* and *to write* equate, in the textual weaving and in its implicit/implied ontology, with *to be*. "As far as I remember, in the few years I spent in this enclave, I perceived it as a small self-sufficient society. All character types, all rhetoric types - an agora with endless debates. Lots of discussions" ["*Din câte mi-aduc eu aminte, în cei câțiva ani petrecuți în enclava aceasta, am perceput-o ca pe o mică societate suficientă sieși. Toate tipurile de personaje, toate tipurile de retorică, o agora, cu dezbateri interminabile. Multe discuții*] (Manea, *Înainte de despărțirii/ Settling My Accounts...* 51). Essentially, just as little Saul makes his entrance in the *new world* under the sign of his parents' idiom, Yiddish, and of love for the central character of the New Testament, little Norman discovers the fascinating world of literary fiction through Ion Creangă's writings, both decisively placing themselves under the auspices of the written word.

In what Norman Manea is concerned, his identity cleavages and dilemmas are organized in the spoken-book along the coordinates of the same affective memory that digs out from the past the free-thinker's revolt against any form of constraint, including the pressure - once felt as identity ballast - exerted by the vivid Jewishness concentrated in his mother's figure (and later, image), a symbolic being of the ghetto, of ethnic and social stigma. A keeper of the traditions and values pertaining to a space partly identifiable in reality and partly projected as a faraway Ithaca, from the history of the Jewish people, the mother remains, despite the son's need for self-determination, an affective hallmark which provides stability in the American cultural space. Here, values can be easily lost or reconfigured for survival: "when I was still an adolescent, I met in Chicago many cosmopolitan Jews from Poland and Russia, from Warsaw and Moscow. I was amazed by their readiness to eat *tref* food [Yiddish: *not kosher*] - I had never seen before people breaking the rules at home, buttering the bread and putting a meatloaf on it" - says Bellow ["*pe vremea când eram încă adolescent am cunoscut la Chicago mulți evrei cosmopoliți din Polonia și din Rusia, evrei varșovieni și moscoviți. Am fost uimit de ușurința cu care mâncau mâncare tref [idiș: care nu este cușer] - nu mai văzusem oameni care să încalce regula la ei acasă, să întindă unt pe pâine și să pună o bucată de carne deasupra*"] (57). The assimilation (Americanization), partial as it may be, takes place, in Saul Bellow's case, after his mother's death, as a result of his need for survival in a multiethnic world that is nevertheless little generous with immigrants. Saul's elder brothers become salesmen - selling newspapers and, respectively, chocolate - and their sister becomes a typist. Symptomatically, the urgency of survival, doubled by the American mirage, conquers the eldest brother, while the second brother remains the Judaic prototype of the wise man who looks at the world with a view to understand it. "My second brother was meek, intelligent, and thoughtful. The eldest, on the other hand, was the agitator, the pro-American" ["*Fratele meu mijlociu era blând, inteligent, meditativ. Fratele cel mare, în schimb, era agitatorul, pro-americanul*"] (70). The quarrel between ancient and modern men, in identity key, is taken over, in Norman Manea's case, by the opposition between the family's moderately traditional attitude in what the ethnic issues are

concerned, and the behavior of Ariel, cousin of Janeta Manea (Norman's mother) – a protesting spirit par excellence, an antagonist of Orthodox Judaism. Virtually, both interlocutors re-evaluate the ideological options of their youth, i.e. Marxism and Trotskyism, in Saul's case, and respectively, a Romanian version of Marxism in Norman's case, condescendingly enough so as to easily ascribe them to the identity searches of the young age, in different contexts, but strongly imprinted by indices of the ethic, social and political differences: "I also had my own direct connections to Europe thanks to the family traditions. My cousin had been a renowned Menshevik, the revolutionaries and the European characters represented those *dramatis personae* of my life" [*"Am avut propriile legături directe cu Europa și datorită tradițiilor din familie. Vărul meu fusese un menșevic de marcă, revoluționarii și personajele europene reprezentau acele dramatis personae ale vieții mele"*], says Saul Bellow (81).

"The damned Jewish problem" reverberates late, at the age of wisdom of the Romanian writer of Jewish descent, after having crossed, both the writer and the problem itself, dilemmas and identity re-evaluation and re-definition processes favored by the American multiethnic space: "The Jewish problem' had remained, in lieu of the horror I should have felt. And I still wonder, even these days: why did it take you so long to vibrate with this disaster?" [*"Rămăsese 'chestiunea evreiască', în locul ororii pe care ar fi trebuit s-o simt. Și mă întreb deseori și azi: de ce ți-a luat atât de mult timp să vibrezi la acest dezastru?"*](82). Living in/next to the English language, as global(izing) identity agent and vehicle or as tool of cultural hybridization, and openly assimilating the Jewish identity, as one of the ultimate truths of the self, give new meanings to Jesus's story, an exemplary story of tolerance and love for people.

The second part of the spoken book opens with a provoking interrogation of the role and place of the writer in the world and society. Is he compelled to become actively involved in the life of the citadel or should he rather firmly preserve his rights to exercise his creative strength towards a freedom vouched by the awareness of his belonging to the typology mentioned, for instance, by Plato in the dialogue *Ion*? Another issue that concerns the two writers to the same extent is the relation between man and death, whether the former should fear the latter, or whether he should be at peace with it. And also, if in this existential equation, obviously disadvantageous to man, religion or the belief in the perennial nature of the work of art could compensate for this disparity.

The problem of creation – either literary or artistic, it is less important – means, for Saul Bellow, the sole *modus vivendi* for the truths of the being:

My job is to be myself. And, by being myself, I manage to be this elementary or primitive phenomenologist. Look, I settle my accounts before I go away. You asks me what means to be an artist. Firstly, you see what you have never seen before: you opened your eyes, the world is there; the world used to be a strange place, you've got your own version of it, no one else's, and you've stayed loyal to your version and to whatever you saw. This is, in fact, the foundation of my condition as a writer. You know exactly what I'm talking about.

[*"Treaba mea este să fiu eu însumi. Și, fiind eu însumi, reușesc să fiu acest fenomenolog elementar sau primitiv. Iată, îmi reglez conturile, înainte să dispar. Mă întrebi ce înseamnă să fii artist. În primul rând, vezi ce n-ai văzut înainte; ai deschis ochii, în fața ta se afla lumea; lumea era un loc straniu, ai căpătat asupra ei propria ta versiune, a nimănui altcuiva, ai rămas loial versiunii tale și a ceea ce ai văzut. Asta stă, de fapt, la baza condiției mele de scriitor. Știi foarte bine despre ce vorbesc"*]. (96)

As far as he is concerned, Norman Manea believes that the act of creation involves, aside from the most honest self-awareness, a disinhibited dialogue with the others, both concurring to reorganize the world and its fundamentals, that is, to give it a (different) meaning.

Naturally for a writer from a former communist Eastern-European country, Norman Manea also tackles the issue of the relation between the criterion of establishing the artistic value and, at the same time, the exclusive functioning principle of art – the aesthetic criterion –, and the ethical behavioral norm, related to the political power that writers should assume (see also Roth, *Memory, Trauma, and History: Essays on Living with the Past*). In this respect, the writer's status, as privileged voice of the public opinion and steadfast defender of the fundamental moral principles, although unable to condition the artistic value, adds up an ethic component specific to literature and art as a whole, in the sense of assuming the value system of the entire humanity and, correlatively, of the exemplary value of creation.

Along the same lines, the "insoluble Jewish problem" is repositioned, in Saul Bellow's confessions, as an identity component of the individual, with natural reverberations in the writer's identity profile and in the in-depth stylistics and semantics of his works. It nevertheless remains subject to the aesthetically infallible and immutable artistic truth. This is the reason why the novelist opts for Humboldt – the intellectual artist, and not for the intellectual Jew (Manea, *Înainte de despărțirii/ Settling My Accounts...* 111). The discussion on the long-term effects of the essay *Felix culpa*, in which Norman Manea signaled Mircea Eliade's right-wing ideology (never denied), without minimalizing or sabotaging the incontestable

merits of the savant and historian of religions, brings forth the question of Jewishness correlated with that of the Holocaust, as an object of irony and, implicitly, of minimalizing suffering. "Annihilation is always presented by the enemies of the Jews as a comedy of sorts. This was, in part, the genius of the Nazi. Giving the horror a comic touch"["Anihilarea este mereu prezentată de dușmanii evreilor ca un fel de comedie. Acesta a fost, în parte, geniul naștilor. Să confere ororii un aspect comic"] (123).

As parts of the Great Text of the World or, why not, of the Mallarmean *Livre* to which the universe aims, the pertinent, comparative or contrastive comments on the political activity of renowned political personalities of the world – Reagan, Clinton, Kennedy, Churchill, Ben Gurion or Teddy Kolleck, the mayor of Jerusalem – can naturally stay near illustrious names of world culture – Rilke, Malraux, Eugen Ionesco and others, because all are artisans of other people's destinies. In what the writers are concerned, the affective and intellectual reverberations have the gift to clarify Saul Bellow's fundamental truths about himself: "I remember the state. When I run into such a writer, he becomes a kind of an underground song whose voice I hear all the time, day and night" ["Mi-aduc aminte starea. Când dau peste un astfel de scriitor, el devine un fel de cântec subteran a cărui voce o aud tot timpul, zi și noapte"] (145). He speaks about Rilke. The translucent semantic nature of the work and of the individual camouflaged behind the fragile aureole of an exemplary creator is severely rebuked by Bellow in André Malraux's case: "it seemed to me that I saw through him clearly and that he wasn't able to bewitch me" ["mi s-a părut că văd clar prin el și nu mă poate vrăji"] (146). Similarly, the predisposition to irony is found, in the same exemplarily ironic manner in Eugen Ionesco's confessions: "His wife used to send him every night, irrespective of the weather, to walk the dog. He was telling me: 'I'm staying there, and it's pouring on me and the dog, on the sidewalk, and the umbrella can't keep the rain away. I'm doing this... why? For my wife! Because she believes it's my duty'"["Soția îl trimitea în fiecare seară, indiferent dacă era vreme bună sau rea, să scoată câinele la plimbare. Îmi spunea: 'Stau și mă plouă acolo, pe trotuar cu câțelul, și nici umbrela nu mă poate feri de ploaie. Fac toate astea – pentru ce? Pentru nevastă-me! Pentru că ea consideră că e de datoria mea.'"] (148).

The Nobel episode gives the laureate the occasion, seconded by Norman Manea, as a willing *raisonneur*, to identify, beyond the amiable self-irony, the behavioral and identity data of a typical Jewish family, happy to participate in the achievement of the most important member of the clan: "My brother Sam, who is no longer with us, and who had legal troubles at that time, also showed up. With his entire family. A flock. Children, grandchildren and so on. They filled the hotel. There wasn't a person named other than Bellow in there. It became a kind of joke"["Fratele meu Sam, care acum nu mai e și care avea probleme cu legea, a apărut și el. Cu întreaga lui familie. O șatră. Copii, nepoți și așa mai departe. Au umplut tot hotelul în care stăteam. Nu mai era pe-acolo om pe care să nu-l cheme Bellow. A devenit un fel de glumă"] (151-2). It is a biblical re-reading in a cultural palimpsest ad-hoc – the encounter of the Jew and the King, two figures of unquestionable archetypal value, playing in the eternal story of the relation between the artist and political power.

These scriptural histories with and about writers are completed with that of Ralph Ellison, the author of the famous novel *Invisible Man*, whose identity dilemmas intensified to the point of definitive inner rupture. Resounding failure of American democracy, victim of the impossibility to simultaneously answer to the ethnic commands, the Afro-American novelist was accused by young black people of having chosen a career to the detriment of the racial cause and against the expectations of the readership. He tried to write a sequel to *Invisible Man* as a book capable of displaying all the aspects of multiethnic American democracy, but he failed. Ralph Ellison's case illustrates the negative effects of positive discrimination. This is exactly why Saul Bellow asks himself, not at all rhetorically: "Don't you think it amazing that someone entrusts his peers, be them Romanian, American or whatnot? That he is able to establish a connection with that person! A form of insane devotion, an impossible idea of connecting people!"["Nu crezi că e uimitor ca cineva să acorde încredere semenilor lui, fie că sunt români, americani sau orice altceva? Să poți stabili o legătură cu acel om! Un fel de devotament nebunesc, o idee imposibilă de legătură între oameni"] (190).

In equal measure, the biography of Norman Manea, with its fictionalized versions in the spoken-books, is an adventure of (re)self-discovery by experiencing moments of adversity – the deportation to Transnistria – the struggle between the obligation to survive, embraced body and soul by a mother completely devoted to her vital instinct, poured over her entire family, hunger and disease; living in a Romania crushed by a sharpened totalitarian regime, in the 80s, which determines the writer to take refuge in the West, in Germany, thanks to a scholarship, and then in the United States of America; in other words, the exile embraced by the intellectual as an extreme - obligatory - form of revolt against the ideological oppression of the extreme left. The Western experience is viewed, in this case, with the eye of a man from the East, built – in soul and body, according to a rule of obligatory survival, assumed and strictly observed. Reaching down to the deepest fiber of the writer, the experience of the

Transnistrian Holocaust is doubled, not paradoxically, by the happy experience of discovering humanity in its warm, deeply good side and, in this way, catalyst for the equally happy contact with the Romanian language - thanks to the young teacher to whom he owes the discovery of Ion Creangă's *Amintiri din copilărie/ Childhood Memories*. The child Norman Manea will thus create a deep connection with the language of his native country, so deep that he will continue to write, in exile, his books, only in Romanian. A "snail house," protective and preserving the emotional memory of the lost Ithaca, the Romanian language is, along with ethnicity, an identity constant of the writer's spiritual profile that his books of dialogues reflect. From this perspective, American democracy, insistently present in the pages of the spoken-books, with its good and not so good aspects, is described by an intellectual well-acquainted with its short history and admirer of the controversial democracy where extremes coexist - Puritanism and the most diverse forms of the socio-cultural avant-garde, emigrants and natives - they themselves descendants of several generations of emigrants, ethnic communities of all kinds, various religions, ghettos and hyper-technological metropolises, etc. Diverse and generous with the marginalized of all kinds, the American socio-cultural crucible seems, to the Romanian-speaking Jewish writer, to be, truly, the *best of all possible worlds* in contemporary reality.

Descending from a family of Jews from St. Petersburg, emigrated to the United States and then settled in Chicago, Saul Bellow also openly assumes the Jewish identity, transposed in his novels - *Ravelstein*, *Herzog* - emotionally imprinted discreet chronicle of the lives of Jewish communities in Chicago and New York, *Humboldt's Gift* - for which he received the Nobel Prize for literature. The novel *The Dean's December*, however, captures the traumatic experience of the protagonist, Corde - obviously, (in)discreet auctorial alter-ego, descending to a 1977 Bucharest, under dictatorship, a gray city, like the people who populate it, oppressed by privations and fear. Accompanying his wife of Romanian origin (in reality, one of the writer's five wives, Alexandra Bagdasar, the fugitive daughter of Florica Bagdasar - former Minister of Health and later disavowed by the communist power) to her native country, to see her dying mother for the last time, Corde experiences the living conditions in the communist camp, thus outlining an experience in the opposite direction from that covered by Norman Manea, towards the free world. Deprivations of all kinds - lack of hot water and heating, food shortages, and especially widespread suspicion, the fear that at any moment, the overseers in the shadows could brutally intervene in the life of any individual, is transferred to the stranger who suddenly makes contact with this city struck by earthquake and with the gloomy atmosphere that predominates. Moreover, he helplessly witnesses his wife's desperate attempts to see her mother, her hopeless struggle against the ban from entering Elias Hospital - the party's elite hospital, and unwittingly becomes an(other) example of an individual persecuted without knowing why. The external perspective on the Bucharest *penal colony* is found, specularly, in the less than pleasant image of the city of Chicago, where the struggle for survival is of a savagery perfectly comparable to the human and material misery with which people struggle under dictatorship, in 70s Romania. In Chicago, the racially motivated death of a student becomes, for Dean Corde - who investigates it provoking a series of adverse reactions up to the level of academic management - an unfortunate opportunity to dramatically review his entire value system - *truth, justice and equality* among people remain, in the context of ghettos and social and ethnic violence in the suburbs of the American metropolis, only the principles of an idealistic American intellectual, struggling with reality.

To conclude, we could say that the questionnaire put together by Norman Manea retraces, in palimpsest, the identity and textual path of his other writings (especially that of *The Hooligan's Return*), while also activating the specular function of the narrative interview. It considers the matter of a personality built at the confluence/ interference/ contamination of more real and hypothetical cultural spaces (here including the fictional spaces built by literature, the image of the country of origin, which ends up overlapping the writer's biography - Romania - and that of the archetypally encoded one - Israel), but that also finds itself against the grain in relation to each and every one of these. On the other hand, Saul Bellow's answers make possible not only the reflection of the affectively recovered biography, but also a problematizing *mise-en-abyme*. In what concerns Saul Bellow's biography (the writer himself is considered to be a "strongly autobiographical" author - Sánchez-Canales, "Bellow's Letters and Biographies about Bellow"1), textually constructed on two levels, of questions and answers, it becomes a biography written by two hands, as the bio-graphemes actually result from the fertile hybridization between the question, as challenge for the other, and the answer, as challenge for the self.

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Author's profile: Simona Antofi teaches Romanian literature, cultural and literary theory at "Dunarea de Jos" University of Galați, Romania. She is a member of "G. Călinescu" Institute of Literary History and Theory of the Romanian Academy - "Dunarea de Jos" University of Galați and the main editor of [Communication Interculturelle et Littérature](https://revistacil.wordpress.com/) Journal (<https://revistacil.wordpress.com/>). Her foremost research interests are related to post-communist literature of Eastern Europe, Romanian culture and civilization, contemporary Romanian literature. Antofi's latest publications include: *De la discursul poetic la facerea literaturii. Structuri poetice românești în diacronie*, 2010 (*From the Poetic Discourse to Making Literature. Romanian Poetic Structures in Evolution*),

Norman Manea, *Textul nomad - ipostazele narative ale identității exilice*, 2014 (Norman Manea, *The Nomadic Text - the Narrative Facets of Exilic Identity*) and *The Multi-identity Pattern of the Regained Equilibrium - Norman Manea, "Intoarcerea huliganului" / The Return of the Hooligan*, 2013. Email: simona.antofi@ugal.ro, simoantofi@yahoo.com

Nicoleta Ifrim teaches Romanian literature at "Dunarea de Jos" University of Galați. Her research interests include: literary criticism, comparative intercultural studies, literature of exile, and (post)communist European literature. Ifrim's publications include *Identitate culturală și integrare europeană: Perspective critice asupra discursului identitar românesc în perioada postdecembristă* (Cultural Identity and European Integration: Critical Approaches on Romanian Identity-focused Discourse of the Post-December Age) (2013) and *Fractalitatea și discursul literar: Ipostaze ale unei noi teorii a receptării* (Fractality and Literary Discourse: Towards a New Reading Theory) (2011). E-mail: nicoleta.ifrim@ugal.ro