

The Black Envelope

Plicul negru

Presented by: Brîndușa Nicolaescu

The Black Envelope is a bitter satire about Ceaușescu's dictatorship. The main theme is survival and dissent under a totalitarian regime. The publication of the novel implied a fierce fight with the communist ruthless censorship and eventually compelled Norman Manea to flee Romania for good in 1986. The censors returned him the manuscript three times and the repeated recommendations brought changes in the text, but could not expurgate it – there are still allusions conveying strong critical messages: writing between the lines had become at the time the necessary complicity with the readers, in a joint political defiance.

Once established as an exiled professor in the United States, the author revisited the novel, which was published first in English in 1995, translated by Patrick Camiller, and only in 1996 it appeared in Romanian. The second edition, however, is not a mere restoration of the original manuscript mutilated by censorship; the writer reconsidered the text with the international audience in mind and rewrote it by also cutting a considerable number of pages that would be considered too cryptic and convoluted for contemporary readers. By doing so the novelist also removed an enigmatic character, Mynheer, called also the "Author", who was an alter ego of the writer, and whose presence turned the novel into a self-referential text that transformed the process of reading into a reflection on the process of writing. The structure of the second edition remains quite complex, a psychological puzzle, and the story of an investigator who loses his mind during his search for an occult organization. The textual surface brings together realistic scenes with nightmares, dreams, fantasies, memories, and obsessions construing a narrative that is more plausible rather than reliable.

The plot can be briefly summarized as the failed attempt of the protagonist, Anatol Dominic Vancea Voinov, nicknamed Tolea, to find his Jewish father's alleged murderers, bordering between nightmare and clinical madness, and leading to a layered x-ray of Romanian society before 1989, in full anomie and political aphasia. In his early fifties, Anatol needed to come to Bucharest, where he worked as a receptionist in a notorious hotel, after having been an esteemed high school teacher in a provincial town and having been fired both because of his bisexuality and because of political police entrapment. Tolea receives a letter from his exiled brother who, sensing that his death is near, asks him to investigate the mystery of their father's death. The presence of the envelope from abroad echoes a sinister "black envelope" received by his father, Marcu Vancea, on the eve of his death around Easter 1940, an anonymous threatening letter written in the anti-Semitic style of the Romanian fascist Iron Guard organization. Anatol suspects that the sender of the letter was the photographer Octavian Cusa, the rejected suitor of the philosopher Marcu's daughter. Anatol looks for Octavian in the records of the Association of Deaf-Mute Silence, ruled by the almighty "network" (a metaphor for the Romanian "securitate") and eventually learns that Tavi had left the country. The Association may be interpreted on two levels: first as a symbolic organization representing the

ordinary people under the oppressive regime: “the underworld, the underdeveloped” and the voiceless, presumably “building the multilaterally developed society” and secondly, as a literary reference to Ernesto Sábato’s “Report on the Blind” from the novel *On Heroes and Tombs*, relevant to Anatol’s plunges into the darkness of his consciousness.

An important theme is a substitution, the illusion of reality in the fake, constructed world of dictatorship: from “coffee substitutes made from chickpeas, barley, cornmeal”, to “substitute bread, clothing, or books” and substitute people, “the assorted extras of the great farce.” The protagonist also feels like “a substitute in a world of substitutes”, which is why “no action materializes in this fictitious world of signs and substitutes.” Related to the image of this type of replacement and displacement is the protagonists' reverie to take heterotopic escapes. The "madhouse" run by Dr. Marga represents, to both Anatol and Irina, his former lover, a refuge for friendly dialogue, because, the author notes, "perhaps that was his profession, friendship": the very friendship of this strange doctor involves heterotopic detours outside the narrow space of the fictional world, in an attempt to understand the suffocating Romanian atmosphere of the 1980s.

LANGUAGE: Romanian/Română

CENSORSHIP STATUS:

Working Paper

“A Political Novel between the Periphery and the Center: Norman Manea’s 'Plicul negru' (1986) / 'The Black Envelope' (1995)’ & “Response”

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