

NORMAN MANEA

Now a professor and writer-in-residence at Bard College, Norman Manea (born in 1936) fled his native Romania in 1986, after two decades of life under Nicolae Ceaușescu and a childhood spent partly in a concentration camp. Given this history, it is perhaps no wonder that an ordinary day on New York City's Upper West Side—as described in his 2003 memoir *The Hooligan's Return*—seems in some ways like a day in Paradise. And yet in spite of the abundance that spills out onto the city's sidewalks, the exiled writer is by turns amused and haunted by recognitions of contradiction, deracination, and loss—as if the past were inevitably and uncannily present, or as if the present were entirely spectral. Manea—whose works translated into English also include *On Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist* (essays, 1992), *October, Eight O'Clock* (stories, 1992), *Compulsory Happiness* (novellas, 1994), and *The Black Envelope* (novel, 1995)—writes less about Romania or his adopted United States than about states of in-betweenness and the struggle to find a home in a broken world. “Barney Greengrass” is from *The Hooligan's Return*. The translation is by Angela Jianu.

Barney Greengrass

The bright spring light, like an emanation from Paradise, streams through the large picture window wide as the room itself. There is a man in the room, looking down from his tenth-floor apartment at the hubbub below, at the buildings, the shop signs, the pedestrians. In Paradise, he must remind himself again this morning, one is better off than anywhere else.

Across the street is a massive red-brick building. His eye catches groups of children going through their paces in dance and gym classes. Yellow lines of taxicabs, stuck in traffic at the juncture of Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue, are screaming, driven mad by the morning's hysterical metronome.

The observer, however, is now oblivious to the tumult below, as he scrutinizes the sky, a broad expanse of desert across which drift, like desert beasts, slow-moving clouds.

Half an hour later, he stands on the street corner in front of the forty-two-story building where he lives, a stark structure, no ornamentation, a simple shelter, nothing less, or more, than an assemblage of boxes for human habitation. A Stalin-era apartment block, he thinks. But no Stalinist building ever reached such heights. Stalinist nonetheless, he repeats to himself, defying the stage set of his afterlife. Will he become, this morning, the man he was nine years ago, when he first arrived here, bewildered now, as he was then, by the novelty of life after death? Nine years, like nine months brimming with novel life in the womb of the adventure giving birth to this brand-new morning, like the beginning before all beginnings.

On the left, the drugstore where he regularly buys his medicines. He is idly looking at the store's sign—RITE AID PHARMACY, spelled out in white letters on a blue background—where suddenly five fire engines, like metallic fortresses, advance on the street in a screech of sirens and horns. Hell's fires can rage in Paradise, too.

But it is nothing serious, and in an instant everything is back in place—the photo shop where he is having the photo for his new ID processed; the neighborhood diner; the local Starbucks; and, of course, a McDonald's, its entrance graced by a pair of panhandlers. Next come the Pakistani newsstand, the Indian tobacconist, the Mexican restaurant, the ladies' dress shop, and the Korean grocery, with its large bunches of flowers and displays of yellow and green watermelons, black and red and green plums, mangoes from Mexico and Haiti, white and pink grapefruit, grapes, carrots, cherries, bananas, Fuji and Granny Smith apples, roses, tulips, carnations, lilies, chrysanthemums. He walks past small buildings and tall buildings, a mixture of styles and proportions and destinies, the Babylon of the New World, and of the Old World, too. There is a population to match—the tiny Japanese man in a red shirt and cap, swaying between two heavy loads of packages; the fair-haired, bearded, pipe-smoking man in shorts, walking between two big blond female companions in pink shorts and dark sunglasses; the tall, slim barefoot girl, with cropped red hair, skimpy T-shirt, and shorts the size of a fig leaf; the heavy, bald man with two children in his arms; the short fat man with a

black mustache and a gold chain dangling down his chest; beggars and policemen and tourists as well, and none seem irreplaceable.

He crosses to Amsterdam Avenue at Seventy-second Street and is now in front of a small park, Verdi Square, a triangle of grass bordered on three sides by metal railings and presided over by a statue of Giuseppe Verdi, dressed in a tailcoat, necktie, and hat, surrounded by a bevy of characters from his operas on which the placid pigeons of Paradise have come to rest. A scattering of neighborhood denizens sit on the nearby benches, the pensioners, the disabled, the bums swapping stories and picking at their bags of potato chips and slices of pizza.

There is nothing lacking in Paradise—food and clothing and newspapers, mattresses, umbrellas, computers, footwear, furniture, wine, jewelry, flowers, sunglasses, CDs, lamps, candles, padlocks, dogs, cars, prostheses, exotic birds, and tropical fish. And wave after wave of salesmen, policemen, hairdressers, shoeshine boys, accountants, whores, beggars. All the varieties of human faces and languages and ages and heights and weights people that unlikely morning, on which the survivor is celebrating the nine years of his new life. In this new Afterlife world, all the distances and interdictions have been abolished, the fruit of the tree of knowledge is available on computer screens, the Tree of Eternal Life offers its pickings in all the pharmacies, while life rushes at breakneck speed and what really matters is the present moment.

Suddenly hell's alarm bells break out again. No fire this time, but a white, roaring juggernaut leaving behind the blur of a blood-red circle with a red cross and red letters reading *AMBULANCE*.

No, nothing is missing in this life-after-death, nothing at all. He raises his eyes toward the heavens that allowed this miracle to happen. An amputated firmament it is, for the concrete rectangles of the buildings narrow the prospect to a chink of blue sky. The façade on the right, blocking the view, is formed by a brownish wall flanked by a waste pipe; on the left, a yellow wall. Against this golden background, spelled out in iridescent blue, is the message *DEPRESSION IS A FLAW IN CHEMISTRY NOT IN CHARACTER*. Warning, or mere information—hard to tell. *DEPRESSION IS A FLAW IN CHEMISTRY NOT IN CHARACTER*, displayed on five separate lines, one after the other.

He stares at the lines of sacred text, his head tilted backward. Jolted out

of his reverie, he steps back and finds himself walking along Amsterdam Avenue again. There is an advantage to his new life—immunity. You are no longer chained to all the trivia, as in the previous life, you can walk on in indifference. He heads toward the restaurant/delicatessen Barney Greengrass, famous for its smoked fish. “The place will remind you of your previous life,” his friend has promised.

The buildings along Amsterdam Avenue have been reclaimed from the past, old houses, reddish, brown, smoke-gray, four-five-six stories, iron balconies, fire escapes blackened by time. These streets of the Upper West Side, when he first encountered them, reminded him of the Old World. However, over the nine—or is it ninety?—years since he moved into the neighborhood, the tall buildings have multiplied, dwarfing even the forty-two stories of his apartment building to the proportions of a paltry Stalinist construction—there is that insidious adjective again.

On the ground floor of the building, the old shops, as before—Full Service Jewelers, Utopia Restaurant, Amaryllis Florist, Shoe Store, Adult Video, Chinese Dry Cleaning, Nail Salon, Roma Frame Art, and, at the corner of Seventy-sixth Street, Riverside Memorial Chapel. A young girl with thick legs and long dark hair, wearing a black short-sleeved dress, black stockings, and thick, dark sunglasses, comes out of the building. Three long black cars with darkened windows, like huge coffins, are parked at the curb. Out of them step smartly dressed gentlemen in black suits and black hats, elegant ladies in black dresses and black hats, teenagers in sober dress. Once more the metronome has struck the hour of eternity for some poor soul. Life is movement, he has not forgotten, and he hurries away. One step, two, and he is out of danger.

On the sidewalk in front of the venerable Ottomanelli Bros. meat market (SINCE 1900, a sign proclaims) are two wooden benches. An old woman sits on the one on the right. He collapses onto the other, keeping an eye on her. She stares vacantly into space, but he feels she is observing him. They seem to recognize each other. Her presence is familiar, as if he has felt it before on certain evenings, in certain rooms suddenly charged with a protective silence that would envelop him. Never has he felt this way in broad daylight amid the hubbub of the workaday world.

The old lady gets up from the bench. He waits for her to take a few steps, then follows her. He walks behind her in the slow rhythm of the past. He observes her thin legs, fine ankles, sensible shoes, cropped white hair, bony shoulders bent forward, her sleeveless, waistless dress, made of a light material in red and orange checks on a blue background. In her left hand, as in time before, she carries a shopping bag. In her right hand, as in time before, she holds a folded gray sweater. He overtakes her and makes a sudden turn. She gives a start. She probably recognizes the unknown man who had collapsed, exhausted, on the other bench at Ottomanelli's. They look at each other, startled. A ghost, out of the blue, on a bench, on a city sidewalk.

All is familiar—the gait, the dress, the sweater, the cropped white hair, the face half-seen in a fraction of a second. The forehead and the eyebrows and the eyes and the ears and the chin are all as before, only the mouth has lost its full contour and is now just a line, the lips too long, lacking shape; and the nose has widened. The neck sags, with wrinkled skin.

Enough, enough . . . He turns around and follows her from a distance. Her silhouette, the way she walks, her whole demeanor. You do not need any distinguishing marks, you always carry everything with you, well-known, immutable; you have no reason to follow a shadow down the street. He slows down, lost in thought, and the vision, as he had wished, vanishes.

Finally, at Eighty-sixth Street, he reaches his destination: Barney Greengrass. Next to the window, the owner sits sprawled in a chair, his hunched back and big belly enveloped in a loose white shirt with long sleeves and gold buttons. The neck is missing; the head, topped by a rich mane of white hair, is ample, the nose, mouth, forehead, and ears firmly drawn. On the left, behind the salami-halvah counter, stands a worker in a white coat. Another counterman tends the bread-bagels-buns-cakes section.

He greets the owner and the young man standing next to him, who has a telephone glued to each ear. Then he walks into the room on the left, the restaurant area. At the table next to the wall a tall, thin man with gold-rimmed spectacles raises his eyes from his newspaper and calls out the customary greeting: "How're you doing, kid?" A familiar face, a familiar voice. Exiles are always grateful for such moments. "What's up?"

"Not much. 'The social system is stable and the rulers are wise,'" as our

colleague Zbigniew Herbert says. “In Paradise one is better off than anywhere else.” The novelist, to whom these quotations are directed, is not keen on poetry, but luckily, it sounds more like prose.

“How are you? Tell me the latest. News from here, not from Warsaw.”

“Well, I’m celebrating nine years of life in Paradise. On March 9, 1988, I was shipwrecked on the shore of the New World.”

“Children love anniversaries, and Barney Greengrass’s is the ideal place for such things. It has all the memories of the ghetto, pure cholesterol, *Oy mein Yiddishe mame*. The old world and the old life.”

He hands me the plastic-covered menu. Yes, the temptations of the ghetto are all here: pickled herring in cream sauce, fillet of schmaltz herring (very salty), corned beef and eggs, tongue and eggs, pastrami and eggs, salami and eggs, homemade chopped chicken liver, gefilte fish with horseradish. The chicken liver is no pâté de foie gras, nor are incubator-bred American chickens East European chickens. The fish isn’t like the fish of the Old World, the eggs aren’t like the eggs we used to know. But people keep trying, and so here are the substitutes for the past. Russian dressing with everything, with roast beef, turkey . . . Yes, the myth of identity, the surrogates of memories translated into the language of survival.

A handsome young waiter approaches. He recognizes the famous novelist and says to him, “I’ve read your latest book, sir.” Philip seems neither flattered nor upset by this greeting. “Indeed? And did you enjoy it?” He had, the waiter avowed, but not as much as the previous book, much sexier.

“Good, good,” the novelist says, without raising his eyes from the menu. “I’ll have the scrambled eggs with smoked salmon and orange juice. Only the whites, no yolks.” The waiter turns to the customer’s unknown companion. “What about you, sir?”

“I’ll have the same,” I hear myself mumbling.

Barney Greengrass offers acceptable surrogates of East European Jewish cuisine, but it is not enough to add fried onions or to affix bagels and knishes to the menu to produce a taste of the past.

“So, how did you like Barney’s cuisine?”

No reply.

“Okay, you don’t have to answer that. Are you going to go back to Romania or not, what have you decided?”

"I haven't decided anything yet."

"Are you afraid? Are you thinking of that murder in Chicago? That professor . . . what was his name? The professor from Chicago."

"Culianu, Ioan Petru Culianu. No, I'm not in the least like Culianu. I am not a student of the occult like Culianu, nor, like him, have I betrayed the master, nor, like him, am I a Christian in love with a Jewish woman and about to convert to Judaism. I'm just a humble nomad, not a renegade. The renegade has to be punished, while I . . . I am just an old nuisance. I cannot surprise anybody."

"I don't know about surprises, but you've been quite a nuisance occasionally. A suspect, becoming more suspicious. This is not to your advantage."

Professor Ioan Petru Culianu had been assassinated on the twenty-first of May 1991, in broad daylight, in one of the buildings of the University of Chicago. A perfect murder, apparently—a single bullet, shot from an adjacent stall, straight into the professor's head, as he sat on the plastic seat in the staff toilets of the Divinity School. The unsolved mystery of the assassination had, naturally, encouraged speculation—the relations between the young Culianu and his mentor, the noted Romanian scholar of religion Mircea Eliade, with whose help he had been brought to America; his relations with the Romanian community of Chicago, with Romania's exiled King, his interest in parapsychology. There was, in addition, the Iron Guard connection, that movement of extreme-right-wing nationalists whose members were known as *legionari*, the Legionnaires. The Iron Guard, which Mircea Eliade had supported in the 1930s, still had adherents among the Romanian expatriates of Chicago. It was said that Culianu was on the verge of a major reassessment of his mentor's political past.

The Chicago murder, it was true, coincided with the publication of my own article about Eliade's Legionnaire past, in *The New Republic*, in 1991. I had been warned by the FBI to be cautious in my dealings with my compatriots, and not only with them. It was not the first time I had talked about this with my American friend. Culianu, Eliade, Mihail Sebastian—Eliade's Jewish friend—these names had come up frequently in our conversations over the previous months.

As the date of my departure for Bucharest approached, Philip insisted

that I articulate the nature of my anxieties. I kept failing. My anxieties were ambiguous. I did not know if I feared meeting my old self there, or if I feared bringing back my new image, complete with the expatriate's laurels and the homeland's curses.

"I can understand some of your reasons," Philip says. "There must be others, probably. But this trip could cure you, finally, of the East European syndrome."

"Perhaps. But I'm not ready yet for the return. I am not yet indifferent enough to my past."

"Exactly! After this trip, you will be. Those who come back, come back healed."

We have reached the same old dead end. But this time, he persists.

"What about seeing a few old friends? A few old places? You did say you would be willing to see some of them, despite not being quite ready for it. Last week, you said something about going to the cemetery to visit your mother's grave."

A long pause follows. "I saw her again," I finally say. "This morning, half an hour ago. I was on my way here, and suddenly there she was, seated on this bench, on Amsterdam Avenue, in front of Ottomanelli's."

We fall silent again. When we leave Barney Greengrass's, our conversation returns to familiar topics and resumes its jovial tone. We say goodbye, as we always do, at the corner of Seventy-ninth Street. Philip turns left, toward Columbus Avenue. I continue down Amsterdam to Seventieth Street and my non-Stalinist Stalinist apartment building.