



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

RMST 202

Romance Studies,
Modernism to the Present

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The Trenchcoat:
Norman Manea on
Interpretation and
Complicity

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The Trenchcoat: Norman Manea on Interpretation and Complicity

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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The overthrow of Romania's Communist regime in December 1989 was more violent, and more spectacular, than equivalent transitions elsewhere in Eastern Europe that same year.

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Communism in power was infinitely
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In *The Trenchcoat*, Norman Manea faces the problem of how to portray the country during the final years of Ceaușescu's rule.

On the one hand, to side-step the censors, he has to avoid naming the leader or being too specific in his account of people and places, practices and problems.

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Hence the fiction of totalitarianism tends towards allegory or fable.

On the other hand, he has to work with
monotony, boredom, repetition, and habit.

On the other hand, he has to work with monotony, boredom, repetition, and habit.

Hence his fiction revolves around small differences, tiny details or vague doubts that we can seldom be sure are truly significant and may never be resolved.

Reading Manea, we are trained to attend to minor variations, uncertain whether they can quite bear the weight of our perhaps paranoid over-interpretation.

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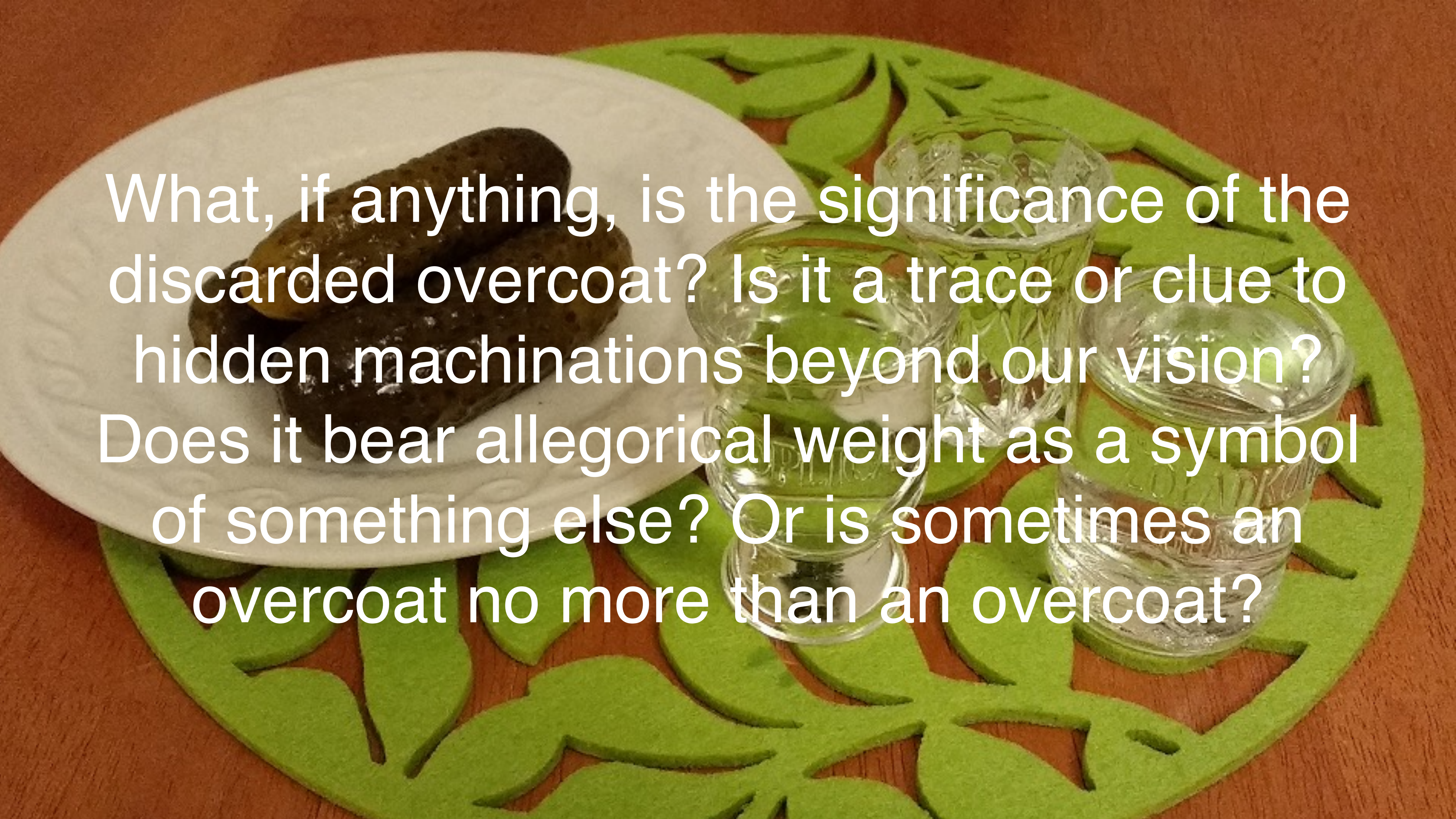
How can we avoid inadvertently legitimating its ubiquitous surveillance, if we too admit that small details can be significant?



THE UNCERTAINTY OF INTERPRETATION

By the time the story ends we are left wondering what the unexpected appearance of this item of clothing may mean.

What, if anything, is the significance of the discarded overcoat? Is it a trace or clue to hidden machinations beyond our vision? Does it bear allegorical weight as a symbol of something else? Or is it sometimes an overcoat no more than an overcoat?

A still life photograph featuring a white ceramic plate with two pickles on the left. To the right are two clear glass tumblers filled with water and ice cubes. The items are set on a bright green, leaf-shaped placemat with a scalloped edge, which rests on a wooden surface. Overlaid on the center of the image is a large block of white text.

What, if anything, is the significance of the discarded overcoat? Is it a trace or clue to hidden machinations beyond our vision? Does it bear allegorical weight as a symbol of something else? Or is sometimes an overcoat no more than an overcoat?

The garment itself is anonymous and nondescript—the fact that it could belong to anyone shows that it reveals no personal style or individual characteristics. That it could so easily have been left behind and overlooked indicates that it can be taken for granted, go without saying.

“the cheapest kind, you know, the one you see in all of the stores, the one hardly anyone buys. [. . .] A sort of cotton duck that used to be real material and used to have who knows what real color. Now it’s the color of wind, fog, our bleached-out boredom.” (249)

“Poor Dina, she got scared over nothing.
There’s no reason to be scared or
conscience-stricken. It’s not unheard-of,
nothing to get hysterical about, believe me.
Routine and boredom [. . .]. Our little devil,
boredom. [. . .] A sleepy society!
Deprived of the epic elements.
Unspeakable boredom.” (240).

Nothing really happens in Romania;
all ideas of utopia or progress
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all ideas of utopia or progress
have been abandoned.

“Those creeps who keep an eye on us all,
even they’ve become apathetic.” (239)

Just because you are paranoid, it does not mean they are not out to get you!

“It’s possible that they use these apartments even without the permission of the tenants, when nobody’s home.” (192)

“And the trenchcoat, I mean the raincoats
. . . What is this farce, they’re playing
ghosts, or what? No, no, there’s
something going on, something! [. . .]
There’s always something under the
surface, obviously. Obviously! Nothing is
what it seems, nothing or no one, not even
your own husband, no one! Anyone
can become anything!” (257).

The regime is real, even if it works through simulation and dissimulation. The coat is a glitch, a mistake, or a sign, to keep everyone on their toes.

“The overcoat! You’ve read his stuff? The madman? The one with the big nose [. . .]. Well, the inspector. The inspector! The inspector with the big nose. The nose! The madman. The diary of a madman . . . The little devil with the big nose! Nikolai Vasilievich, who wrapped us all up in his Overcoat.” (237)



Nikolai Gogol

The background of the cover is a dark, monochromatic illustration. It depicts a man in a long, dark overcoat and a tall top hat walking across a city street at night. In the background, there are buildings with lit windows and a horse-drawn carriage. The overall mood is somber and atmospheric.

THE
OVERCOAT
AND OTHER STORIES

NIKOLAI
GOGOL

Manea's tale is indebted to Gogol's as much as Communist Romania was indebted to its Warsaw Pact overlords— however hard Ceaușescu strove to assert his independence from the standard Moscow line.

“confusion . . . The confused voice of a confused time” (191); “there were, in fact, many hypotheses” (258).

The same is also true of the text itself:
that it is subject to a variety of
interpretations or hypotheses.

There is a margin of uncertainty in life as in literature, and a strange resonance between the experiences of living in Communist society and engaging with a text, both of which are exercises in close reading, a hermeneutics of suspicion.



THE TEMPTATIONS OF COMPLICITY

Writers and artists were among the most prominent and celebrated among the dissidents who voiced their opposition to authoritarian rule.

It could seem as though art and literature were by their nature at odds with totalitarianism.

“I never wished to be a ‘political’ writer,
and I hope I wasn't only that even when
I was forced to write about a
nightmarish politicized reality.”

“The sequel to the events of December 1989, with its adroit renewal of ideological masks and its totally one-sided restructuring of the administration, corresponds not at all to a revolution but rather to a finely tempered remoulding.”

“It is not so hard also to see the forces of corruption in a free market society, the pressure exerted by money, advertisement, fame, the distortions imposed through popular culture and television.”

Literature cannot save us from bad politics,
whether of the right or the left.

“The same old line. Pure demagoguery,
everyone’s fed up with that blah-blah-blah.
And yet! And yet . . . if you think about it
. . . the paradox is that . . . yes, yes,
it’s even true!” (210)

What if literature is not so distant from power? What if disgruntled chatter and even occasional outright criticism are insufficient to absolve anyone from the charge of complicity?

Sometimes, power is most effective not when it indulges in censorious prohibition, but when it encourages us to express ourselves as freely as we dare.

Sometimes, power is most effective not when it indulges in censorious prohibition, but when it encourages us to express ourselves as freely as we dare.

Anyone can become anything. We can never be sure we are doing the right thing.



MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



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