

**ROMANCE STUDIES:  
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

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### ***The Trenchcoat: Norman Manea on Interpretation and Complicity***

The overthrow of Romania's Communist regime in December 1989 was more violent, and in some ways more spectacular, than equivalent transitions elsewhere in Eastern Europe that same year. Initial unrest in the provincial city of Timișoara spread to the capital, Bucharest, where on December 21 the dictatorial president, Nicolae Ceaușescu (head of state since 1967), tried to assure the nation that all was under control with a public speech in the city's Palace Square. This plan went astray when the gathering degenerated into chaos and violence, with the disturbances broadcast on live TV until the coverage was suddenly curtailed. Street confrontations, which led to many deaths, continued that day and the next, when protesters broke into the national palace just as Ceaușescu and his wife, Elena, were being helicoptered off the roof. With the country and much of the armed forces against them, the Ceaușescus had nowhere to run, and were quickly located and arrested. Three days later, on Christmas Day, after an hour-long court martial in front of a hastily-assembled military tribunal, the couple were executed by firing squad. Images of their final moments and their dead bodies were broadcast around the world.

The everyday reality of Romanian Communism in power was infinitely less dramatic. In his novella *The Trenchcoat* (*Trenciul*, 1989), and the other short fiction collected under the title *Compulsory Happiness* (*Le bonheur obligatoire*, 1991), 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. Hence the fiction of totalitarianism tends towards allegory or fable. On the other hand, to convey the sense of a regime that had run out of steam and a people worn down, he has to work with the unpromising materials that are 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 these minor variations, uncertain whether they can quite bear the weight of our perhaps paranoid over-interpretation. Moreover, we are always aware that it is precisely this generalized suspicion that characterizes the regime itself: how can we avoid inadvertently legitimating its ubiquitous surveillance, if we too admit that small details can be significant, that there is never smoke without fire?



Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1986

### 1. *The Uncertainty of Interpretation*

The plot of *The Trenchcoat* is simple enough: two couples travel together to the home of a third pair for a dinner party. The hosts are privileged, the husband a senior party member, and they serve fine food, decent wine, spirits, and “even coffee, real coffee, not ersatz” (206). But the conversation is stilted, and nobody has a very good time. The guests drive home, with no great desire to repeat the experience or even to maintain the strained pretence of friendship with the other couple. But the hostess is soon in touch over the next few days: she has found a strange coat on her coat-rack. Did any of them leave it behind? Nobody claims it, and by the time the story ends we are left wondering what the unexpected appearance of this item of clothing may mean.

So let me turn to you. 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? Pause the video, and write down some ideas. While you do that, I'll have a vodka, but I'll be right back.

Manea's dinner-party guests are offered the option of whisky or vodka, a choice that is allegorized as a decision whether to side with the East or the West: "The two super-powers! So, which will it be?" (201). Also available, "for the ladies," is either a Cuban liqueur, or vermouth (202). What does not seem to be on offer is Romania's own national drink: *țuică*, a plum brandy. This fits with the hosts' pretensions to cosmopolitan sophistication. Their house is, after all, located among the embassies (if closer to the Ghanaian delegation than to the American or the French). All this enhances the sense that the country's elite are removed from everyday life, alien—"Martians," as they are repeatedly described (252, 258). But it also reflects Romanian Communism's claim to be charting its own course within the Warsaw Pact. As with Tito's Yugoslavia, the conceit was that they could pick the best from East and West. Presenting vodka as a choice (rather than a compulsion) is then a very Romanian gesture.

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. A similar coat, later in the story, is described as "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). Perhaps it is simply boredom that ensures that the coat and its mysterious provenance should provoke such anxiety and consternation. "Poor Dina," one of the guests says of their hostess in the wake of the fuss that her discovery has caused, "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 have been abandoned. Even the Securitate, the secret police, we are told, are merely going through the motions: "those creeps who keep an eye on us all, even they've become apathetic" (239). Here at last is a distraction, something to worry about, and it is easy to give in to that temptation to worry and to fear.



But just because you are paranoid, it does not mean they are not out to get you! Another possibility is that the coat has been left, deliberately or otherwise, by a member of the Securitate. Word is that they have a new tactic, of conducting interrogations in private residences: "It's possible that they use these apartments even without the permission of the tenants, when nobody's home" (192). Or maybe one of the diners themselves is an informer, who may be lying or covering up what they know. Perhaps this is all some kind of strange experiment. One of the guests in particular, never given a name, is later seen (along with the hostess, Dina) dressed in a trenchcoat, unleashing in another member of the party, catching sight of them, a "flood" of anxiety and panic: "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). Beneath the dreary monotony of everyday life, there *are* machinations and conspiracies. 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 coat also, however, has literary antecedents, to which the text points us: "The overcoat!" one of the characters exclaims. "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). Here the coat has gained a capital letter, as though further to signal its intertextual symbolism. Vasilievich is Nikolai Gogol, born in Romania's neighbour, Ukraine, who was the author of short stories, novels, and plays ("The Nose," "Diary of a Madman," *The Government Inspector*) that are mixed up here in a soup of references upon which all Eastern European writers and readers can draw. One of Gogol's most famous stories is "The Overcoat" (1842), in which an impoverished Russian clerk saves up for a new overcoat only to have it stolen almost immediately; his attempts to seek help from the authorities backfire, he sickens and dies, only to return to St Petersburg as a coat-snatching ghost. The issue in Manea's story is an overcoat that mysteriously appears from nowhere, rather than being snatched away. But his 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, for instance by condemning the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia in a speech to crowds in Palace Square that he unsuccessfully tried to mimic twenty-one years later, the day before he fled the presidential palace.

*The Trenchcoat* opens with an invocation of “confusion . . . The confused voice of a confused time” (191) and ends without much resolution, noting that “there were, in fact, many hypotheses” (258) about the coat’s “appearances” in both senses of that term—both the act of coming into public view, and the outward aspect behind which may lurk some hidden meaning. But the same is also surely true of the text itself, like every literary text: 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.*

## 2. *The Temptations of Complicity*

From the 1950s to the 1980s, across the Soviet bloc, writers and artists were among the most prominent and (in the West) celebrated among the dissidents who voiced their opposition to authoritarian rule: Nobel laureates Joseph Brodsky and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in the USSR, for instance, or playwright Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia, who went on to become the country’s first post-Communist president. It could seem as though art and literature were by their nature at odds with totalitarianism, a view strengthened by heavy-handed official pronouncements and censorship.

Norman Manea had his struggles against the censor, and eventually felt compelled (in 1986) to leave Romania for exile, ending up in the United States. But he is uncomfortable being called a “dissident,” though often that has how he has been labelled and packaged. “I never wished to be a ‘political’ writer,” he tells an interviewer, “and I hope I wasn’t only that even when I was forced to write about a nightmarish politicized reality” (Stavans 104). Not that, for Manea, the so-called “revolution” that deposed Ceaușescu changed very much. As he put it in 1995: “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” (Cugno 128). Equally, he has never been starry-eyed about the West: “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" (Stavans 104). His most long-lasting political preoccupation, forced on him against his will, has been an engagement with a culture of anti-Semitism that predated Communist rule (during World War Two, Romania was allied with Nazi Germany; Manea and his family were sent to a Ukrainian concentration camp) and continues to this day. He has spoken out against amnesia about the pre-Communist past, and warned of a revival of ethno-nationalism, in Romania and elsewhere. His most controversial essay is an indictment of famed Romanian philosopher (and fellow exile) Mircea Eliade, for his early enthusiasm for the country's fascist "Iron Guard."

Literature cannot save us from bad politics, whether of the right or the left. The people portrayed in *The Trenchcoat* are for the most part educated and literate: one of the dinner-party guests is a newspaper editor, another is a painter; they make small-talk by passing on slightly scurrilous gossip and veiled jokes about "ah . . . you know who" (194). The most interesting character is un-named but goes by monikers such as "The Researcher" and "The Learned One," perhaps because he has written a book, to modest success. He has little time for the slightly boorish host, a journalist who drunkenly expands on the notion that "the true hero of postwar literature" is the Party official or apparatchik: "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 the disgruntled chatter and even occasional outright criticism ("what do I care if the walls have ears, fuck it" [247]) are insufficient to absolve anyone from the charge of complicity? This is the theme also of another story in the same collection, "The Interrogation" ("Interogatoriul," 1988), in which a cunning and inscrutable Party functionary entices a political prisoner to take up art. Sometimes, Manea reminds us, power is most effective not when it indulges in censorious prohibition, but when it encourages us to express ourselves as freely as we dare. It can lodge itself in the ensuing uncertainty as we choose between the roles it provides for us. Anyone can become anything. We can never be sure we are doing the right thing.

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Image: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Personality\\_cult86d.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Personality_cult86d.jpg)

Song: "Andrii Popa" (Transsylvania Phoenix)