BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY: ION LUCA CARAGIALE AND MATEIU CARAGIALE. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract: The dramatic history of the Balkans as well as the consciousness of its drama is often reflected in the ethnic and national literatures of this ex-centric space. The two writers that make the object of this paper, Ion Luca and Mateiu Caragiale, come from a family with Greek origins, belonging to the "melting pot" of the Balkans, which for centuries mixed Greeks, Bulgarians, Turks, Serbs, Albanians, Romanians and other nations. The split identity of the Balkan people is reflected both in Ion Luca's and Mateiu's works, however different stylistically. They offer complementary perspectives on the perception of the Balkan drama and what it means for a modern to be born "aux portes de l'Orient, ou tout est pris a la legere…"

Key words: literary balkanism, orientalism, modernization, centre/periphery

Located between the Orient and the Occident and drawn together by a common historical and cultural tradition that includes the Byzantine millennium, an Orthodox religious heritage and political domination first by the Ottoman Empire then by the Marxist Leninist ideology emanating from Moscow, the Balkan space was and still represents a space of alterity for Western Europe. Its function as the negative mirror image of rational and ordered Western Europe has given rise to a cultural imaginary replete with stereotypes of the Balkans as a peripheral space haunted by the specter of political tyranny and administrative fragmentation (balkanization).

The dramatic history of the Balkans as well as the consciousness of its drama is often reflected in the ethnic and national literatures of this ex-centric space. Romania makes no exception, although its particular geographical and historical context has often made the recognition of the shared Balkan heritage a matter of cultural debates and political disputes.

Lying at the outermost border of the Balkan region, the threshold space between the Balkans and Central Europe, Romania as a nation was born out of a continual wavering between its attraction to the Western ideals of rationality, progress and autonomy and its grounding in an Orthodox spirituality and the Balkan historical reality. The struggle between the Balkan heritage and Western ideals has materialized in two specific literary traditions: one looking up to the development of Western European literature and imitating the great European traditions of the novel, Romantic poetry and later postmodern fiction and the other, an expression of a specific kind of historical trauma, the tradition of literary Balkanism. Sometimes a dialogue, more often a confrontation, this coexistence of the two traditions, the first an elite cultural movement gravitating towards the West, the second deeply rooted in folk and oral production and engendering an ironic conservatory politics provided Romanian literature with a rich source of ideas and images.

The two writers that make the object of this paper, Ion Luca and Mateiu Caragiale, father and son, although Romanian citizens by birth, came from a family with Greek origins, as attested by their name. They belonged to the "melting pot" of the Balkans, which for centuries mixed Greeks, Bulgarians, Turks, Serbs, Albanians, Romanians and other nations. Ion Luca Caragiale's plays, sketches and newspaper articles X-ray the social and political body from the period when Romania was undergoing the so-called process of modernization, bringing to light the contradictions and the extensive hypocrisy of that age, the widespread corruption that flowered under the banners of the new liberal ideology. Mateiu Caragiale (1885-1936), born out of wedlock, carried on the family literary tradition, in spite of his (professed) hostility to his father. The author of a single novel, *The Rakes of the Old Court*, of a book of poems and a few stories, he managed nevertheless to attract the attention and the interest of critics. *The Rakes ofthe Old Court* became a cult book and was voted by over 100 critics as the "Romanian novel of the XXth century". The micronovel, a product of the bitterness and grudge deriving from the author's double identity complex (that of being an illegitimate son and a writer at the periphery) plays out a symbolic confrontation between the Balkan mentality, an ambiguous mixture of aristocratic decay and lower class upstartism and the liberal ideals of the new Europe of nations.

Ion Luca Caragiale's dramatic oeuvre reflects a critical period in the history of modern Romania, following that of the crystallization of the national ideal. Ideas of progress, national unity and liberalism were spread across Europe after the great wave of revolutions that marked

the nineteenth century. Central and peripheral administration was undergoing a process of change, the bureaucratization of state administration had just begun, and elites were developing new programs of mass education. What was the effect of modernization on the young Romanian nation? Caragiale's lifespan more or less overlapped an important period from the first (or small union) of the Romanian principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia to the second (or Great Union) when the National Assembly of Romanians in Transylvania decreed the unification of all Romanians and their territories with Romania. In 1866 Romania became a constitutional monarchy under the rule of Carol I of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen and in 1877 an independent country. The upheaval of the social, political, economic and cultural life that these successive changes brought on was amply documented in Caragiale's plays, sketches and newspapers articles, which render the zero content of the soul of modernity in a language and style worked to perfection. His achievement is unsurpassed: he forged a new language for a broad social category that was just coming into being as a result of modernization and bureaucratization: the small clerks and state employees, the lower capitalist class and the demagogue politicians that rose to prominence during this agitated and confused period. The language of his characters is as confused as that of the age, full of mannerisms and mistakes, devoid of real content, mirroring on the one side the transformation of the liberal idea into pure bombastic demagogy and on the other a tragic loss of identity that occurred as a result of a sudden shift from an agricultural, highly traditional and religious lifestyle to a modern urban one. Almost all his characters are inhabitants of the city, the experimenters of a new way of life so divergent and distinct from the traditional one that it engenders a reversal of values and principles. The contact of modernity with the Balkan psychological, cultural and social fundament leads to the formation of a split identity, a fact that affects both society and the individual in a negative way. There is a clash between the traditional Balkan identity, a multiple one, capable of accommodating different cultural values and traditions and the ideals of modernization, which meant first and foremost the bureaucratization and compartmentalization of daily social life. Caragiale's writings portray people that live meaningless lives because of their meaningless occupations, small clerks who have to perform menial tasks, housewives that adore and support stupid husbands because their lives are forced to revolve around them and pseudo-intellectuals whose discourses, a mimicry of liberal progressive jargon border on the absurd and ridiculous.

As Ibrăileanu noted, for most of Caragiale's characters modernity means the ideal of living a good life without any responsibilities attached to it (22). This happens because modernization is misunderstood and liberal ideals misused. Changing mentalities proves to be a long term process in comparison with the reform of political systems. The enduring legacy of the country's political subordination to the Ottoman Empire proves an obstacle for the appropriation of modern Western ideals. Thus, in the play *Master Leonida face with the reactionaries*, the eponymous character, a starch republican supporter, gives the following definition of the republic: "nobody will pay any taxes", "every citizen will get a good salary, and all will be equal" (98 – *my translation*). Living a good life on state money is Leonida's interpretation of the modern revolutionary ideal. In fact it is the old ideal of Oriental slavery translated into liberal jargon. This time the tyrant is the state itself, which is perceived from the very beginning as an almighty entity, either a benevolent or irate Father figure, and not as a form of government, a purely political organization. This conception of the state as an almighty entity that can never be really opposed, with roots in the Byzantine orthodox tradition and the Ottoman dominance represented one of the major challenges Western modernity had to face in South East Europe and it led to a feeling of powerlessness of the average citizen. Much of Eastern Europe and Romania's incapacity to change derives from this ingrained attitude towards the state and political systems of organization, which are have never been seen as contingent and open to change. For the average citizen, the state is always to blame, it is always maligned, yet feared and rarely opposed. The widespread corruption of state employees is also indirectly linked to the way the state is perceived, as an almighty entity that excludes opposition. Because one can never change it, then people have to find the means to circumvent it and its decrees. Corruption becomes thus the other side of opposition, a symbol of political impotence and at the same time the mark of the slave. State employees become slaves to the state, while modernization functions only as a mask for the deep-seated Byzantine and Ottoman mentality. For Caragiale, this is the tragedy of the Balkans, and his decision to spend the last years of his life in Berlin, a "civilized capital" can be explained only in the light of his subconscious perception of comedy (all his plays are comedies) as tragic and absurd. One of Caragiale's critics, Elvin Berstein, going against the flow of criticism (which consider his dramatic oeuvre as social satire), regarded Caragiale as a precursor of the absurd, emphasizing the grotesque dimension of his plays, similar to the tragic farces of Eugen Ionescu and the nonsense theatre. (237) Caragiale's enduring

popularity even today certainly seems to suggest that his theatre, in spite of its use of rather traditional dramatic devices, has an overall revolutionary quality. Elvin argues that the contemporary feel of Caragiale's plays resides in an unusual correlation of dramatic devices and dramatic effects, as well as in his construction of characters. Lache, Mache and Tache, the interchangeable heroes of some of his sketches are no more than unspecific bundles of vices and qualities significant of modern social phenomena which lead to the annihilation of human particularities. Yet it would be a mistake to analyze these characters as universal representatives of the homo sapiens of modernity - they display a Balkan cultural specificity that comes more and more to resemble a mask. First this is suggested by the similarity of their names, which differ only by the first letter, while ending in the universal Greek suffix 'ache', typical for the Phanariot age. The Balkan stereotype is further suggested by their extrovert and sociable nature as well as their propensity for loud argument and noisy merry-making. However, argument loses its rational basis and becomes a 'moft', while the emotional structure of social gatherings is no longer adapted to the reality of transition and is rendered by set phrases. In the world of Caragiale's characters everything turns into a "moft" sooner of later: politics, love, reform, the revolution. The word 'moft' (roughly translated as either 'trifle' or 'whim') carries within it a specimen of Balkan history and by the associations that Caragiale introduces is made to reflect a whole socio-political context. Etymologically, it derives from the Turkish word*müft*- a trifle, an object that can be obtained gratis[1]. Yet what is remarkable is that 'moft', together with its derivatives 'moftangiu' and 'moftangioaică' (the male and female whimsical/good for nothing person), derived again with the Turkish suffix 'angiu', 'moftologie' and 'moftologic' (referring ironically to the 'moft' as a science) is used by Caragiale to refer to the new class of social climbers and urban bourgeoisie who try to delimitate themselves from their Balkan origins and adhere to Western modernity[2]. Caragiale's ample use of the word to refer to Romanian political changes, mentalities and attitudes implies a criticism of the discourse of modernity prevalent in the age's liberal press. Caragiale was a conservative, strongly opposed to the liberal 'mimicry' of modernity and also the editor of a magazine ironically entitled "Moftul Român: Revistă spiritistă națională, organ pentru răspandirea științelor oculte în Dacia Traiana" where he made fun of the

[1] The same word exists in Serbo-Croatian: "mukte" meaning for free, gratis.
[2] In one of the conversations with a writer-friend, Caragiale is even reputed to have called Kant a 'moftangiu'.

new nationalist quasi-mystical and mythological discourse of the pure origins of the Romanian people, descendents of the Dacians and the Romans.

Another emblematic character is Mitică, the average inhabitant of the capital "the Bucharester par excellence". The French phrase is aptly introduced here- a sign of the times when Romania stepped on the road to modernization and westernization. In the 19th century the model for modernization was France, our 'Latin sister'. Caragiale ironically notes that "because Bucharest is a little Paris, Mitică is understandably a little Parisian." ("Mitică" 108 - *my translation*) But he is not just a little Parisian, his name is also the diminutive of Dumitru, a popular name in the Balkans, derived from St. Dumitru, the patron saint of Bucharest (of Bulgarian and thus Balkan origin). This double diminution of Mitică points again to the zero content of what Caragiale perceives to be modern identity: trying too hard to imitate Western civilization, Mitică forgets his own Balkan identity. His personality is a simulation as well, a chain of witticisms and jokes meant to hide the absence of any enduring character traits. A visitor of cafes and beer gardens, Mitică appears in Caragiale's prose as either Mache, Lache, Tache or Amicul X - all schematic characters, devoid of any psychological complexity, whose interactions are limited to the daily gossip, political comments and loud professions of personal worth whenever their pride is threatened by an unexpected turn of events. Caragiale's description of Mitică mixes a kind of literary apophatism and the oxymoronic: "he is neither young, nor old, neither beautiful, nor ugly, neither too-too, nor very-very; he is quite average in everything; but what distinguishes him, what leaves a distinct mark on his character is his original and inventive spirit." ("Mitică" 108 - *my translation*) This literary apophatism is one of Caragiale's main techniques of character description, which he carries to perfection in the description of Leonică, a minor clerk from a ministry office: "His hair was neither black, nor blond, nor brown; his face was neither dark, nor white, nor red; the eyes were neither dark, nor green, nor brown. He was neither upturn-nosed, nor big-nosed, and his ears were middle-sized. He was neither big, nor small, neither fat, nor slim, neither tall, nor short, neither thick, nor thin. Apart from this, he was neither good, nor bad, neither soft, nor sharp, neither smart, nor stupid. In a word a being neither too-too, nor very-very." ("Broaște" 323 – *my translation*) Yet far from suggesting any transcendent qualities of the characters, Caragiale's *via negationis* is more akin to Gogol's techniques of character description, hinting at the lack of an interior life and a social conformism that leads to the standardization and bureaucratization of the human. As Gogol's petty clerks are

identified by means of some peripheral feature or a trifle that rises to symbolic proportions (the nose or the coat), Leonică, lacking individuality is defined by his possession of an array of necktie pins, each of which " had a symbolic meaning: a coral heart pierced by an arrow cast with mini-diamonds showed that Leonică's heart was especially sensitive to the blows of Cupid; two crossed golden mini-keys meant that the young man mastered the secret with which one could open hearts; an enameled pen shown on an open gold notebook said clearly: I am a Registrar, etc." ("Broaște" 324 – *my translation*)

The Balkan world of Bucharest and the South as perceived by Caragiale can be summed up in the word "moft": nothing more than pretense, a mask, a never-ending comedy. Under the pressure of modernization, the old accommodating and friendly Balkan world turns into a cheap imitation of the West: incapable of assimilating the Western ideals, it alters its old face, which now turns into a simplified mask of its former self. The never-ending farce at some point becomes a real tragedy: for the Balkans, in trying to adapt to Western modernity, have given up on their old identity - and at the same time never managed to assume the new Western one. Caragiale's world is carnivalesque because it is a world of masks: masks that try to hide both a tragic loss of identity and the inability to convert to modernity.

Mateiu Caragiale's prose offers a different, yet complementary perspective on the perception of the Balkan tragedy. Suffering from an all too understandable 'anxiety of influence' as well as from a life-long complex of being an illegitimate son, Mateiu Caragiale's writing bears an emphatic mark of difference. If Caragiale the father was a prolific writer, the son brings out a single novel (dwelling for years on its exquisiteness), a book of poems and a couple of stories. The styles are also miles apart: the terseness and precision of the father is counterbalanced by the flowering musical sentences of the son, the mispronounced and misused neologisms revealing pretence are substituted by an archaic vocabulary that is made to live a new life out of the old chronicles. The plays teeming with the variegated life form of the metropolis, the vast array of petty clerks, state employees, humble inhabitants of the "mahala" (the city periphery) become in Mateiu's prose an amorphous human mass to be despised by the chosen few, those aristocrats by blood and spirit doomed to extinguish the flame of their genius at the gates of the Orient: in the Balkans. The Rakes of the Old Court are three: Pasadia, Pantazi and the unnamed narrator, accompanied by Pîrgu, who may and at the same time may not be counted with the three. The motto of the novel, taken from the defense of Raymond Poincare in a famous case of corruption

of the age hints first at the tragedy of the Rakes: "Que voules-vous, nous sommes ici aux portes de l'Orient, ou tout est pris a la legere…" Everything is taken lightly here. Everything, starting with political and social issues and ending with private lives is a "moft". The Balkans are a huge "moftological society" where serious issues are laughed off, the state turns a blind eye to corruption, administration overlooks 'minor' mistakes and soul-searching and remorse are brushed off with a "Ia lasă-mă, monşer!". Mateiu Caragiale's characters are gifted individuals doomed to live in the space of 'moft', lost souls forever wandering in an alien desert. As many critics have noted, the few characters in Mateiu's novel are no more than projections of the author meant to play out the intimate drama of being the wrong man in the wrong place. To give the larger picture, it may be interesting to dwell a little on the author's other pursuits apart from his literary career, which he himself did not take very seriously. He was interested first and foremost in genealogy and heraldry, and developed an obsession with the aristocratic origins of his family. In the end he made up for himself an imaginary aristocratic lineage, which acted as a compensation for his hurt pride and his inferiority complexes. Ovidiu Cotruş argues that his genealogic and literary writings served a therapeutic purpose by "laying at his disposal a imaginary community with which he could establish an affectionate relationship" (54) The old aristocratic lineage acted as a palliative for Mateiu's psychological make-up, justifying his loneliness and transforming what he took for a punishment (being doomed to live in the space of 'moft') into a privilege.

The Romanian title of the novel *Craii de Curtea Veche*[3], translated either as The *Old Court Libertines* or *The Rakes of the Old Court* points to a web of significations that the translations are unable to capture in all its complexity. "Crai" is a word with both positive and negative connotations in Romanian. On the one hand, crai means prince, king or emperor, a use restricted to fairy tales and stories; it is also used to refer to the three magi present at the birth of Christ. The derogatory sense of the word comes from its argotic use to denote aristocratic or wealthy men who spend their time drinking and philandering, and it was this meaning that was taken as the most representative. The novel is generally interpreted as a portrayal of the vicious and perverse Balkan mentality at the frontier of the Orient and the Occident. It is this, but also

[3] Crai de Curtea Veche was a phrase used to designate the thieves and the vagabonds that had found shelter at the Old Court (the former residence of the princes of Wallachia) in the last decades of the 18th century, when the place became a real "Court de miracles", according to several historians. (Rodica Zafiu www.romlit.ro)

more than this. The atmosphere of the novel, replete with haunting descriptions of the night and the sumptuous interiors of aristocratic houses hints at a fairy-like quality of the Oriental One Thousand and One Nights. Then one of the chapters of the novel is called "The Three Pilgrimages", an allusion to the religious undertones of the word "crai" and to the three magi. In fact, the inverse parallelism of the three Rakes and the three Magi is extremely important in the novel. First, it establishes a powerful contrast between the universal hope for change present at the birth of Christ and the gloom and doom of an age when the aristocracy of the old Europe was living its last hours. Secondly, as there are four characters: Pantazi, Paşadia, Pîrgu and the unnamed narrator, a certain incertitude is introduced as to who are the three Rakes: the initial letter P of the three names seems to indicate a partnership of the three Ps and to suggest that the narrator is somehow outside the story. However, the narrator is the only real character in the novel, for Pantazi and Paşadia function as extensions of the narrator's rational and emotional dimensions: "For if I felt awe towards Paşadia, I had a weakness for Pantazi, one grows from the head, the other from the heart, and however much one would resist it, the heart goes before the head." (92 – *my translation*) A man with a beautiful head, as the narrator describes him, Paşadia leads a double life: during the day a life of the mind imprisoned in his hermitage, writing his memoirs. At night he turns into a Mrs. Hyde of debauchery, all the same preserving his haughty and aristocratic demeanour. Once a "morning star" in Romanian politics, when on the verge of ascending to power, he mysteriously decided to retire. The reasons behind this decision remain obscure, yet what is sure is that his retirement is not one into higher wisdom and serenity. He nurtures deep rancor towards the circumstances of his self-imposed retirement, using his historical knowledge to detract Romanian culture. Participating in the usual debates of the time about Western superiority, he argues that the Romanians had nothing to offer the civilized world because an appreciation of beauty was specific only for the noble nations. "An intellectual suicide" as Matei Călinescu calls him, Paşadia will destroy his work post-mortem, by ordering a servant to set fire to his writings. Although this destructive act can be related to an entire literary tradition of perfection (among whose notable representatives are Virgil and Kafka, Paşadia' reasons for destroying his work are wholly different:

> I was regarded as a foreigner, every body became my enemy. [...] Seeing that it was hard to destroy me with the „mockery": my bite would be more poisonous, a plot of silence was

> weaved around what I had begun to publish. Realizing that the only means to get even was to leave behind me nothing others would profit from or enjoy. I welcomed the plot and joined it myself. „Ungrateful fatherland, thou shall not possess my bones" Scipio Africanus had it engraved on his tomb. My bones, I will leave, the fruit of my labor, my thinking this, no! (88 – *my translation*)

Matei Călinescu interprets this justification that Paşadia offers for his final revenge as the typical cliche furnished by failures or unsuccesful artists and places him in a gallery of kitch characters meant to embody the very defficiencies they seem to criticise.(53) For all his so-called superiority, aristocratic refinement and civility, Paşadia is the very product of the perverse Balkan world that he despises, the representative of a kitch intellectualism that feeds on the grandeur of the classics, yet is in itself sterile.

Pantazi, the phantasizing aestheticist, is the other facet of the narrator, a projection of his emotional and sentimental world. The descendent of a noble and ancient Greek family, he is born with the taint of the European aristocracies of the time: inter-breeding. Although the reader may rightly suspect him of idealizing his parents' marriage and his own childhood, Pantazi suggests that the harmony of his structure is due to his parents' being close relatives: first degree cousins. Yet only a few lines later, this affirmation is contradicted by Pantazi's admission that in himself sensitivity is always acompanied by a certain melancholy, a nostalgia after what is remote and exotic. A dreamer, a visionary and an esthete, Pantazi is simultaneously a ruthless pragmatist. Like Paşadia, Pantazi is built along the lines of a Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde prototype. Homo balcanicus, as Mircea Muthu remarked, is a homo duplex. On the one hand he offers the narrator a long journey through a phantasmatic, deeply „orientalized" Orient, resembling some hallmark pictures from a Turkish hotel:

> The smell of oleander flowers was lying bitter over melancholy lakes which reflected white towers among the funereal cypress-tress. Devout pilgrims, we would go to pay our respects to Beauty in the cities of quietness and oblivion, we would wander their inclined streets and grassy squares, we would admire august works in old palaces and churches, we would fill ourselves with the breath of the Past by contemplating its sublime remains. The ship sailed slowly between the praised shores of Hellenic and Latin seas [...] A Greek woman would smile at us from a verandah hung with jasmine; we would haggle with armenians and jew merchants in the

bazaars, we would drink sweet wine with the sailors in smoked pubs where women used to belly-dance. (32 – *my translation*)

A pastiche of the Romantic hero, Pantazi leads a dissolute and self-indulging life in his youth, falls in love and is betrayed, plans to commit suicide at 23 but gives it up on finding out that he was left a fortune by his uncle. He later confesses to the narrator that his uncle had left a will entrusting the Eforia of the Hospitals with his fortune, and that he had destroyed it. What is more appalling than this recognition is the admission that for him „wealth is everything, I set it above honour, health, life" and that his act was a heroic deed meant to rescue the family line and return it to its purpose, that of being free. Thus Pantazi joins the gallery of kitch heroes as well, his sentimental and aestheticist pretense hiding a degenerate aristocrat with burgeois ideals. The triviality of the burgeois emerges towards the end of the novel when Pantazi commits the most burgeois of sins, that of wanting to marry a much younger woman.

Gore Pîrgu embodies the misery of the Balkans. The narrator depicts him as a man of low extraction and despicable habits. He is inseparable from Paşadia, following him around like a shadow and mediating his debauchery. He acts as a guide through the infamous world of Bucharest night locales, a kind of reversed Virgil leading his team though Hell. The epitome of Ottoman and Balkan degenerescence, there is no perversion he does not practise: a cheat at card games, the master of ceremonies at every late night party, he likes sleeping with fat, pregnant or mad women, while intercessing for the corruption of young beautiful girls. The narrator often calls Pîrgu a clown and a jester. As the figure of the jester is inseparable from that of the truth he was allowed to speak at the courts of the emperors this seems to indicate that in spite of his debauchery and vulgarity or maybe just because of it, because of his extreme abjection, he is the only real, anti-kitch hero. Pîrgu's perversion is real and at the same time emblematic, the sign of the long and tragic Balkan history of intermingling races and endless wars, of lives lived for the sake of the moment, when only the transient matters. His extreme adaptability and lack of moral scruples, his insubstantiality makes him an exemplary hero of the Balkan mentality as it has been perceived and rendered in Romanian literature.

To return to the question of how many the Rakes of the Old Court are, this remains a moot point. There may be four Rakes in reality, yet symbolically there are only three, and finally only one. The religious symbolism associated with the names of the chapters (The Three

Pilgrimages, Confessions) and the three magi from the East works in favour of a religious (and psychological) interpretation of the three Ps (Pantazi, Pârgu, Paşadia) as hypostases or projections of the narrator. They play out the conflict between the West and the East in a complex manner which excludes any binarisms. Although Orientals by birth (Paşadia is of Turkish, Pantazi of Greek descendency), the two friends of the narrator are too much enthralled to Western values (the first to reason and success, the second to wealth and name) to stand for the Balkan and the Oriental. In fact, one despises Oriental and Balkan values, while the other, in a typical Western colonizing gesture, exoticises and eroticises them. It is Pîrgu, the one for whom the narrator feels a sort of moral nausea, that embodies the Balkans, its tragic history and its abjection. Pîrgu is none other than Ion Luca Caragiale's Mitică, a few decades older and wiser, and seen from a different perspective. What had happened? Meanwhile, Romania had chosen to follow the path of Western civilization, and while trying to model its socio-political, economic and intellectual life on the West, the Balkan and the Oriental were repressed in the collective subconscious. For I. L. Caragiale the West was still a "moft" among others, a fad that was going to pass away; for Mateiu, an Occidentalized Romania is the reality. This is why the character of Pârgu appears so abominable: he represents the past that refuses to die, he stands for everything deplorable and miserable, for a history that has refused us the West and Civilization. For all his „literary balkanism" Mateiu's novel is strongly imbued with the values of the West and modernization. It is no wonder that it managed to capture the Western public in a way that I. L. Caragiale's work never did.

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