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I.L. Caragiale. The Problematic Real and the Labyrinth as Text. A Hermeneutic Perspective

This study proposes a reinterpretation of I.L. Caragiale's work, abandoning the mimetic realist perspective in order to suggest the configuration of an interrogative manner of reading the text founded on the premise that the author explores the real at metaphysical level, beyond any socio-political implications. In a chaotic world, the writer watches the spectacle of everyday life as if it were a labyrinth that does not generate traumas and anxiety, but hedonism. The excess of matter and reality is the only proof of the ontological absence of truth. Therefore, Caragiale's work reveals the existence of a crisis of meaning, the world being or only appearing to be a mechanism devoid of transcendence. This proposed reinterpretation relies on illustrations from plays, short epic texts, as well as epistolary and publicistic excerpts. This integrating vision reveals the central meaning of the whole exegetical construction.

A hedonist in labyrinth

Protected by its ambiguous position, both on the inside and on the outside, Caragiale's perception is that of a hedonist: matter shows itself to him as a fascinating spectacle – and not a terrifying one – of shapes, contexts, colours, a show displaying actions which are difficult to set into rational or reasonable patterns. Everything unfolds in a type of sophisticated balance in which no interpretation is decisively motivated. However, such a lack of decision does not alienate Caragiale and nor does so the labyrinth-like expansion of space. An epicurean solely finds a possibility of being amazed: life itself is a show and Caragiale is driven to it like a moth to the flame by its mystery, by the abyss of the “constructions” which shatter any expectation and the logic of common sense. The paradox and surprise, taken to the point of absurdity, having consequence in the de-materialization of the tangible, are built by Caragiale with the purpose of repeating an equation deciphered by him in the real world. Fascinated by the world, his desire is, in his turn, to be able to amaze. And he does so as if actions of this kind were exemplary, not exceptional, marginal situations.

Let us not forget that the volume *Notes and sketches (Note și Schițe)* from 1892, begins with the text *In Nirvana*. And here, as in Eminescu, we see in a zigzag to which Caragiale has always been sensitive, the monadic image of the world: “That's how I met him then, that's how he remained until his very last fine moments: joyful and sad; talkative and sullen; gentle and harsh; settling for little and always unhappy with everything; now having the abstinence of a hermit, later voracious for the pleasures of life; running away from people and searching for them; as uncaring as a stoic old man and as irritable as a beautiful woman. Strange mixture! – ideal for the artist, bad for the man!” If this is not something more of a self-portrait, it is without a doubt that, in the particular case which troubles him, Caragiale identifies something from the impenetrable law of life. A sum of paradoxes – even with all the rhetorical interstices of which he can not free himself – and the consequence of a “blind ambition of being”: “In the sickest head, the brightest intelligence – the saddest soul in the most tired body! And if we cried when his friends and enemies, admirers and those who were envious lay him under the “sacred lime”, we did not cry his death: we cried for the toil of his

life, for the suffering that his sensitive nature endured from circumstances, from people, from itself”.

Besides, the next text of the volume *Irony* places the poet's life in the same terms. Avid for the details which he articulates voluptuously in a structure, Caragiale is neutral concerning morals. In any case, pain leaves way to a terrible admiring force which has both the world as well as its own constructive force as subjects. Such situations, paradoxical, similar to a disruption in the fabric of normality, (pre)tend to condense the core of the world, otherwise inaccessible. Maybe this is why Caragiale chooses the outskirts (if he is not himself chosen by it) as the space for his explorations. Here, on the fringes, the clerk has a more acute sense of the void, which he lives instinctively, even if the world to which he belongs is in a continuous movement of ascension. It is a way of saying that the outskirts do not kill, but build. Life is perceived as a machine, as a succession of paradoxical facts, as a secret mechanism in which the border between hazard and destiny – or fatality – is much more than fragile. It is as if everything were unfolding according to a plan, but is, at the same time, an endless improvisation.

The manner in which he casts an observation made explicitly for art, over what is real, is particularly strange. What is art? Caragiale states during a conference: “the human spirit's attempt at satisfying a great need of the human spirit”. So, Caragiale sees the same gratuitousness in the world: its identity, lacking in meaning; its only goal, joyfulness. In any case, immersing in matter offers the chance for a meaning, be it of a secondary nature. Caragiale asks himself: “Is there a more powerful means of ridding ourselves of the chaotic invasion of the world into our poor soul than divine music? – as vague and vast as the world, integrated in the great mysterious meaning of harmony.” (*An Artist*) Harmony, the seal of life placed within the model of a mechanism which Caragiale tries, more than once, to understand and explore with the aid of the “vessel” named fiction. This time, there are no traces of cynicism, but only a fascination full of grief: “When it was at the peak of its functionality, the admirable machine collapsed : the regulator, which from the beginning had a flawed part, broke down in the midst of its movement. The device was crushed and the maestro insane!” Finally, “death completed the literary creation of insanity”.

Isolated in the midst of ironies which easily glide in graveness, the affirmation that refers to harmony suggests the existence, not only in literary creations, but also in the world, of a rigor of “subtextual” order. Such rigor, transformed into sense, is the sole element which justifies existence, through a transcendence that does not have, in a proper sense, anything transcendental, and which can also save it. Here, in any case, the hypothesis of an equation is formulated, whose unknown elements are the world and art, more precisely, the gathering of forms and sense. What unifies them is their structure which does not exclude the notion of “vague” as a fundamental given that explains fascination. If it were not for it, and if the fundament had not been build in fascination (not in any other kind of usability), the world would truly be uninteresting. Thus, permanently left in a hypothetical state, manifesting itself as accidental upgrades, giving the impression of fatality, it, at least, gives the impression of contribution, even without any sort of deliberation, of the individual. How could we otherwise explain to ourselves the strange association, so puzzling for many of his readers, of Caragiale's musical passion and the voluptuousness of transcendence towards the elementary?

In Berlin, Beethoven's concerts and caviar, metonymically speaking, are complementary obsessions. Both express basic needs. However, things may be a bit different: on the one hand, the world, which satisfies its needs to perceive matter with the senses, and, on the other side of the spectrum, the architecture of a sense and the illusion of its articulation based upon unknown laws.

Maybe it is in this sense, and not only in that of hesitation between irony and graveness, or between rhetoric and style, that the sketch which opens the volume *Notes and literary fragments (Notițe și fragmente literare)* is eloquent. *Between Two Pieces of Advice (Între două povește)* implements the space of hesitation just like a niche in which the self can manifest itself freely. A niche of creativity, both in the linguistically limited plan of the play upon words and also in the plan of the world which it creates. Another fact worth mentioning is that there is no actual rupture here, only a discrepancy of intensity. It is what explains, to a certain extent, the final reply of the storyteller from *The Wonderful Frog* (after Mark Twain). Swept into a vertigo of "fictions", he replies: "Well, father Simion, why don't you rid me of this limp cow at least for today. What do you want of me, to put up with all your nonsense in one single day? Keep some for later." The leap from lies to wonders is not only proof of a simple play upon words, but also of the need to still remain in ambiguity, even if reading everything in an ironic tone. It is as if the territories of this invention should not be, in any way, taken as being false.

Let us return to the advice of the "two intimate counsellors": "I know them both well, better than they know me. I am sure of their character; they can never be sure of mine. Numerous times I have teased them, paying attention to the plead of one, despite hearing the advice of the other, which I did not take into consideration. But it is also their fault. One drags me to the left, the other to the right; when one says yes, the other says no, so that I either have to stay put, waiting in vain for the impossible reconciling of the two, or follow one and thus contradict the other. What is regrettable for me is that each time, after I follow one down a path for a long time, when I look back, I regret that I did not take into account the plead of the other one."

I refuse to read such texts as if they were programmatic, nor do I find in them any didactic allegories. Still, I am tempted to see in both counsellors, besides all sorts of structural zigzags, the rupture (in the sense of complementary addiction) between the world and sense, between the picturesque of life and the harmony of a monadic understanding. It is the balance, very frail indeed, in which the hedonist engages himself. Actually, in this context, fragility gives balance its strength. Practically, beyond this didactic prologue, *Between two Pieces of Advice* actually is a sketch about fragility. Nina, maybe the embodiment of a nymph-like Mephistopheles, delicate and strange, provocative and gracious, fancy and dominative through hesitation, today is just a shadow of sadness descended through the first to the last pages in light irony. Who would say now that I.L. Caragiale would not have known how to express the fine meander of the feminine soul! Even here, irony is a sign of the diabolical in order to avoid sentimentalism, to remain, even in the form of an illusion, on the outside. The reference to Satanism is also nothing more than a literary construction. Of course, in order to minimize the effect, Caragiale makes use of the frame of the two trusty advisors.

Therefore, one must remember the belief, which also has an auto-referential nature, that "a little devil can slither through the narrowest cranny". This means that if we are to talk

about the demonism of Caragiale, his own before that of the world he creates, then we must summon his very option for hesitation, for the outskirts as the proper place for it, for those niches through which no reality can institutionalise itself in order to surpass the stage of approximation. Even so, Nina remains a dream. To penetrate through such crannies is to explore a hypothetical realm delicately created through processes of sophisticated textual engineering, sometimes too conspicuous. This is the very territory of Caragialean writing where everything is possible as if nothing were real. And, remarkably, everything occurs through the exploration of reality. The hypothetical is thus understood as a manifestation of the endless possibilities of being's existence and as a permanent source of world interpretation.

The problematic real and the return to the labyrinth

Almost any text can be invoked in order to comment on the Caragialean fascination with the world. Take, for example, *A Visit to "Iulia Hasdeu" Castle (O vizită la castelul „Iulia Hasdeu”)*, this masked interview bordering on literary report, which is actually the story of a failed, or rather refused initiation. Călinescu commented on its malicious undertone on the grounds that Caragiale had previously published a series of ironies regarding the spiritualist preoccupations of Hasdeu in “The Romanian Whim” (1893). Undoubtedly, Hasdeu is one of the authors Caragiale identifies with; what brings them together is the demonic historionism and free spirit, the pleasure of creating scenes and a passion for details and, why not, even a certain view on art, a subject which is in need of further exploration. Furthermore, there is this humane issue that is so much more relevant when we explore these the writers' lives and their idiosyncrasies regarding Maiorescu.

In the pages of the report, Maiorescu practically becomes the object of an “execution”, at least to the extent he is rendered so by Hasdeu, who regards Alecsandri as our greatest literary figure, and Heliade as a “gigantic figure”. And this commentary occurs while also considering that “Eminescu had talent, but he is far from possibly being named a great national poet”. If Caragiale's admiration is sincere (otherwise, what meaning could have been attributed to the visit), the vector or relativisation is equally real, managing, however, to remain harmless. Within the portrait, there is only the scarcely perceptible shadow of an ironic exaggeration: “I listen in awe to the vertiginous games of this high spirit, all of them equally full of the charm of inspiration and of the power of persuasion. This spirit juggles with balls or oranges”. What does Caragiale discover about the castle?! A building whose architecture, literally inspired, should bear in the most precise way *the seal of the world and the fingerprint of God*. As it is written somewhere: “In every corner, matter has an idea to say”. Overwhelmed by so much meaning impregnated within matter by the view of a spirit integrated in the cosmic order, he should stop for a moment to calm himself on a terrace. Yet, the host is possessed by his mission and by the ascending route of the vision which dominates him: “Higher! Higher!”, he urges. And later: “Now, higher still! Higher!”. All this occurs to experience the sublime scene of the cosmic show in the middle of the night. From this comes the final invitation: “You must stay here tonight, to see a starry night on the upper terrace, to better understand everything which I have told you.” But the visitor (a mere... man) finishes

his work and leaves. He “catches” the train so he can get off at Ploiesti. Ploiesti?! It is the emblem of the real world. Caragiale stays here to make, as Marta Petreu explains, a demonstration of the (im)possibility of knowing a thing in itself. Involved in this story, Kant is ultimately himself passionate about astronomy. However, Caragiale remains an empiric sensualist: he prefers the cosmic sublime and the more human monadic sense of pleasure. Evidently, he is not the “teacher of the new school”, which draws an ellipsis on the blackboard in front of the pupils in order to talk with soberness about the “Ugniverz”, the newspaper which is, without a doubt, “incompetent in the matter”. Caragiale is more like Bârsescu, the student who mistakes the ellipsis which indicates the „trajectory of the comet” for a cucumber.

But even in the text of the most prosaic world, even if it may be the bizarre incorporation of a destiny, Caragiale questions the mechanism which establishes a meaning. What could be the common factor between such a report about “matter having an idea to express” and a short story such as *Cănuță, a Twisted Man (Cănuță, om sucit)* ?! Apparently none – but the latter itself follows the idea turned fact, in a burlesque context. We can skip the normative condensation and the quite sterile didacticism which reduces the living to a mere template of a scheme. Even beyond the artificial image of synthesis there are, tied like beads on a piece of string, but lacking the coherence of a motivated spiritual impulse, the suggestions which put folkloric Satanism and fatal oddities next to the teacher of the new school, in the same line as Spiridon from *A Stormy Night (O noapte furtunoasă)*, and political intrigues against an adulterous backdrop. No matter how sketchy, the “report” of a destiny can be found here as well. But what exactly connects all these strings beyond the strange nature of the character?! Nothing. As for his nature, despite not being able to explain everything, it allows for an even more interesting investigation. Finally, Cănuță is a blasé person with passionate reactions, taken to the extreme: apathetic when he is beaten with cruelty or cheated on by his wife, he divorces, makes exaggerated decisions shortly after being slapped in the face or when his fish is overcooked at home. He abandons his pregnant wife, but is touched by her toothache and remarries her.

These are oddities which are accompanied by sufficient coincidences to create the impression of a disarticulate text, exactly because of its conspicuous intentionality which reveals, *in nuce*, Caragiale’s obsession with articulating a mechanism. This is a true witness. But what is the real cause of the mechanism? What fuels it?! Is man a *godly* or a *demonic agent*?! In other words, could he be a conservative spirit, fanatical in his choice of action, or a liberal, relative, empty one?! This is – at the edge or irony, in balance, in the space in which everything is possible, with a heavier weight on the scale on which the denunciation regarding the hidden secret of things presses down – the opinion of a narrator. Because this is a short story (as the text indicates) and not a sketch, or a report, Mr Iancu is not so visible from behind them, although he is just as present. One reads, in *Lache and Mache. A Short Story*: „In the first week after receiving their pay, their principles are established: on recognizing the order and the providential goal of mankind; on the truth that man is not a mere animal which lives to eat and drink, but a godly agent, having an important mission in the complexity of the universe; on the necessity of the reigning government; finally, on purely conservative grounds”. This course does not stop here: “After the last coins leave their garments, Lache and Mache abandon these ‘worn out’ and ‘false’ principles; then the world and mankind are

simple confusions without a plan or an order; all governments are bad, but the worst is the one in power; man is a damned plaything of blind fate, a victim of society – almost anarchist principles – everything fades into a grave! – bitter skepticism!”. Lache and Mache, “true encyclopaedists” (because they “know a bit of nothing about everything”) are modern men, emblems of their time. They take part in discussions about “poetry, the future of industry, the drawbacks of the constitutional system, the progress of electricity, microbes, Wagner, Darwin, Panama, *Julie Belle*, spiritism, fachirism, *l’Exilée* and so on”. But they are people of their time in the fullest sense: just as with the “the Capon”, their quarrel leads to cosmic disorder; their reunion results in the recovery of cosmic harmony, all becoming a movement within the ironic hyperbole of an integralist view of the world. Therefore, fed by the muteness of an immanentist perspective for which, however, everything becomes illusion, the question persists: is man *a godly agent* or *a damned plaything of blind fate*? Or is he both? Any opposition becomes a law of harmony through repetition.

Finally, the simple paradox which maintains the mechanism in motion is not sufficient for an explanation, if we consider the exemplary case from *Cănuță, a Twisted Man*. Thus, we encounter a demonstration of the impossibility of understanding, because Caragiale offers in detail every bizarre coincidence, however, without surpassing the surface of a mechanism which acts as a will onto itself. As a result, destiny is not destiny, but the surface of a challenge. Still, as within the whole Caragialean creation, two things establish themselves simultaneously: on the one hand, on the edge of a realistic view, the discourse about the world, and on the other, at the edge of the metatextual probing, the discourse of the world as text. The impression that the signals *are recognized* overlays upon the one that they *are constructed*. In one instance, the author does nothing but recognize them himself, in another case, he suggests they should be recognized. Nevertheless, in both cases there is the joy of a hedonist – who gazes at the spectacle of the world (not of the mystic one, but of the material one: “What a crowd! What elegance! What plentitude!”, he exclaims in *Sunday Rest (Repausul Dominical)*, while contemplating the bustle of “carriages, chaises, automobiles” on Victoria Street) and also lets himself be gazed upon by a world for which he, the grand conjuror, leaves, at times, a detail in the open. In one case, if there are not others as well, the world which is watching is within himself, the actor.

The situation from *Sentimental Correspondence (Corespondență sentimentală)* is equally hilarious as it is reflected in the letter from the acquaintance who comes to think that he is the hero of a farce which Mari plays on him. Fear, pleading, madness are followed by the joy of participating in a show. But, except for the interpretation itself, there is no meaning. He does nothing more than put a mechanism into motion even when he creates the impression of copying it – perfectly within it, which creates the permanent feeling of eeriness. Were it not exaggerated, I would invoke de Chirico’s paintings..., even if a world full of proteiform details almost always opposes an exact rendering of them. Void of interpretations, facts lose any consistency, becoming almost exclusively interpretation. “Why? Why, shouldn’t we always have to bother with philosophizing, with finding the cause of everything... It is enough to notice how things happen...”. Let us admit that, taken out of context, these words seem to resemble the lesson of Euthanasius from the well-known short story by Eminescu. There one reads: “It is facts which are given explanations, but it is facts themselves which are the truth”.

And this is in a letter in which he pleads for the natural state, in which only the blind ambition of being operates, freed from any subjective participation. However, in the case of Caragiale, so much passion is evidence of a mechanism which is more violent and without... an ideology, empty but enticing intelligence because of it, placed, either way, at the opposite pole of the cosmic sublime, which does not offer any reason for becoming unsettled. Most likely it would offer the chance for metaphysical irony to manifest itself, because reality feeds upon the most precise strangeness. An explanation of this mechanism can be found in *How Could One Become a Revolutionary and a Politician... (Cum devine cineva revoluționar și om politic) ?*

Next to this mechanism which does not know transcendence, which is, however, about to offer the illusion of transcendence, there is the same euphoric void in the articulation of the endless labyrinth of the world. The labyrinth does not scare, but protects. No defense reflex is alarmed in a space which proves to be virtual, in which everything is possible and in which, finally, nothing seems to happen. Any somber feeling yields to euphoria. Thus, in a forest of signs, chases, searches, raids, wanderings take place; the Caragialean body of work is full of people who rummage, ransack, and run in search of places or people, as if in an exaltation of agony. But agony creates “pleasure”. No one is ready to contemplate; but everyone – including the reader involved with the text by means of the visible presence of an author who, like a little cynical demiurge, frames everything – records facts, exhausts them in a self-devouring delirium, becoming like little detectives who, often blinded by their own search, forget to word their interrogations. No kind of investigation regarding the ultimate meaning with which they are still obsessed is undertaken. The cause which generates facts remains obscure, like in *Inspection (Inspectiune)*. And what is this text, also built on the obsession of the bizarre mechanism of life, if not a demonstration – of the *purity* of fiction, hard or impossible to overlay on the existent -, a farce played on the reader? Without a doubt, this happens almost permanently in Caragiale’s work, only this time, the body is perfectly crystallized and the illusion is total, despite its appearance of mimetic circumscription in a recognizable space. It is a demonstration which has its polemic substrate.

Actually, Caragiale subtly prepares the failure of any interpretation, only leaving facts to be known. So, being asked the question which is stubbornly prompted by critics, “Why, Mr. Anghelache?”, Caragiale does nothing more than amuse himself, pleased by the perfection of the game. While maintaining some coordinates regarding attitude and the context of romantic ontology, the situation is no different in *Poor Dionis*. Let us remember the author’s “two conclusive words” at the end of the short story: “Who is the real man of these happenings: Dan or Dionis? Many of our readers will have searched the key to what has happened to him in the things which surrounded him; [...] eventually, with the thread of causality in their hands, many will think they have guessed the meaning of the happenings, dismissing them as mere dreams of a sick imagination”. So the key of these happenings is not a solution, the result of a civilized rationality, but the challenge and the integrity of a world. A pure world, because textually, even if Caragiale’s humor is dark: similar to himself, of course, “good Mr Anghelache did not want to answer”. It is polemic and ironic humor. Thus, this is how it ends, with a lock which moves in another reality different to that of the world, a famous sketch. But this is not the only outside intervention which relies not on a passionate complicity, but on an ironic one, possible in the midst of the hypothesis of a paper existence.

We read: "From Dobroteasa take a left turn to exit towards the keys next to Piața Mare. When passing in front of the morgue, I see the funeral carriage: a newly-arrived guest, fed up with the heat of life, soon to descend in the cool (h)otel. Here it is no longer about making a parody of the style of the worldly press..., although it could be about parodying his friends' way of thinking, being brought up in the worldly style, which means intelligent and cynical, or, in a word, Miticism.

An admirer of Sophocles, Caragiale will become fascinated by the idea of fatality, as a transcendent mechanism but just as well by the creation of a fictional world which can not tumble when facing any exegetic confrontation. What results from the combination of these elements is the question he explicitly prompts in this text. But it is a question which is a fundament of the Caragialean style of writing. The question of a... detective. Again, however, we glide from the territory of reality to that of fictional truth. And the question exits the world so as to enter the text. At least, that is what we ascertain, because the vague geometry of a labyrinth also appears in the text. In its centre there is Mr Anghelache, of course, with the strange mechanism of his life. But there is another labyrinth as well, that of the mundane spaces: pubs, markets, bars, establishments, streets, breweries, the keys, even the morgue. In a world of suspicion (after all, his friends are looking for Anghelache to warn him about the imminent check), what follows is a wandering on a trajectory lacking in meaning: in the middle of the night until dawn, in Dobroteasa, at his home, then two or three times in every pub, then at the dairy farm, back again in Dobroteasa and finally, when the men are to do nothing more ("from here on, may God protect Mr. Anghelache!"), the sign, owing to the simple accident of encountering the funeral carriage. Otherwise, there is no sort of clue. It is by mere chance that they arrive at the morgue and find the great secret in it, as if in an athanor. Maybe Mitică, the one from the café, who leads them uselessly towards the dairy farm, is a sign. And what about this Mitică, who seems to come from the pages of Mateiu Caragiale?! Here he is: "In the small room at the back, another comrade... At the dim light of an Auer light bulb, the comrade's face resembles the icon of a martyr after great sufferings: as white as a ghost, with blue shadows; his jaws are clenched; his nose drawn; his eyes lost in ecstasy. In his just-as-white hand, as if no blood were flowing underneath his skin, he holds a teaspoon, which he uses to slowly, slowly stir all the sugar in a cup full of coffee. Every now and then he sighs deeply, enlarging his nostrils. As soon as his comrades see him, they come closer and greet him. He smiles at them – with the holy smile of a martyr who can see, through the opening of the skies, the light of eternal life – and goes on stirring in his cup without changing the speed of the action".

So, these are comrades caught in a fight... Were he not drunk, we could say that Mitică is the embodiment of mystery, that the gloomy prediction resides within him. As reflected in this passage, Mitică is nothing more than the shadow of a clue, a mere appearance. Like Anghelache, he is a closed door for those who seek signs. Beyond the interpretation of signs, remains the unsophisticated pleasure of their identification and framing in the territory of the vague. This is why the labyrinth does not frighten. The Epicurean is, after all, not afraid of death. Blasé, having reached ataraxia, he experiences the joy of being in this world at a constant intensity.

Reality is challenged and the void is forced to come into form. In other words, the exercises in style about reality endow the possible with the quality of truth. It is as if one considered everything to be style and, consequently, actions – which characters pursue – are nothing but style. But being style, they have the undeniable consistency of the real world. It is by this means that the initial indication from *The Mates* can be explained: “The reader will forgive me for not giving any indication regarding tone, action and temperamental range in the dialogue, - indications so necessary for an appropriate reading, - and will replace its absence with imagination”. Thus, Caragiale offers just facts – but only with the purpose of their “interpretations”. If it is not wholly so, then the question regarding the balance of the unknown factors in this equation, which put the world and the text in motion from the shadows, persists. And everything occurs under the fascinated eyes of the author, who, omniscient, but playing the role of the one with a limited gaze, stares into the labyrinth from above and asks questions regarding identity. But the band of Möbius is everywhere.

In *Pleasure Train (Tren de Plăcere)*, for example, we find a labyrinth which prompts the poetry of love. On the one hand, actions in their meaningless delirium, on the other, the ambiguous suggestion of the actions, from which, despite all the ironic subtext, poetry does not disappear. It is as if Caragiale were similar to a Cekhov without innocence, present both within and outside of the text, capable of amusing himself behind the veils which protect him although they can not save him. Often around, death is not a style. Or it is a style which devours itself, making the fall into the world possible. This is how Mitică, from the monologue *April 1st*, becomes the victim of his own trap. What is a farce if not a possible labyrinth which causes in the person exposed to it the anxiety of motivating actions? After all, Lefter Popescu or Anghelache, in different ways, see the world as a theatre, or, to be more precise, as a stage where farces occur according to the instructions coming from the cynical director, who the author only attempts to copy occasionally. Being himself a blasé and skeptical director, Mitică falls into the trap of another, uncontrollable mechanism, of strange reactions, possibly psychologically motivated, although Caragiale does not provide any psychological analysis. Even a text such as this one is included in the group of texts which are the result of a hedonism fed with suspicion, searches and the vague. A hedonism which approximates reality.

Identity? This competition between truth and reality is the subject of much of Caragiale’s work. There is even a sketch which is entitled *Identity...* Of course, he descends into the mundane and the anecdotic, because the stake is not that of a questionable philosopher. But why refuse it a higher meaning? Because these facts demonstrate how easily the false can be mistaken for the authentic; what is more, that the false is always mistaken for the authentic, because the view on truth contradicts the reality of the truth. In other words, form replaces essence, becoming essence, even if only as a specter. Thus, reference is necessary to the anecdotes from the memorialistic sphere. Without a form of identification, the hero can not withdraw a meager sum of money from the Parisian branch of a bank. However, a gentleman (English; red-haired; striped suit; enormous wallet, real crocodile skin, etc. etc...) who eventually proves to be a criminal, is handed a large sum. Similarly, at the border, without a passport, it is impossible for him to pass, while an anarchist, Moscow citizen (but who is “an excellent person, good, honest and moral; but... restless and incurable”), carrying “a wad of documents”, succeeds without being hindered. This is where

salvation comes from, so our hero is called Bob Schmecker, and is an American citizen. What is more, “the president of the U.S.A ‘asks all military and civil authorities on the planet to let me pass and aid me and offer me protection if needed’”. So, with this new name, the anecdote is farfetched and, obviously, adds in an exaggerated dose, amusement to sorrow. But it is not in the simple coincidences that the meaning of the sketch must be searched for, nor in the satirical humor of the story, but in... the title, *Identity*. After all, this is how easy it is to be someone else and how easily *you yourself* can become a mere, empty form. Thus, the authorities – the only ones who have to take the test of credibility – who are looking for the truth are merely incompetent.

The same themes are found in the texts of the Bulgarian cycle. In *The Last Hour!...*, the ridiculous note referring to a journalist who is searching for the sensationalist is undeniable. Any kind of information is nonsense. Conversely, everything takes place on the night before the fair of St Mary’s. So, it is a prelude to the time of mask-wearing, which also signifies a change in décor. But, bombarded with sensationalist news, forever contradicted either by the captain, or by a minister, the storyteller eventually takes his role seriously. And, convinced by the fake nature of a piece of news, he does not contradict the almost fanatic journalist, rather he confuses him with new details. This is how a piece of information and a reliable source are created out of nothing! Let us remember Șerban Foarța’s statement about a *demonization of the press* in Caragiale’s work: “When the press establishes itself as a source of events , when instead of being a mere receptacle and/or a clear mirror it becomes in the (im)posture of generating them, uncontrollably and malignantly, similar to a tumor, it becomes demonic, literally demonic.”

As a result, by reading *Reportage* in the discussed volume, we can ascertain their musical unity, given by the *leit-motif* of the journalistic fabrication. In subtext, however, the problem of the fragile balance between what is true and what is fake can be found. On the route of fabrication, as in a carnival of shapes, any accidental context can embody reality. The same investigation is in Boris Sarafoff!... In its centre, both literally and metaphorically, some “restless journalists” named A., B., C., D. – proof of the fact that the mechanism is interesting, and not the characters, who are used as nameless actors, as those who trigger the plot. While following “the intelligent instruction judge” J. Th. Forescu, who escaped them in the last moment, they meet Boris Sarafoff, guilty of national crimes, at the renown Enache inn. He plays a precise game: self-confidence, courage, impetuosity. Over in the journalists’ side: surprise, fright, terror. On a backdrop of suspicions, the mute game is played close to paroxysm. Thus, confrontation is imminent – and while it unfolds, while Sarafoff manages to reach the carriage with which he escapes, his wig falls off and he removes his beard. Total surprise: Sarafoff was none other than “the intelligent instruction judge”. Everything was perfect: the acting, the clothes, the card he let fall, his language. Here is a judge (still an authority) who plans farces. Moreover, a registrar, now Kovaceff, accompanied him, someone whose duty is to record actions or words without interfering as the registrar is a mere clerk. However, the judge and the registrar create the real, they cause the series of events, they endow them with the test of truth. Through them, the hypothetical, with all its dose of improbability, is circumscribed to reality. Other levels? They are reflected in the ridiculousness of the journalists and the mania of sensationalism, the placement of the story in

the realm of daily affairs by the implication of the Romanian-Bulgarian conflict, the matter, worth discussing, of the point of view and of the manner in which it constitutes the decisive process of creating the story. Had he not used the successive recording of actions, had he even suggested, as an omniscient author, the possibility of a farce, any interest would have been cancelled. Thus, it is a farce about how everything can become something else owing to its shape, surface and presentation.

But more will be said on the matter of farces another time... in order to write in detail about the problem of the relationship between reality and truth, a kind of veil behind which the balance between the particular and the general hides. What is the intermediary of this problem?! It is the same instrument of journalism, which should be defined as the attempt of recording forms in a neutral fashion, as it is configured in a masterpiece of Caragialean writing, of brilliant modernism. The work in question is *Toma's Sunday*. The parody and the metatextuality, the irony and the transformation of the absence of a subject into a subject, these are some of the levels which compose the complexity of this sketch, whose roots reside in *Theme and Variations*, the sketch that completed the 1982 *Notes and sketches* volume which, let us remember, started with the two essays on Eminescu, *In Nirvana* and *Irony*. Of course, in *Theme and Variations*, the so-called mimetic dates, which suggest either the political life of the time or the journalistic mentality, are only of marginal importance, even if the original title contained the phrase *Political Varieties*. Of great importance is the pleasure of making a parody of registers so different from one another and, reduced to their essence, so unmistakable (yes, those few manners hide true characters!). The voluptuousness of creating a fabrication is supported by a special linguistic disposition, doubled by the total change of register.

After all, as an absolute master of linguistic means, Caragiale can write in any way he pleases. He is a conjurer who can reveal at any time any illusory realm. It is illusory because, being exclusively a style, and a mimicked style, everything can disappear in a moment. Which is what happens when we suspect that, also of great importance appears to be the issue of "the investigation" of truth. Of course, the title rather indicates the way in which specters substitute the truth, in a labyrinth-like zigzag. Thus, the feeling that *the theme*, which is the information from "The Universe", is the very objective truth, recorded as such, begins to topple. However, in any case, the factual information is in "The Universe"; the other newspapers contain the attitudes, commentaries and political war doubled by the worldly show. Something different occurs in *Toma's Sunday*, where the direction of fabrication continues. In short, the narrator is visiting his "brother and friend" Tomiță on his birthday. Despite being in pain because of a toothache, he had to write a review about teeth and science. Here is the narrator, writing such a text, and slowly gliding over to the melancholic-evocative memorialistic style, with comically-masked anecdotes regarding the Church, with priests, widows, parishioner, children and teachers. A little forced sentimentality, (to reduce the excess of authentic sentimentality) about people and times long gone. What follows is not a fabricated variation, but a copied one from a text which is also his (*Resurrection Night*, the preliminary form of the short story *At Times of War*), which, in its turn, was also a copy.

Lost in meditations regarding modern time, fallen, he is awoken from his reveries by Tomiță's "triumph", now cured. Everything is laughter in this show of brilliant intelligence and of the permutations of plans. In the space of simulation, the sentimental-nostalgic style

ends with a clear choice for the time of childhood and so, for the time of happy faith. However, Toma is the unfaithful; he only believes in the miracle of the revival of Jesus only after he sees and touches his wounds. This is what generates the question about happiness (“Jesus said to him: ‘When you saw me, Toma, you believed; blessed those who did not see, but believed...’”) which triggers the nostalgic stream. But childhood was the age of faith which did not need evidence. Thus St Augustus is invoked, with his renown paradox (“I believe exactly because it is absurd!”), after which the damnation of modern time and of Voltaire’s illuminist spirit: “So you have come, new people, with science, to wrench from its roots this divine plant, which drew its sap from the depth of our hearts! But that was not enough for you! Over the wound in the depth of our hearts, from which it could be reborn you poured the caustic, poisonous, destructive lye, the poison of skepticism, of pessimism, of atheism!...”, or: “Yes! Yes! In the abyss of faithlessness in which we are sinking, when you took away my soothing faith and gave me nothing in return but depressing skepticism, destructive doubt, my soul screams, as does the whole world’s, together with the poet... together with the poet... it screams...”. This is the moment of maximum ecstasy suddenly interrupted by the return of Tomita. Or course, the ecstasy is that of the style which in the end substitutes the being, with all its evocative note which re-authenticated it. But, even so, the accusation against modern time is made in a mystified key; everything is anti-phrase and simulation. Rightfully speaking, Caragiale manages to make any fatality materialize in palpable mechanisms. “Knowing” should account for them as well. Returning to Augustin, Caragiale wants to touch the absurd. Regarding *the poison of skepticism*, it is obvious that something from the retrograde-restorative spirit is parodied here, the author possibly guessing some of the forms of the Romanian spirit from the coming century. He maybe foresaw Nae Ionescu blaming Europe and modern science, preaching mysticism but doing this from the most modern automobile that had ever driven on the few streets of Romania. It is not by chance that his disciples are allergic to Caragiale. In any case, we are to believe that the skeptic Caragiale, with his *destructive doubt*, gazes upon the space of the unfolding of the text with the refined voluptuousness of the playful spirit. It is because of this that, while the cured Tomita exuberantly claims a triumph for modern science, towards which the narrator himself guided him, he continues to act within the anti-modern delirium, erroneously substituting faith with his teeth: “... You took away my tooth with your science!... what have you given me in return?... give me back my tooth!... I need it!...” An error which he will happily agree to amend. Everything becomes burlesque. Yes, the theme is that of journalism: how a text on a given topic can be written, how passion and conviction can be mimicked. What is more, nothing is in contradiction: the accepted result of modern science does not contradict “the faith” in the decline of modernity, although, in the self-mocking finale, it is clear that all these are not the consequences of fanaticism. On the contrary, this attitude reveals a lucidity which makes everything relative. After all, Caragiale is a modernist who actually believes in the sufficiency of the empiric world and in gaining knowledge through the senses.

It is indisputable that this sketch is not a fable, although stories of the analogical type, such as the ones by Creangă, are not absent from Caragiale’s work. It is not even a meditation. Still, no matter how well hidden it is behind the brilliant intelligence which creates epic illusions from anti-phrases, a spirit makes queries regarding the fragile balance of

the truth, which can be assumed through the senses. These queries are articulated in playful structures and in an “epic” freed from the ballast of the anecdotes. They fascinate Caragiale and do not submit to utopias, ideologies or any kind of utilitarianism. Frankly, being both a skeptic and a hedonist, Caragiale does not regard literature as the chance for redemption, although, it is exactly by not endowing the fragile balance of truth with a state of crisis, that he offers the means of deceiving the abyss.

Works with the most diverse topics (and I am not referring to the exterior topic) establish themselves on the game which, beyond its satirical surface, has the crisis – and the illusion – of truth as its subject. Playfully, in the sense of permanently denouncing the processes, a denunciation for their conspicuous use, Caragiale, in *The Terrible Suicide from Fidelity Street* (*Groaznica sinucidere din strada Fidelității*), conducts the experiment of projecting reality in interpretation. Of course, there is something from *Theme and Variations* that remains present, even if the emphasis is no longer on the voluptuousness of fabrication. In reality, the pastiche was a mere means of pulverizing the concrete, the references. But being visible, too visible, the exhibition and stripping down of the world transform this text in a playful experiment which forces the reader to become an accomplice. And this time the reader is not sophisticated or cynical in his turn, but one who is willing to collaborate. Fidelity Street, house no 13, the newspaper “The Light”, and later “Aurora”, the work of the young Mișu Z. on *The Symptom of Various Violent Intoxications*, all these are no longer related to the farce of the young medicine student (of the rationalist who knows the exterior secrets of the body), but to that of the author. The opening sentence, in which the narrator specifies that “buds were the favorite flowers” of Miss Portia Popescu is a simple play on words. Being too visible, apart from some ontological ambiguity, the previously conjured facts become a mere technique. It is exactly because of that that they are eloquent, making it clear that everything is artifice. Even the search for the truth is a game of interpretation.

In any case, the journey through the world as a labyrinth, searching for signs, inspired by the organic desire of constructing the self is a true obsession. It must also be mentioned that he who searches for signs also creates them. And that is not an angel, but a daemon. The signs are the consequence (or the evidence) of a sometimes cynical and, at times, playful mind which draws inspiration from the pleasure of enactment. Nonetheless, the signs should never be trusted. They always mean something more than they show, from mystification, fatality or mere cynicism. And in this enactment, the reader often becomes himself an object to be molded, prepared, provoked and fooled. Rightly speaking, Caragiale’s bet does not regard the world which he creates, but the reader. Without him the world does not exist, for it manifests itself exclusively as a sensorial perception, as a stimulant of the senses or the mind. The Eminescian dichotomy between *fantasy* and *fantastery* clearly places Caragiale among the true epigones. For, if visionaries place creation in the space of imaginal worlds, as Andrei Pleșu would say, the Caragialean creations, throbbing with intelligence, seem to remain on the plane of self-aware artifice. Thus, the technique of placing reality in illusion concludes with establishing a realm of the vague, which claims to be the truth. Caragiale’s world moves within these boundaries and, truth be told, all journeys, pursuits and characters’ investigations occur in this space. Their pleasure for fabrication, to let themselves be driven by the inspiration of interpretation, often makes them the victims of their own imagination. Again:

he who searches for signs also creates them. It is not only once, that the hero hunts himself in the spider's web spread to capture others.

Perhaps the most relevant examples can not be found in Caragiale's plays.

However, the plays' "case" can not be overlooked, considering that in the profound structure of the drama *The Plague*, for example, the pursuit is a decisive element as it shows the way in which it establishes the world, revealing the delicate balance between reality and truth. It is well known that the play opens with a scene frequent in Caragiale's works: Dragomir, Anca and Gheorghe comment on a newspaper article; in this case, the escape of Ion the deranged. So that, the entire play develops around this character – his secondary role being just an impression – and the "dialogue" of suspicion. Anca identifies signs to obtain a confession of the truth; Dragomir tries to delay their appearance and deciphering. But these signs are different from those that lie. She suspects that the pipe, the tobacco and the flint found on Ion's person are not evidence of the truth. She understands that that facts produce confusion. That is why, she repeats it in the ending, when the belt of Ion the deranged is found in Dragomir's pocket. As a side note, the spirit of justice can not be found within this play. A matter, such as this, far from Caragiale's attention, is of interest only to capture in this case, like in many other, the secret mechanism of psychological deviance and, perhaps, the mechanical repetition of "destinies" according to rules that are hard to identify. Gheorghe himself is on the verge of entering this mechanism, which is one of killing and if he should remain an uninteresting character, this happens because he is not absorbed by the mechanism that is under investigation. The only situation that changes in this pattern of the relationship between the culprit and the victim regards Anca, the character who incorporates the reality-conjuring virtues of the investigation of the real, which are precisely those of the author. Anca is not an alter-ego, of course, Caragiale himself could not say, like Falubert, that Anca *c'est moi*. But here, she has the attributes of the one who triggers, maintains and decides the events. Still, she only does it superficially, because she is nothing more than the demon in the text. In any case, the change refers to the fact that although she, like Dragomir, plays the part of the one who knows the truth and does not interfere to materialize it, she will not be chased by anyone (not even her own nightmares) so as to re-establish the truth. What is more, not even the truth about Ion's innocence is re-established in the world of the text. After all, what is this work about? It is about a conveyance of the mystification and of the mechanisms which make this possible. And here the reproaches regarding the verisimilitude of the environment and the unauthentic psychologies are not considered.

Why is Anca the *author* only at the surface of the text? Let us return to Ion the deranged, the only one who is the embodiment of the truth. If the parallel structures between the architecture of the dramatic plays and that of the comedies were to be thoroughly sought, surprising similarities would surface. One of them is about the very appearance of Ion, who is not very different from Dandanache's. In addition, there is also the obsession for open spaces, for the circularity around the hypothetical of the events, which causes the characters to be built according to a mould. But if Dandanache arrives from the centre to confirm that the real space is nothing more than a peripheral repetition of a "model", Ion himself is identified by a central instance – Mother Mary – with the (merely apparent) goal of having the model present in the world. By wandering on the trail of a squirrel, Ion arrives where he should. And yet,

Anca's plan is diabolical. Ion becomes her victim, because no one absolves him as he continues to "be" guilty of Dumitru's death. Moreover, he remains an instrument of revenge. Let us be clear: the reader's wish to absolve him (which could be invoked) is not relevant here. Thus, what is the meaning of this mystical textual complication (and explanation) since it is nothing more than an accident in Anca's (improvised) plan? So, hesitant and slightly predictable, it is not a mystical backdrop which Caragiale proposes through the presence of the signs which bring Ion to the inn, but the simple virtual articulation of a faulty mechanism. It is obvious from this that Caragiale enjoys paradoxical situations: it is as if he is saying that the truth lies solely in the possession of the abnormal. If something can be reproached in Caragiale's drama, then the overly-emphasized presence of the author in the mechanism which he builds must be considered; if the impression, in comedies, of an illusory body of the world, which is announced by the presence of the author who is like a little demiurge, has its organic euphoria as its corollary (and a world whose identity is just an illusion can be euphoric), then in *The Trouble (Năpasta)*, it is unable to find an appropriate counter side. The (even psychological) terror from the drama can not support a virtual architecture. The same is true vice versa.

The conjuration of comedies in the attempt of analyzing the character's exploration of an imaginary, labyrinth-like fabric and his search for signs enters the realm of tautology; it is an assumed risk, since apart from the identification of the problem itself, the details create a marginal zone of possible queries and nuances. It also enters the realm of tautologies because, each of the four comedies establishes, in its very center, an investigative territory. Under the mask of a perfect circumscription in the realistic mimetic, *A Lost Letter* is a perfect construction with an impeccable architecture which, however, is nothing more but a comedy of morale. The shivers caused by being at the edge, at the borderline territories through which uneasiness sneaks in is missing. Even the amusement caused by language, once capable of receiving a meaning through its relevance to the ambiguity of the world which it "represents", is here only a technique. Tipatescu's letter or Catavencu's forgery, identified, do not set their adventure in the opportunity of examining the real as an illusory territory. Everything here is geometry, a photo of a structure filled in a convincing way with matter. Apart from the morals, this play lacks the "fissure" through which man can sneak out. Yet, the morals themselves have something predictable in them. However, an exception can decide on another state. It regards Dandanache and the world from which he comes: the centre. On different areas, in concentric worlds, Dandanache's world is the supreme authority, that God that who shows himself in visible, thus degraded forms. But here, the centre, through the shape it takes, is the absolute form of degradation. It is well known that Dandanache is more unintelligent than Farfuridi and a bigger scoundrel than Catavencu.

A manner of toppling known correlations is used to serve an implicit attitude. The last line, belonging to Pristanda, the side man who guarantees (or so he should) for the truth, must especially be remembered. His obedience makes any of his statements, no matter how lacking in logic, legitimate. But the last festive stammer of Catavencu becomes valid in this way: "Truly constitutional!" he cries, in the final turmoil of a regenerated world. Here, indeed, everything can restart. Time is circular, so no illusion seems capable of threatening reality. But what reality?! The one which is formulated, under the influence of alcohol, by Catavencu, which triggers Pristanda's cry. It is: "Brothers! After century-old struggles which lasted

almost thirty years, our dream has come true! What were we a short time before Crimeea? We have fought and have made progress: obscurity yesterday, light today! Bigots yesterday, today free-thinkers! Sorrow yesterday, cheerfulness today!... These are the advantages of progress! These are the benefits of a constitutional system!”

This is the reality of a lexical illusion. This is the reality of a moral verdict, which Caragiale reaches, however, with sadness. It is what did not happen, I believe, in the other comedies; or not so conspicuously. The fragile balance of the identity of the world was pungent within them. Here, as well, the stake of Caragiale’s works must be thoroughly searched for – in the attempt of identifying the route towards something which could be called, with all irony, the last reality in the pure fascination of the spirit which passes through the sordidness of this labyrinth-like route.

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