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The Critical Reception of the Works of Mateiu I. Caragiale
-Critical Narratives and Refictionalising Strategies-

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Abstract

The critical reception of the works of Mateiu I. Caragiale is an ample history of detracting bursts, admiring blindness, coffee shop rituals and underground argumentation, indebted pastiche and parricidal rewritings, sublime apocrypha and generous bio-fictions. What makes it different? We believe the answer should not be sought in the back stage of the works, already overcrowded with interpretation attempts exceeding the noble thinness of the Mateiesque works. It must be tracked exactly in this proliferation of readings, with the simultaneous breaking down of the mechanisms of critical discourse, whose poetics does not seem to decisively preoccupy the Romanian interpretation community.

By placing our analytical approach in the area of the intra- and intertextual contaminations, the meeting of the argumentative and the narrative has become visible with the reception of the works of Mateiu Caragiale. We believed that, before becoming discourse, the critical view is based on a reiterated act of reception, on a growth in stages that correspond to the various levels of the imaginary (of the critic, of the analysed author), but also on hermeneutical gestures later transferred to explanation structures, informed in their turn by the creative project of the critic and also by the dynamics of an interpretation community.

In the first chapter we set off from the conceptual corpus offered by the theories of reception and from the direction offered by the *reader-response criticism*, in the hope that they could offer the methodological tools to transform the reading and the reader into operating analytical concepts. Unfortunately, the change of paradigm proved to be rather a rearrangement of existent directions because of the impossibility of overcoming the dichotomy text – reader, both by the Konstanz academic movement and by the American direction. Re-reading the fundamental texts of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser has revealed the simultaneous avoidance of both psychological subjectivism and of the objectivism of literary history, as well as the apparition of new models to find solutions for the same problem: the blockage of the text-reader relation in a sort of abstractionism which offers it validation, combined with a touch of

unpredictability which offers it vitality. However, reclaiming the above mentioned theoretical corpus maintains its necessity within the analysis of the Romanian critical discourse, as an enlightening, self-reflexive stage, essential in the attempt to explore the presuppositions and lecturing references recovered from the articles, reviews, studies and monographies dedicated to Mateiu I. Caragiale. Although the interest for the reader figure is present with studies such as the studies of Matei Călinescu or Iulian Costache, the approach of the critical discourse as the repository of reading idiosyncrasies which end up in profiling a history of reception, has not yet been the object of an approach at the crossroads of the narrative and the argumentative, such as the present work.

In the second chapter, we softened the methodological discomfort first by accepting the heterogeneousness of the critical discourse and then by assuming, as risky as it could prove to be, a certain type of fictionalising, specific to this discourse. We have counterbalanced the possible objections, based on the tradition of the non-fictional status of critical discourse, oscillating between essay writing and scientific strictness, in the direction of the local researches of Mihaela Ursu or Andrei Terian, or those of Paul de Man and Florian Pennanech, who approached the slippery terrain of a critique of critique, placing it in the proximity of the literary text. On the other hand, the reception of the works of Mateiu Caragiale has been placed from the very beginning under the sign of unconditional admiration, which offered critics the subterfuge of recurrent contamination of the author's idiolect, and also of a constant veering towards the figurative, sometimes at the level of the discourse configuration. At the same time, we have associated the speculative imaginary of the critics, expressed by complex gestures, analysed by Jean Starobinski, to a layering of discourse allowing the meeting between argumentative strategies and the narrative patterns.

When the critical instance places argumentation in a narrative order, based on a contract of a search for knowledge, it becomes the narrative instance manipulating an epic of cancellation through hermeneutical "heroism", of a deficit of transparency in the work, which needs to be rectified. By telling the story of the meeting between the work and the author, this instance is driven by the aspiration to understanding, revelation, ordering into a narrative in which the other often becomes the helper or the opposing party. The author's intent, which is to improve, recuperate in relation with the object of the analysis, is integrated into an argumentative structure which gives it the persuasive force of a "academic coup de theatre", as Umberto Eco calls it. If

the argumentative pattern allowed the analysis of discursive presumptions, the narrative has unveiled contaminations between the critic's and the author's creator projects.

At the base of the Mateiesque cult founded by Ion Barbu we have thus discovered both a cult of the ritual placed on an existential level by admirers (café dramatizations, recitals, reconstruction of the fictional geography) and a certain type of fascinated re-reading, based on a type of affectionate rhetoric with soteriological accents, figurative props and places of quality which valorise the singular, the a-typical, the eccentric. At the other extreme, the detracting reading probably comes from a relational asymmetry given by not finding the contents of phantasms the critical instance expected of the work, generating a rhetoric of vituperation, such as the one cultivated by Șerban Cioculescu. We have analysed the articulation of the author's view on the axiological criticism, a powerful tool in the battle with the Mateiesque ineffable, as well as the abstract hierarchy assumed by him (in the sphere of nobility, snobbery, of the idea of literary dynasty) as the basis for the refusal of the polarity crossing the purifying critical gestures. Basing his arguments on the co-existence link between act and essence, the critic lists lacks and eccentricities of Mateiu I. Caragiale, which make the restoration of the homogeneousness of the family picture impossible.

Another type of detracting discourse, belonging to Mircea Mihăieș, was taken down in relation to a collection of critical masks the author displays in his works in accordance with a poetics of the critical narration which goes from the gestures of stubborn, yet lucid mirroring into the other's writing in order to capture the traces of his inner project, to the rewriting of this forced divination into another language reuniting the voice of the analyst with the voice of the analysed author. In exercising this debunking rebellion, the detractor relates not necessarily to the works of Mateiu I. Caragiale, but to the studies that have accompanied it, bombarding it with authoritative arguments, as well as to the failure to express the tones of the works in a different way than the antagonistic instance.

By practising a mirror reading of the detracting discourse represented by Nestor Ignat and of the admiring one represented by Anatol E. Baconsky, we have noticed that the hidden argumentation unveils novel contaminations and interpretation excesses. The realist-socialist criticism, based on the progressive elimination of retrograde elements meets the discourse saturated by visual metaphors of the admirer, who communicates the underlining resonance with his own spiritual patterns. The reader's fascination also appears in the detracting discourse as

involuntary lapse, being promptly repressed in accordance with the arguments placed in the *forma mentis* of the blameable critic – considered retrograde – and not in the discussed work.

The attempt to rebuild a zero level of the initial reception implied a mapping of the interwar serial-story columns in **the second part of the third chapter**. The so called landmarks of Mateiesque hermeneutics, as Barbu Cioculescu calls them, are set during this period, from the family novel built by critics based on some heredity theories to the uncertain novelist status of the author, just as, later on, the commemorative discourse based on the poetics of re-reading has offered the coordinates of the analysis of the artistic writing.

The interwar serial-story columns offered a schedule of criticism established in the very contact with a prodigious literary production, which had to be evaluated quickly and efficiently, thus ending up in the situation of wasting the method in the very practice of writing texts on the various editorial releases. It is a paradox, based on anti-dogmatism and a refusal of any categories methodically applied to the textual study, but aspiring at the same time to the photographic precision of classifying writers in a spiritual family, following the Sainte-Beauvian model. One of the most tumultuous plots of the period, which has continued to generate critical narrations up to the present (and probably indestructible, as literary pattern) is the one of the reconstruction of the family novel of Mateiu I. Caragiale by establishing with almost PhD-like strictness the avoidances and vassalage in the face of heredity. The writer still being validated and marked by the successional pressure of the artistic Caragiale clan was subjected to Inquisitorial judgement (Pompiliu Constantinescu) but also extracted from the oppressive genealogy and placed in the spiritual family of the end of the 19th century decadents (Vladimir Streinu). At the same time, the novel reading code of the period was reflected into the idea of measuring the epic factor of *The Old Court Libertines*, a process which ended up with a listing of the vices of the narrative constructions, under the pressure of realistic narratives, in spite of the obvious acquaintance of the critics with the evolution of the genre in Western literature (Mihail Sebastian). By refusing him the status of novel writer, the critical discourse will progressively go to the oxymoronic status of lyrical novelist, following the specific musicality of Mateiu I. Caragiale's writing.

The memorial discourse, based on a poetics of re-reading and promoting the works Mateiu I. Caragiale for new categories of the public, eludes the contextual aspect of its production, projecting it in an area of essences (N. Steinhardt) or discovering the coordinates of

the writer's stylistics (Oscar Lemnaru, Paul Lăzărescu). After the edition of 1957 and the reopening of the problem of the aesthetic classification of the narrative, as well as of the completion of the writer's portrait in 1966, the mechanisms to use the works by critical narratives have become more refined, turning into comprehensive visions by the exhaustive vocation of monographies.

The apparition of more ample studies, starting with the 1970s allowed the analysis of the background of the critical discourse, from the readings generating intertexts to theoretical studies determining the hermeneutic gestures, in **the third chapter**. The traces of associative readings that sometimes fracture the dogmatic heroism of the reflexive reading can be manifestations of discursive marks of the *blindness-insight* dynamics theorised by Paul de Man, often by reconstructing the argumentation in the figurative level.

The first ample study, belonging to Teodor Vârgolici in 1964, aims at ordering the compartments of the work, at quantifying the influences and the originality for the readers and at identifying the author's sources and intentions, avoiding hermeneutic drilling or the ambiguities of the writer's portrait. Assuming the influence of phenomenology, of genetic structuralism and psychoanalysis, Ovidiu Cotruș lays at the basis of the big monography of 1977 the hermeneutic dialogue which implies answers to the difficulties posed by the work and letting yourself carried away by the fictitious memoire nature of the texts of Mateiu Caragiale. This nature is not one given of the text, but it represents the reading hypothesis, the anticipating vision which is at the basis of the identification the writer's personal mythology. The image of the critical blockage with the closing of the hermeneutic circle, surprised by Ovidiu Cotruș is associated to the meeting of the organic nature of the work undermined by inconsistencies, excesses or information gaps and ends up being defined later euphemistically as a poetics of mystery. Here, in this type of camouflage, in this ambiguity or constitution gap, as W. Iser would call it, the critics validate their admiration, detracting or just explanatory narratives and inevitably reach the compulsive need to fill this absence with some coherence, with some sense.

The streaks feeding Matei Călinescu's subscription to the style of Mateiu I. Caragiale are, in addition to the subversive need of the '50s, personal history, the poem-like style of the Mateiesque narrative meeting the refined, fine sense of hearing of the music aficionado critic, and also the ambivalence of the writer to his own culture. The critical discourse becomes self-reflexive because of its placement within the re-reading theory, claiming at the same time the

modesty of a solipsist interpretative itinerary, with frequent extended paratextual and intertextual searches. The admiring view of the reader, laid in a compensating gesture in relation to the narrative insufficiencies of *The Libertines* ..., uses an alephic magnifying glass in order to immerse itself into an intertextual scale which ensures the openings necessary to the micro-narratives comprised by the cult-novel. His spiritual “twin”, Ion Vianu will invite the Mateiesque spectre onto an imaginary psychoanalytical sofa in order to make sense of the existential data which was the basis for his fiction. The argumentation is built simultaneously on two levels, the narrative level – based on an erotic plot centred on the writer’s father – and the psychiatric level, subject to terminological precision, in its turn discussed in the stylistic terms of a psychoanalytical interpretation.

Ion Vianu also investigates the mechanism of nostalgic regression accompanying the complimentary reception of the works, visible in repressive periods, as well as the extreme aesthetics consumed as a form of mental resistance during the communist period.

If the critics writing monographies generally set off from the objective of totality obtained by functional methodologies within the interpretation community, Vasile Lovinescu’s approach seems to break the boundaries of literary hermeneutics in order to see his vast esoteric culture confirmed. His study of 1981 revealed the author’s conformation to an extra-literary stake, seeking to sketch the alchemical portrait of Mateiu I. Caragiale by displaying its components into the alchemist’s oven that his work is. The esoteric narrative implies the confrontation between the instance owning the initiation and another instance with an ambiguous status, going from the aspiring alchemist to failed alchemist, Mason knight and eventually mute holder of secrets. Vasile Lovinescu is interested in the Mateiesque soteriology, not in the epic construction or the corresponding stylistics, and that is why the extensive cultivation of the analogic reasoning – which has directed him towards Hinduism, Greek mythology, masonry, and iconography – has led to a limited and tendentious reception of his study.

The so called poetics of mystery, fully fed by all exegetic directions, finds in Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu an analyst in Leo Spitzer’s line, seeking the spiritual etymon in the plain level and in the opaque, as brands of Mateiu I. Caragiale’s writing. The use of Leo Spitzer’s method – who had aimed at analysing stylistic deviation as a symptom to be analysed in relation to some mental constructs, the era’s spiritual, etc. – is associated with a figurative argumentation where the cryptic and the mystifying natures of this writing coexist. The author reaches, just as Ovidiu

Cotruş, a barrier of inconsistency hidden by this mystery, of the lacks which cannot be assumed by the critical discourse and which lead to an accumulation of flaws with the analysed author. Nicolae Manolescu also places the mystery in the domain of the horizontal, associating the paradigm of symbolist, decadent narrative with the Corinthian type of novel, a creation of his own critical narrative.

On the other hand, the Mateiesque figure is to be found in the critics' temptation to subject it to a sometimes forced immersion into various taxonomies, this temptation being the more obvious the more the author had refused to join in his time various literary trends and groups, and the hybrid nature of the work continues to refuse a definite classification. The narrative dimension of the critical discourse was analysed **in the fourth chapter** from the point of view of two directions. The first is the direction of the introduction of the works of Mateiu Caragiale into the epical structures of the literary history as identified by David Perkins, by associating the work with the figurative taxonomy it uses, as uncovered by J. Hillis Miller or L. Bessermann. In this case, the preference for inclusive tropes, as well as the Balkanism and decadence of the work, with a larger articulation from a chronological and theoretical point of view, was justified either from the visually decadent intertextual point of view (Angelo Mitchievivi), from the point of view of the aesthetic Balkan redemption (Mircea Muthu) or by the thematic dimensioning of the comparative approach (Iulian Boldea). We have recomposed the entire mechanism of detective investigations, which followed either a symbolism of the detail (Ion Vartic), or its introduction into the deductive machine (Cosmin Ciotloş).

One form of the reception of Mateiu Caragiale's work, which was not given its due attention, is represented by the hypertextual practices based, in Gérard Genette's view, on two great procedures: imitation and transformation. **In the fifth chapter** we have analysed derived forms – pastiche, transposition, re-writing, and continuation – as resuscitations of the Mateiesque idiolect with various stakes. We have asked whether imitators defend their own creative project or the one of the emulated author, whether the admiring burst, the obsession of being complete or the one of promoting their own stylistic abilities are the factors the texts of Ion Barbu, Radu Albala, Eugen Bălan, Alexandru George, and Dan Stanca are base on. We have approached the relation between the hypo-text (*The Old Court Libertines*, *Under the Seal of Mystery*) and hypertext (the epistolary pastiche, the continuations of *Under the Seal of Mystery*, the re-writing of the novel) both from the grid offered by Gérard Genette in *Palimpsests*, and from the

suggestions offered by Pierre Bayard regarding failed work, the problematisation of the concept of style by Antoine Compagnon or from other studies centred on the poetics of re-writing and parody. However, the coordinating principle has been the dialogue reading of the texts, following the constants of the creative projects of the analysed authors, assuming the unpredictable drift Paul Cornea laid at the basis of these projects. We have ascertained that we could get a glimpse in this way at the novel relation between the stereotypical nature necessary to any writing, the stylistic saturation and even the vulgarisation of the Mateiesque textual mechanism into hypertexts, as well as the ambivalent stakes of heritage.

Sharing the Mateiesque idiolect, Radu Albala borrows, sometimes to exaggeration, the superfluity of likeness which leads eventually to the need of a purge by an inevitable anxiety of influence. Between imitation and transformation, the border becomes fluid by the insertion of the stage props of Albala's stories into the Mateiesque décor or by spicing them with quotations, mottos and lexical preferences of the admired author. On the other hand, under the pretence of a continuation of *Under the Seal of Mystery* Eugen Bălan executes a transposition in which the stylistic infidelity is combined with the augmentation of the diegetic universe of Mateiu I. Caragiale, offering coherence and motivation to the story about the disappearance of Gogu Nicolau, bringing back into play marks of the idiolect of the only novel ever published by the author. For Alexandru George the quality of the short stories to execute a niche into the structural conformism of the author, thus revealing surprising narrative fantasy is certified by the moment when the 1998 debut is re-edited, but also by the remedial exercise of the following year when the writer's narrative insufficiency is substituted. Thus, the stake of continuation is double; on the one hand the exhibition of the Mateiesque ingenuity and shortcomings, and on the other hand the polemics with the literary criticism unfavourable to Al. George (with the Iliad told in the confessions) and hostile to Mateiu I. Caragiale.

Assuming the status of author-interpreter, Dan Stanca sees the world of Mateiu I. Caragiale from two directions: following Lovinescu, as a description with a transmutation function and as a chance to capitalize on a success at the level of the interpretation community, by contamination with the fetish- writing. The author lends the narration in *The Libertines and the Dead* the voice of a damned prophet who, marked by recurrences and religious symbolism, regresses to the birth moment of the mythical figures of the knights, imagining then the stages of implacable degradation, then going through the fictionalising process of Mateiu I. Caragiale

(taken over as allusion, pastiche, metatext), in order to eventually contextualize it in his own novel in the formula of a hieroglyph with uncertain descriptor. But, under the pretext of handling the esoteric level of the works of Mateiu I. Caragiale, Dan Stance ends up in scholastically decrypting him, abundantly copying him and fracturing the mystery keeping him strong.

But may the most exciting case, which we discuss in **the sixth chapter**, is the case of Ion Iovan's polygraphy, who relates to the existential universe of Mateiu I. Caragiale in a textual form which exceeds the autobiographical essay going through the apocryphal journal and eventually bio-fiction. In the absence of visceral affinities, like with Ion Barbu, which could fuel the experimentalist poet and novelist, interested in the undermining of the narrative, to assume the fictional mask of a retrograde, nostalgic writer? We have set off to identify the articulations of the narrative labour to the intersection of the objectives expressed in interviews, narrative strategies and the thematic territories explored in his novels and, especially, we have insisted on the narrative process, right under the reader's eyes, directed upon the factual or fictitious elements chosen from the stingy Mateiesque domain. We have discovered that the writer's meeting with the spirit of Mateiu I. Caragiale represented the offer of a rounding of his own creative project, outlined in his previous writings by an opposing approach of the novelistic and a permanent oscillation between consolidation and playful deconstruction of the fictional edifices. Using a technique of juxtapositioning or agglutination, Iovan allows stylistic registers to co-exist, making analogies accessible to the competent reader, passing from argumentative to the narrative right under their eyes. In biographical fiction, chronology is abandoned to the flow of the novel, interrupted by keywords, dates or bolded interrogations in order to maintain a helping net for the reader. Self-reference – under the umbrella of the apocryphal journal – goes from the connection of details in the sense of the leitmotifs circularity and frequency on the level of the novel vision, past the fragmentary nature specific to journal writing. The imperative of humanising the Mateiesque face, kept for so long under the mask of impenetrability by those who had perceived him on the parallel sidewalk, meets the temptation of playfulness, just as the reception of the work has been marked by the obsessions of remedy, compensation, decrypting the mystery or just placing it into some aesthetic paradigms or modelling influences.

The critical narratives have played their theoretical stakes in this tale of reception, placing their analytical and persuasive tools into a heroic hermeneutic attempt which unveiled

their vulnerabilities, excesses, anchoring into other creative stories, the pieces of the Mateiesque scores compliantly reintegrated into re-fictionalisations.