
Critical Approaches to Caragiale’s Writings: From the Pressure of the Totalitarian Ideology to Postmodern Re-configurations

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Abstract

During the Romanian totalitarian age, Caragiale’s writings were read through the doctrinaire pattern subjected to the political ideology of the Communist Party which deeply de-formed the politics-aesthetics relationship, favouring the former. Nevertheless, in the contemporary literary critique, Caragiale’s “Momente și schițe” (Moments and Sketches) as well as his comedies are revised by taking into account their ‘classical’ interpretation, enhancing the new canonical status of Caragiale’s work. Obviously, Liviu Papadima’s critical approach is different from Mihail Novicov’s ideological analysis, the former focusing on the dominance of the aesthetic criterion. Irrespective of the critical approach and of the reading pattern applied, the fact remains that Caragiale’s literary discourse is ever more appealing to contemporary readership.

Keywords: ideology, totalitarian doctrine, literary canon, critical discourse

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1. Introduction: On Ion Luca Caragiale and his literary work

The Romanian writer Ion Luca Caragiale began his literary activity as a publicist. His work includes pamphlets, chronicles, poems, sketches and ‘momente’ (a type of text similar to sketches in which the writer presents glimpses of the daily realities in the lives of various social categories and human types), comedies, short stories, articles, most of them in the form of editorials. Caragiale’s publicistic activity continuously intermingled with the literary one being carried out until the end of his life. Irrespective of the newspaper he wrote for and of its political orientation, Caragiale published his articles constantly. As a result, he became a well known and highly appreciated writer of his time being later integrated in the category of classical writers.

Among Caragiale’s most representative literary works mention can be made of the comedies “O scrisoare pierdută” (A Lost Letter), “O noapte furtunoasă” (A Stormy Night), “Conu Leonida față cu reacțiunea” (Conu Leonida facing the Reaction) and of the sketches “Vizită …!” (Visit …!), “Bubico” (Bubico), “D-l Goe” (Mr. Goe) in which the author satirizes the manners of his contemporary bourgeois society using, most often, a rather bitter humour. The writer envisages representative members of his society such as politicians, land owners and officials insisting on the way in which they handle various situations in their lives. By doing this, Caragiale comically highlights a series of elements specific to the Romanian identity profile and revitalizes them by an ironic–parodic approach. Mitică, the leit motif character who can be found in many of Caragiale’s works, is the embodiment of all the aspects criticisable in the Romanian society, namely falsity, lies, adultery, greediness, superficiality, ‘forms without essence’ (contrast between appearance and essence or between what one wants to be and what he/she really is). The so-called miticism\(^a\) has become a phenomenon which reminds us of Caragiale and it is often mentioned in the current critical works. In addition to the theatre, Caragiale’s publicistic activity is one of the components which ensured the author’s validity throughout the centuries. Depending on the historical period and considering the transition from communism to postmodernism, the critical discourse on I. L. Caragiale’s work has crossed ideologies and doctrines which validate the practices and literary canons of each age.

2. Literature and censorship in the Romanian cultural space

Censorship existed in the Romanian space during the totalitarian period, but this censorship did not manifest itself in the same way during the communist dictatorship. Publishing was rather difficult before 1977 and the selection of literary works was made rigorously by the political factors. Although Ceauşescu abolished censorship after 1977, at least theoretically, the political factors continued to exist and to manifest themselves in new and more elaborated ways, experiencing various changes: “Similar to all totalitarian regimes, nothing could be normal in the communist Romania, especially in a domain such as that of literature, which could and had to serve the party propaganda. Consequently, after a long period of time in which, according to the Russian councillors’ indications, only a propagandistic literature (realist-socialist) could circulate and the old literature of the bourgeoisie was purified of all the elements not corresponding to the communist ideals, the controlled freedom between 1964 and 1971 favoured a recuperative jump based on reestablishing connections with the interbelic literature” [1] (our translation).

The proletarist critical discourse could be negatively oriented, including destructive texts which were directed towards the bourgeoisie and those resembling it at those times, as well as towards the less well-known writers previous to the communist regime and towards their power to demonize the bourgeois culture as a whole. At the same time, this type of discourse could be positively oriented, having a false constructive role in promoting the writers who returned to, were integrated in or created by the communism, and in this way the communist doctrine of its unique party.

\(^a\)Miticism is a generic term that refers to Mitică type characters.
2.1 Proletcultist readings of I. L Caragiale’s work

Many writers and journalists wrote articles in the newspapers of the time on the occasion of Caragiale’s centenary and local authorities and schools organised various events in the memory of the author. A case in point is Mihail Novicov’s article “Caragiale al nostru” (Our Caragiale) published in “Scânteia Tineretului” (Youth Spark) on the 16th of January 1952 in which he refers to Caragiale’s life and work, as well as to “the workers’ great love for the unyielding accuser of the burgeois society” [2] (our translation). The author considers Caragiale’s work to be a treasure of our country, a weapon usable in fighting for the socialism and in removing everything that is old and harmful. Thus, altering the literary specificity and the aesthetic impact of Caragiale’s texts, the proletcultist critic starts his demonstration by stating that Caragiale lived in a period in which the leaders of political parties acquired power and richness by oppressing the people, while the author identified himself with the people’s struggles and aspirations. Moreover, Novicov considers that the attempts of those who wanted to prove that Caragiale had no political and social targets were a complete failure since these individuals could not explain the creation and existence of characters such as: Tipătescu, Trahanache, junpăn Dumitrache, or Costachel Gudurău. In much the same way, they could not account for his political article published in “1907 - Din primăvară până’n toamnă” (From spring till autumn) in which Caragiale takes a firm stand against those who had organised the bloody repression after the 1907 peasants’ uprising.

Caragiale’s compassion for and affection towards the people and their suffering is illustrated by “the passion with which the author satirized, on behalf of the oppressed, the burgeois and the landowners, the liberals and the conservatives, all these patronized by the ‘great humbug’, i.e. the king” [3] (our translation).

Supporting all the statements above Novicov draws a first conclusion: “It is a fact that such a writer could not be either a reactionary or a stranger to his people, and his work could not lack precise political and social aims. Caragiale fully lived the political and social struggles of his time and he did not keep a distance from them” [4] (our translation).

At this point, mention should be made that, insisting on the implicit component of the class struggle against the burgeoisie and the landlords traceable in Caragiale’s drama writings, the critical discourse, conditioned by the communist ideology, greatly modifies the real dimension of his creation. This explains why Novicov’s article insists on demonstrating how Caragiale succeeded in exposing the demagogues and the corrupt politicians who oppressed and deprived the people of their goods, freedom and democracy while writing about ordinary people and their daily struggles sympathetically. Consequently, the fact cannot be ignored that “Caragiale was always characterised by strong love and patriotism for the people ... Instead of the sarcasm, contempt and hate shaped in the form of a bitter satyre, we identify a serious and sympathetic tone in describing his heroes” [5] (our translation).

Novicov concludes his article by highlighting his great patriotic pride which is due to the fact that the reading of the great Caragiale in the framework of the socialist realism turns him into an ordinary Romanian who deserves all the love and appreciation of the communists. Obviously, Novicov uses Caragiale as a tool for communist political propaganda and tries to revive him in order to integrate him in the new proletcultist canon. Stabilizing the canon by means of a great classic writer and transferring his authority to the a canon which had to be adapted to the new ethnic-national and ideologic-communist values implies a series of stages. Under the circumstances, I. L Caragiale has to be rehabilitated as part of a new cultural patrimony by using ideological arguments such as the writer’s preference for satyre in describing the burgeois society. Caragiale may prove extremely useful in fighting the old by identifying him with the struggle of the people.

Using literary texts, Novicov refers to the comedy “O scrisoare pierdută” (A Lost Letter) with the aim of highlighting the moral corruption of the burgeoisie. He insists on the idea that I. L. Caragiale identifies himself with the struggle of the people and that his love for the people is the source of his literary and publicistic writings. Moreover, that fact is mentioned that Caragiale’s publicistic work brings to the fore his non adhererence to any political party, his constant/regular contact with the labour movement and his antidynastic attitude.
Contrary to Novicov’s opinion, Caragiale is deeply rooted in his time and he equally criticises all social behaviours. He is by no means some sort of communist, as Novicov tries to demonstrate.

On the occasion of the same Caragiale centenary, Silvian Iosifescu publishes the article “Sensul satiricii lui Caragiale” (The Meaning of Caragiale’s Satyre) in which he tries to demonstrate that Caragiale was not a pure comic writer, but a socially-oriented one.

Considering that Maiorescu’s ideas presented in his article “Comediiile d-lui I.L. Caragiale” (Mr. I. L. Caragiale’s Comedies) lay the basis for altering the message of Caragiale’s work, Silvian Iosifescu states: “In those few sentences which he dedicated to Caragiale’s comedies, the leader of Junimea stated that these comedies ‘have nothing to do with the party’s politics’ and the comic notes of these works were described as being ‘a tint of occidental civilisation’ hastily imprinted to the lower social classes. Thus, according to Maiorescu, Caragiale’s comedy originated in the unimist concept of the forms without essence” [6] (our translation). Iosifescu considered that Caragiale’s message was different and envisaged exposing the real activity of the two political parties, i.e. the liberal and the conservative one. “Moftul român” (The Romanian fad) edited by Caragiale seems to have been his political and social tool by means of which the contrast between appearance and essence was made explicit. This aspect is considered characteristic of the burgeoisie by the proletcultist critic Iosifescu. I. L Caragiale exposes this falsity in much the same way in which communists exposed the enemies of the regime. Implicitely and subversively, Caragiale creates himself an image of avant la lettre communist writer and his texts prove the fact that literature can be an efficient political weapon: “Every little stone in the monumental satyr construction which Caragiale built in over 40 years aims at achieving the same purpose. The great plays, similarly to the sketches, stories or parodies reveal, in various ways, the fundamental contrast of the world they depict, and satyrize the opposition between the reality and the masque of the burgeois society, between what this society really was and what it pretended to be” [7] (our translation). All Iosifescu’s statements were based on examples from Caragiale’s play “O scrisoare pierdută” (A Lost Letter) in order to highlight the bad habits of the society. This explains the proletcultist re-readings of the play with special focus on electoral tricks, the demagogic political discourse, adultery, servilism, high-life style, etc.

Iosifescu’s conclusion is that Caragiale’s writing skills are highlighted by the variety and complexity of comic means and forms used to support the communist ideology. In Iosifescu’s opinion, Caragiala was a good example for the new generations of writers humbly serving the communist ideology: “He is an example for our writers aiming at a necessary development of the satyric literature” [8] (our translation).

3. Contemporary re-readings of Caragiale’s writings

Starting from Caragiale’s representation in the press of the totalitarian period as a fierce critic of the burgeoisie and of the leaders who opressed the labour class and the peasants, Alex. Ştefănescu clearly points out the stylistic marks which support his despising attitude towards the rather badly represented communist movement “What precisely could be used from Caragiale’s work from the perspective of the communist party? He doesn’t write for anybody. He does not praise the labour class, nor does he greet, as a visionary, the red dawn. He only writes using irony and satyre” [9] (our translation).

Liviu Papadima, on the other hand, pays more attention to those details which support the classic structure of Caragiale’s writing insisting on the timelessness of his writings and on their new possible interpretations: “It is not Caragiale’s work that automatically leads us to excess, but its integration in time, its ever lasting validity. What draws the contemporary reader’s attention are the remains of anxieties and contradictions, of suppositions and doubts which were already historically present in the work of the prose and playwright” [10] (our translation).

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**Romanian critic representative of the second half of the 19th century, leader of the literary society and of the literary circle Junimea which envisaged supporting original literary and cultural values with a view to synchronize the Romanian cultural space with the occidental one while preserving national specificity.**
Moreover, in order to highlight Caragiale’s influence on the Romanian literature of the following periods, Liviu Papadima adds: “I doubt that he ever considered himself to be the initiator of a National Fund of Symbolic Investments, but, whether he wanted or not, that is exactly what he became” [11] (our translation). Caragiale’s harsh criticism of all social categories, except for the peasants, as well as of all state institutions and Romanian values makes it difficult for our contemporaries to decide whether he laughed heartily or sadly, joyfully or bitterly” [12] (our translation – adapted).

Most of Caragiale’s publicistic work originates in and is inspired by the fact that “the author laughed at all modern institutions – the parliament, the government, the political parties, the justice, the press, the theatre, a.s.o. He also mocked the priests, teachers, the big and small bourgeois, the clerks, the servants and even the peasants, a category which Caragiale normally described sympathetically. He ridiculised civility and civism, sociability, mutual help, patriotism, nationalism and regionalism, as well as the public and private opinion, the arts, science and rhetoric practice. He caricatured manhood, femininity, love, family, the juvenile impetus and even the childhood innocence” [13] (our translation).

Liviu Papadima analised Caragiale straightforwardly, both from the perspective of his work and life. He discovered the writer to be conservative, attracted by ordinary people and by his home land, a lover of art, talent and politics, as well as of minuteness and of the things well done. Caragiale’s interest in politics is visible in his journalistic work and in “Momente și schițe” (Moments and Sketches). After reading numerous interpretations of Caragiale’s work, Liviu Papadima called him “our contemporary who happened to live at the end of the Romanian 19th century” and who wrote “about his own land, an essentially allegorical one, giving clues of the human precariousness as such”. The conclusion Papadima draws is that “the period after 1989 favoured a series of literary overlaps between daily life and Caragiale’s writings so that daily events could be presented by means of texts marked by a-century-old journalistic features; it did not manage, however, to change the way in which ‘nenea luncu’ work was reciepted” [14] (our translation).

As regards Caragiale’s postmodernist reevaluation, Ştefan Cazimir stated: “Immediately after the 1989 Revolution we were said to no longer be under Caragiale’s sign. Some enthusiastic and premature essayistic attempts were even made on this statement. Caragiale soon took revenge, which was, as we know, overwhelming. His contemporariness reached unbelievable levels, the only notable competitor being, in time, the author of Țiganiadă. This explains the funny mentioning in the former C.P.U.N. of the statement: ‘Dear Sirs, let us stick to Caragiale and not fall for Budai-Deleanu’ ” [15] (our translation).

In Ştefan Cazimir’s opinion, Caragiale may be considered the spiritual leader of any popular movement who joined the people in the street condemning the careerists, the opportunists and the demagogues. This is due to the fact that the playwright supported, in his atypical and ironical way, the people’s dignity, honesty and seriousness. In order to make his statements credible and more pleasant to the readers, Cazimir provides an illustrative example: “In one of his sketches, he chooses a teacher to make the students the following recommendations ‘Leave the school in silence! Do not make foolish things while walking in the streets! Do not swear! Keep clean! Do not say too much bullshit!’, I consider the last recommendation to be valid nowadays and I suggest that we should adopt it as ou party slogan” [16] (our translation).

Last, but not least, referring to Caragiale’s contemporariness, Constantin Trandafir stated: “Caragiale’s contemporariness (and not only his) may be analysed according to various criteria, two of them being essential: on the one hand, the power of his work to illustrate the real life, and its validity in time, on the other” [17] (our translation). Moreover, “the power of Caragiale’s work to be valid nowadays is undoubtfult” [18] (our translation).

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\(^5\)Parodic epic text representative of the Romanian Iluminism written by Ion Budai-Deleanu, in which the literary parody component is supported by the ironic approach to a series of aspects concerning the social, political, religious and cultural life in the Romanian Principalities at the end of the 18th century.

\(^6\)C.P.U.N. - Consiliul Provizoriu de Uniune Națională (The Provisional Council for National Union) - a leading organisation of the Romanian state provisional between 9 February 1990 and 20 may 1990 up to the first elections after the 1989 Revolution.
The “Caragiale effect” in our lives refers to the fact that his characters are often mentioned in our discourse when we want to identify a person, to describe situations similar to those in Caragiale’s work, to quote him, when presenting an event, or approaching Caragiale’s world as a mark of our culture. Although the type of character described in Caragiale’s “Momente și schițe” (Moments and Sketches) is not fully representative for our ethnic and cultural realities, the fact can be stated that there is no clear separation between that type of man and the contemporary one” [19] (our translation).

4. Conclusions

Caragiale has constantly been a point of reference in critical works, journalist texts, schools, theatres and in the Romanian spirituality, irrespective of the social, cultural and political barriers which may have been encountered from the totalitarian period to our days. Moreover, his “Momente și schițe” (Moments and Sketches) and his comedies, have remained valid along the centuries due to their specificity and to the ever lasting truths traceable in the profoundly critical discourse of the writer.

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References