

The Comic in the Works of Gogol and Caragiale

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Abstract: *To consider theater only as literature is a long-standing point of view, but also to regard theater as a spectacle is a false position towards the art of the theater, of her essence and means of expression, the theater being a synthetic art, with a specific language, with their own autonomy. Why Gogol and Caragiale? It seems to me a natural attachment, I strongly believe that the two authors have changed, each in their own way, the gender literature of their countries, that they link a century full of social, political, effervescent phenomena, that the edifice of works is a fundamental one nationally, that they wrote with pathos, with almost fervor, about everything that needed to be addressed in everything around them. The study is a review of the main elements, strategies and models of dramatic construction in the comic work of the two.*

Key-words: *Caragiale; Gogol; comic; theatre; dramatic literature.*

1. Introduction

The great creators of literature, especially the dramatic literature, have always aspired to create an art as close to life as possible, to be its *clerks* and their work, *the huge mirror* in which the world could reflect itself and recognize itself as it is. The acting profession brings me closer to the dramatic literature, it allows me a vision and a way of analysis specific to the profession, but this does not mean that we will deal mainly with it, we must not place the equal sign between dramatic literature and theater. Is theater really literature? Caragiale asked himself the same question in an article published in 1897 and he came to the conclusion that “theater and literature are two very different arts both in intention and in the way they manifest”².

To consider theater only as literature is an old-fashioned point of view, but also to look at theater only as a spectacle is a false position towards the art of theater, its essence and means of expression, theater being a synthesis art, with a specific language, with its own autonomy. But it is true that, influenced by the profession, I would be tempted to only study plays, yet an actor’s repertoire is not limited to these, therefore the poetry, storytelling, sketch, short story, novel, which can be dramatized, are just as many sources of inspiration.

After almost 20 years of artistic activity, it is time for me to return to those behind, to the gifts received from my teachers and mentors, so that the teaching activity seems to me a natural extension of personal actions. Knowing the limits of my skill, understanding the complexity of linguistic phenomena, coming from the post-Soviet space, where the basic language was Russian, the literature was Russian, it all started and ended with the *Russianman of high consciousness*, I hope to make myself well understood. I used to think that the Russian language was much more complex, but since I have come and lived in Romania, I have realized that the Russian lexical fund is not necessarily wider, richer than the Romanian one, as I had thought until I discovered that most words were no longer used, because my vocabulary was impoverished due to the lack of readings. I have had revelations, rereading some Romanian literary works, being invaded by a lot of words and expressions

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² Caragiale I.L. 1965. “Is theater really literature?” [Oare teatrul este literatura?]. In *Epoch*, August 8, 1897. Reproduced after I.L. Caragiale, *Works [Opere]*, critical edition cited E.P.L., vol. IV, pp. 315 - 317.

that I did not know, which are still foreign to me, because they are not associated with anything in my familiar Slavic. This is how I have discovered the value of Romanian dramaturgy, especially that of Caragiale, which I did not completely understand before, I did not fully understand the nature of his comic, what makes him the most played Romanian comedy author.

2. The Comic in the Works of Gogol

The problem of the comic has been and still is tackled from many and various directions, being one of the most debated aesthetic issues and what authors could give me the opportunity to research a common theme, the comic vision of the world, to study their original version, to be able to read them without the intermediation of treacherous translations, meaningless and incomprehensible, if not the two titans of Romanian and Russian literature, Caragiale and Gogol? And I have the great advantage that, being born and raised in the family environment with the Romanian language, and in the social environment with the Russian language, I know, understand, speak both of them fluently. On the other hand, why necessarily Gogol and Caragiale? It seems to be a natural association, I strongly believe that the two authors have changed, each in his own way, the face of the genre literature in their countries, that a century full of social, political, effervescent phenomena connects them, that the edifice of their works is a fundamentally national one, that they wrote with pathos, almost fiercely, about everything that needed to be corrected in everything surrounding them. Gogol, a good connoisseur, draws his sap from the French satirical literature, from Molière and Rabelais, from Griboyedov, while Caragiale, having only Budai-Deleanu or Alecsandri at his disposal, draws inspiration mainly from Gogol, unfortunately without becoming his equal.

In the literatures of the two peoples, Russian and Romanian, the comic occupies an overwhelming space. The joy of living, self-irony and the critical spirit towards the vices of the society finds specific forms of expression, characteristic features that belong, first of all, to the attitude towards life of the ordinary man. Humor would not appear so frequently in literature if it did not go through the authentic folk element.

I will deal with the types of comic encountered, and I will try to discover the strategies and models of dramatic construction in Gogol and Caragiale, taking into account my limited reading of their work, placing all this huge creation in a regional and universal context. I will try not to lose sight of the ways of performing their works, to shed light, to bring a spotlight, at least to satisfy my personal pride, on the comedy actor, because I strongly believe that of all forms of theater, the most delicate, the hardest to achieve, but also the one that produces the greatest satisfactions, both for the actor and for the spectator, is the well-made comedy, not the entertainment, so easy and confusing.

“Madness will one day be the normal state of the human mind, and our planet will be a vast bedlam” - predicted Ion Luca Caragiale, who, self-exiled in Berlin, was living his convulsive loneliness. The loneliness of the genius was probably another reason why I have chosen the theme of the two titans of classical literature. Gogol and Caragiale were the first “laugh teachers”. The sad eternal comedies of these great classics have been, are and will remain current and of an indisputable literary-artistic quality. Gogol’s contemporaries felt that *The Inspector General* had surpassed Russian satirical dramaturgy and was the direct heir to the comedy of D. Fonvizin and A. Griboyedov. However, by the 1870s, it had become apparent that humor, the Gogolian comedy itself, had reached the climax to which the entire Russian national theater should focus. Seeing the shortcomings of Fonvizin and Griboyedov’s comedy, which in his opinion “poorly meet the stage conditions”, Gogol takes a decisive step towards changing the structure of the comedy, in which all actions and characters are

subordinated to the central subject. However, “no wheel should get rusty or idle,” Gogol wrote. The flexibility of the subject which unfolds under the influence of fear - “an inspector general is coming” - forces the characters to *turn around* deciding their facts, no scene, no appearance diverts from the whole. Gogol abandons the traditional intrigue, that of love; if the idea of comedy is to denounce public vices, well, the intrigue also must not be external to love, but it must result from real public relations.

Gogol’s innovation also becomes evident through the analysis and reconfiguration of the love intrigue, which according to the classical tradition was included in the essence of Fonvizin and Griboyedov’s comedy. In *The Inspector General*, love is mocked, the author reducing it to a few scenes where both daughter and mother are ready to become Khlestakov’s mistresses. In conclusion, the plot of Gogol’s comedies, the driving force behind the action, is mockery, so the love story is subordinated to social satire: the characters’ intentions are felt, insinuated from the very first appearance, and the absurdity of their behavior is accentuated by compressing the action times, the burning of the stages in establishing connections, the speed with which Khlestakov acts in order to *conquer*, at the same time, the daughter and the mother. We notice how the author combines the action with the comic. In *The Inspector General* we have two poles of the comic - the Mayor and Khlestakov, these characters containing all the energy of the comedy’s movement. Gogol’s *The Inspector General* created a new type of satirical comedy, in which the relinquishment of the love intrigue led to the creation of the *public* conflict which coincided with the social purpose - the revelation of the comedy of inter-human relations. Gogol’s innovation also consisted in attaching importance to the action development of the comedy, in equal measure, to the secondary characters.

The distinctive character of Gogol’s short stories consists of: the simplicity of the fiction, the popularity, the cruel reality of life, the originality and animation, the liveliness of the comic, always overcome by a deep sense of sadness and despair. The simplicity of fiction in true poetry is one of the surest signs of true poetry and additionally, of a mature talent ... The supreme truth of life in Gogol’s short stories is closely related to the simplicity of fiction. He does not grant favors to life, nor does he slander against her; he is happy to put into it all that is the most wonderful and humane, and at the same time he does not conceal its *ugliness* at all. In both cases, he remains faithful to life. Life is like a portrait in which everything is rendered down to the smallest detail, starting with the expression of the original and ending with the freckles on the face. Gogol’s originality consists in the fact that the frenzy of the comic is always overshadowed by a feeling of deep sadness. In this sense, the old Russian saying: “... started in health and ended in eternal rest” may be the motto of his novels.

Let us take, for example, *Diary of a Madman*, this gentle mockery of life and of the miserable man, this caricature in which a total poetic and philosophical darkness appears, this short story of mental illness, rendered in poetic form, amazing in depth and truth, worthy of Shakespeare’s hand: “You are still laughing at the fool, but your laughter is dissolved in bitterness, you laugh at the madman whose delirium amuses and incites compassion”³.

In *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*, the comic is full of joviality, the smile of a young man greets the wonderful world of God, everything is light, everything shines with joy and happiness, the dark spirits of life do not bother with heavy premonitions the young heart trembling with the joys of life. Here, the poet seems to admire his creations. But these are not exactly his invention; detached from life, the poet strongly believes in their existence. That is why each character speaks and acts by virtue of an inertia, his/her own routine, the character and the circumstances under whose influence he/she is. The poet is mathematical, faithful to reality to the last comma and often sketches comic features without pretending to amuse, submitting only to his instinct, his tactful sense of reality. The laughter of the crowd is

³ Belinsky *On the Russian Short Story and the Short Stories of Mr Gogol* [Din articole și scrisori despre povestirile rusești ale lui Gogol]. Retrieved April 3, 2020, from Gogol.lit-info.ru/gogol/vospominaniya/belinskij.htm.

offensive to him in such cases, it laughs where it would be appropriate to capture the thin border of reality, correctly observed, successfully captured. In his short stories, Gogol goes from cheerful comic, from humor, to satire, which contrasts with the ideal of life, with its reality. This amalgamated Gogolian comic can only amuse the mob and the children, whereas the people who have penetrated life in its essence look at his works with sad meditation. Due to these monstrous and often disfigured faces, they see other things, this dirty reality causes them to contemplate only the ideal reality, thus drawing a clear distinction between what is and what should be.

No other Russian writer has had a stranger fate than Gogol. No one was indifferent to his talent, he was either adored or hated, there was no middle ground. And there is a profound reason for this, which proves the vitality rather than the death of the Russian society: Gogol was the first to look boldly and directly at Russian reality, and if we add to this his penetrating humor, his infinite irony, it will be clear why he has not been understood for a long time and that the Russian society of that time would rather love than understand him.

Dead Souls is, again, a novel read by many people, but understood and accepted by very few. Gogol's works, in general, could please and delight only those who are able to penetrate the thought, idea and execution of artistic creation, those for whom it is not the subject, but the content that is important. Moreover, it takes more readings of the novel *Dead Souls*, even for enlightened minds, to penetrate this unique creation. The humor here is accessible only to deep and mature spirits, to those endowed with a special sense of humor.

3. The Comic in the Works of Caragiale

The comic also played a big role in Romanian culture, not only an entertainment role, but also an educational one and, last but not least, a political one. Almost all of Caragiale's work as a comedy author is based on comic. He was born in a rural area and grew up in a provincial slum, after which he moved, in adolescence, to Bucharest, a city where he blended in so perfectly that it gave him a certain artistic image both in the form of penetrating realistic observation and of fantasies placed in the most common environments. The author of *The Moments* is a man of the place in the sense that, to a large extent, his education and literary culture, has folk roots and was achieved through an act of intuition in the social complex context offered by the environment in which he was born and from which he did not stray too far during his existence. Caragiale is not only an artist whose work is presented in a predominantly comic coloring, but he is the first Romanian writer after Budai-Deleanu who vastly experiments on the resources of the comic, but managing to create a complex universe, in direct relation to the historical reality of his time. His range of humor is extremely wide, ranging from the simple joke, to moments of dark or absurd humor, from parody to the wide comedy of manners. Caragiale is a writer with a constructive and ingenious imagination, overcoming the simple intelligent amateurism that we discover in many authors of comic coloring. But we must emphasize the atmosphere of tension and gravity existing in his merriest sketches and which characterizes the psychology of most of Caragiale's characters.

In his sketches, short stories or plays we are not presented with a cheerful, calm and partying atmosphere in the midst of the pleasures of life, but one of nervous excitement, of tension; people are bored, or downright "mad", they always act in an excessively passionate way, there are serious conflicts between them. In the best of his comedies, *Only During A Carnival* (1885), we are dealing with a man who is capable to even assassinate, with a woman who tries to disfigure her unfaithful lover, with a desperate man who, betrayed in love enlisted voluntarily in the war for independence and who follows the first man in the act of revenge. *The prison* is the final perspective of many of the very determined actions of Caragiale's heroes, from Master Dumitrache to the over-excited Fănică Tipătescu and from Pampon to

Costăchel Gudurău. This play is one with an accentuated farce character, presenting a chain of burlesque situations, placed in a peripheral environment, with characters involved in love affairs which generate confusion.

In Caragiale's case, we are not only dealing with a wide display of the humorous register in all its variety, but also with its use for psychological probing, as a tool for exploring and revealing the world. I.L. Caragiale raises the level of Romanian dramaturgy not only by a broader coverage of reality, but also by deepening the observation, by the security of the value appreciation that leads him to satire and by the ability to capitalize on it artistically. The writer's literary technique combines, with originality, classic and realistic coordinates. Dramatic concentration, the economy of means, the separation of the comic from the tragic, make up the classic framework in which they find possibilities of affirmation, the realistic vision of the man and the deep historical meanings that form the actual content of his comedies.

A stormy night (1879) presents the usual comedy of situation achieved with procedures verified by a long tradition, on the old theme of the fooled husband and the small emotional troubles that fit quite naturally within the limits required by the classical rule of unities; the novelty starts from the great authenticity of the characters and the atmosphere, the still patriarchal stage of the relations between Master Dumitrache and his employees, the concern with the honorability of the family, the way of fulfilling the civic duties and the interest in politics, setting the action at that moment in the evolution of the petite bourgeoisie when the hurried process of modernization of the Romanian society catches it without the inner training necessary for understanding and consciously adhering to the proclaimed principles. The consequence is a mimetic tuning, pretense without substance, borrowed language, ideas as well; the comic is born here from the parodic disguise, aiming at a characteristic aspect of the epoch. From this very first comedy, Caragiale uses with great finesse the critique of the language, aiming not for the simple flaws, but for the gaps, the inner poverty, the form without content.

Caragiale's masterpiece is *A Lost Letter* (1884), a broad satire of the political mechanism and those who led the public life. With a traditional technique carried out perfectly, using the intervention of the props (in this case, a lost letter) to create a comic based on the old principle of the turn of events, the play exceeds, by far, through its thematic consistency and satirical scope, the usual productions. The struggle is not based on different political principles or methods of action, although they are always emphatically invoked, but it starts from group interests, oriented towards upstartism. This is the main target of Caragiale's satire. The seemingly political discussions between Zaharia Trahanache, Farfuridi and Brânzovenescu, prominent members of the same party, the negotiations with the oppositionist Cațavencu, the speeches in the assembly, refer only initially and tangentially to *principles*, they have no other purpose than to negotiate material or political advantages with immediate prospects for enrichment. Beyond the violent façade, there is the possible understanding and mutually beneficial compromise. Caragiale's laughter sanctions the dishonesty and servility of an ordinary policeman, he does not forgive the frivolity and ambition of Ma'am Joița, with an important role in entangling the political issues; but it becomes acid irony and sarcasm when it comes to the leaders of public life.

The serial presence of mediocrity, imposture, standardization of language, verbal and sentimental clichés, alteration of characters, easy to notice in all characters, indicate the extent of the corruption, the spirit of upstartism, the fact that the real culprit is not represented by isolated individuals, accidentally formed this way, but an entire social and political system which favored and promoted nullity, non-value, maintained the lie and relied on it. The inner emptiness, opportunism, deep selfishness, mercenary spirit characterize the representatives of the privileged classes and explain the understanding that unites them beyond any temporarily

disagreements; the coalition between the landed gentry and the bourgeoisie gradually took shape and Caragiale's penetrating view, discovering it under the deceptive appearances of secondary contradictions, chose it as the main target of his destructive satire.

The assessment, however accurate, of reality is interesting insofar as it becomes a successful and convincing artistic expression. The playwright's art also involves technical skill; with the great writers it reaches such a perfection that it is no longer visible, which is not a reason to forget about its existence. The perfect mastery of the craft allowed Caragiale to fully capitalize on the observation, to give great vitality to the characters, truth to the atmosphere and a strong outline to the disclosure. The reality that inspired him, the pseudo-democratic institutions, the appropriate political regime, the masking of the fundamental contradictions through non-essential confrontations within the oligarchy - all of these fit perfectly with the satirical view point Caragiale uses to present them, with the help of the action and the characters. All the characters have an unmistakable outline, although they are essentially similar. The characterization is done dynamically, through action and dialogue, with great nuance in language and behavior. The nonsense, verbal tic, stereotyping, unpredictable word associations, correspond to some inner data, which they make perceptible. The contradiction between appearance and essence is present and appears in different forms.

The author's emotional involvement is strong, and that exclamation against the privileged which is attributed to him: *I hate them, heh!* has its equivalent in the intensity of the accusation by means of satire. Caragiale knows well the tragic turn of events to which his comedy refers; not the voters, but the outcasts, the millions of oppressed without lands and wealth, those who, practically led by the politicians, underwent a drama that Caragiale would seriously record in 1907. Going deep into the knowledge of his time and his contemporaries, like all great writers, I. L. Caragiale included in his characters, in addition to everything that belongs to the time and place to which he linked them, a general human experience which he communicates with artistic brilliance and this has given his comedy the universality which explains its presence today in the repertoires of many theaters in the country and abroad.

4. Conclusions

Along with the end of the war, along with the approach of the *Great Neighbor, friend*, the Soviet Union, the writings of Stanislavsky are also translated, who would revolutionize by his *Method*, the interpretive art around the world, not just from our country. Thus, the foundations are laid for a new way of doing theater, new means of expression are born, the theater evolving towards reality, towards truth, approaching not the form, but the essence. Theater is now asked not to show life, but to represent it, because to show and to represent in art are two different, sometimes contradictory notions. Great Romanian actors, such as: Radu Beligan, Alexandru Giugaru, Grigore Vasiliu Birlic, then Toma Caragiu, Octavian Cotescu, Victor Rebengiuc, Dem Rădulescu and many others played memorable roles in *The Inspector General*, *The Marriage*, *A Lost Letter*, *Only During A Carnival*, *A Stormy Night*, and famous directors: Sică Alexandrescu, Liviu Ciulei, Lucian Pintilie, Radu Penciulescu, Tudor Mărăscu launched or consolidated their careers with these dreaded touchstones. But these, perhaps, will be tackled in another paper.

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