

The Role of Language in Building Characters in Caragiale's Comedies

Mirela Curcă¹

Abstract: The study aims to emphasize some critical opinions that observe and illustrate the power and talent of I.L. Caragiale to imagine a human character or a comic situation with the creative force of words. The characters are outlined in all the comedies from the first act, the dominant features of the heroes being highlighted in particular by language features. The study proposes an analysis of both the critical direction that considers the diversity of the Caragiale social typology to be classical, as well as the modern vision that the grotesque comic in Caragiale's plays relate to life in its entirety, the world of Cațavencu and Conu Leonida being a hopeless world.

Keywords: social typology; critical direction; realism; classicism

The study proposes a comparative analysis of the critical direction that considers the diversity of the Caragiale social typology to be classical and the modern view that the grotesque comic in Caragiale's plays relate to life in its entirety, the world of Cațavencu and Conu Leonida being a hopeless world, a society that mimes life itself.

A first direction sees Caragiale's work as a unitary image that reflects an era but also a complex system in which two tendencies face: realism and classicism. The two influences were identified by the tendency to present social types, through the constant interest for the human being, through the passion of balance, and especially through the "care" of became extinct from his own work. According to modern vision, Caragiale's comedies reveal the full meaning of the dramatic statement, which involves a nuanced relationship between comic and tragic. As elements of this meaning, "what is said" determines the comical dimension of its dramaturgy, the perspective and "what is not said" - but it is suggested - gives the tragic character.

¹ Director, „Edmond Nicolau” Highschool, Brăila, Address: Calea Călărășilor, no. 206, Brăila
Corresponding author: buzoianu_mirela@yahoo.com.

Characteristics of Caragiale's heroes are outlined in all comedies from the first act, the dominant features of the heroes being highlighted by the particularities of language. After consulting critical views on the means of constructing the characters, it is found that some critics accept the realistic-classical coordinate as a set of favorite ways of construction, for playwright, while others follow the absurd type with its specific means.

Contemporary Criticism recognizes the merits of Maiorescu and Gherea to establish the main terms of the art-reality relationship in Caragiale's work. Following this direction, Șerban Cioculescu defines Caragiale as a moralist, a writer concerned with man, with his character and his morals in what comes social relations. Cioculescu thinks that Caragiale's comedies capture a phenomenon of transition, namely raising the small bourgeoisie into political consciousness. He sees the universe of Caragiale's work in terms of social reality with which the great playwright is contemporaneous. Characters act in accordance with the principles, moral and social laws of the transition period in which they live. The power of Caragiale's art lies, however, in the fact that the characters he created seem to live exclusively through their language. Thus, just like the classical artists, Caragiale is interested only in the man who speaks, bringing in the forms of his expression the attestation of the social category, of the profession, of the part of the country where he comes from. "Listening to his characters he surprises the cliché, the commonplace, the agreed phraseology, and notes them with amusing and perhaps bitter satisfaction" (Constantinescu, 1974). Regarding the relation between reality and fiction, we find the idea that Caragiale, an objective writer, subjected to the outer world, strives to sketch it as a direct perception. So, Caragiale's vision of the universe is realistic, the model, the motivation of the plays being the Romanian society in a "moment of evolutionary crisis". Thus, Caragiale's heroes are the product of an era of expansion of wealthy vulgar-mouthed fellows, small bargaining and groups of lawyers and small officials who will invade the new society. The satirical observation of the playwright is aimed especially at the townspeople, including the vulgar-mouthed fellows, the little bourgeoisie and the demagogue intellectuals coming out of this part of the society. Pompiliu Constantinescu believes that Caragiale "is the humorous historian who presents the instincts of all these townspeople, whom he met in his everyday life, in political gatherings, in the cafeteria and in the brewery, where he expressed his opinions with a genial and funny candor" (Cazimir, 2007).

Constantinescu I. joins critics who report Caragiale's work to reality. His ideas, found in *Caragiale and the beginnings of the modern European theater*, talk about

the absurd reality of the Caragialean opera. The study of *The Absurd Derivation* in the above-mentioned book, opens, emphasizing that often the facts, gestures and replies of Caragiale's characters evade cause-effect relationships, the critic identifying in comedies elements that attach Caragiale to the absurd tradition: "false social selection, loss of values, lack of any constructive instinct, degradation of man by self-deception, alienation." (Ghițulescu, 2007) As Constantinescu explains, the playwright saw the absurdity of his world and "foretold" some of the elements of her future becoming: "the alienated man", the "unqualified man", the "automatic doll". Moreover, he has not once characterized his own vision using the very terms: "monstrous", "apocalyptic", "absurd". "The famous self-characterization," I feel enormous and I see monstrous, "is considered to be the most suggestive. Paul Zarifopol also writes:" These words are not only an occasional formula; they summarize a temperament and clarify an artistic formula (Iorgulescu, 1988).

Caragiale Universe, defined as a quasi-hallucinating world of human schemes, is, nevertheless, a true world in which the characters get a freedom that allows them to unleash.

In *Caragiale's Dimensions*, Iosifescu identifies some classical coordinates, including the economy of means and the concern to concentrate the character's peculiarities. The diversity of social typology completes and corrects the classicist nature. The process considered by Iosifescu as being proper to Caragiale, the verbal stereotyping formulas and the characteristic gesture - may seem to be an extension of the classical aesthetic vision with new means. The dominant features of the heroes are highlighted by the customization of language. In addition to a few gestures, Iosifescu considers that "formulas gain efficiency through the truth and expressivity of a phrase" (Iosifescu, 1972). The examples given by the critic are so familiar, "you have little patience", "eleven o'clock past," "don't shake me because I get dizzy." About the verbal gesture and the characteristic gesture, Iosifescu states that they do not only follow a character trait, but the profile of a character set in certain relationships and set into an era.

An important role in outlining the types, gives Iosifescu the scenic directions and the discretion of the description. However, Iosifescu notes the fine perception of the playwright, which also captures the detail of the decor, the gesture and the mimic connotation. The example given by the critic is the background of the third act of "*A Lost Letter*", where we can see written on the doors "civilian officer" or "archive".

For I. Constantinescu, the comic language represents one of the main methods of drawing Caragiale typology. In the field of language, he considers that “the character’s automatism is very obvious and, as a structure, resembles that of popular doll games” (Iosifescu, 1963). So, the vocabulary is an essential mechanism in the act of laughing. “A varied language, in which foolishness, neologisms, dialectal peculiarities abound, color and characterize the characters” (Manolescu, 2008). Constantinescu believes that the introduction of neologisms, the alternation between exotic and domestic sound, as well as the fake of words produce a comic effect that can no longer be categorized as a comic language. The critic exemplifies the repetition of the same phrases [in the case of Dandanache, Pristanda and Trahanache], the deformation of words and their meanings, instauration of noncommunication which illustrates the same technique of puppetry. Talking about the constructions of the characters, Constantinescu identifies some elements of the art of the clown. Obviously, this is the fact that the Turbulent Citizen and Dandanache relate past or present facts by miming them. While preserving the clown technique, explains the critic, Caragiale’s character is himself a show, playing language and situations, playing on himself. “The turbulent citizen is called a super-comic type, according to the critic, keeping something of the honesty and tradition of the traditional clown. His appearance on the stage is often undesirable, he is shaken, insulted, deceived, although he does not hasten, offend or deceive anyone. It is to be noticed that, although the citizen is always turbulent, his language is less incoherent than other characters, is the closest to the common sense of the traditional clown.” The traditional clown was a dissociated character: his madness was often a mask; beyond his burlesque and caricature, his humanity was intact and satirize, as a *raisonneur* character” (Mindra, 1971). The critic points out that the playwright type is simplified to the maximum, losing its double nature and preserving only the appearance of the buffoon, sometimes absurd that becomes its true nature. This “simplification” of the clown’s nature reaches unpredictable depths, indicating a abyss of mechanized human nature; the character becomes a mechanical doll, he is often possessed by language or some gestures that he sometimes does without any apparent logical reasoning.

For characters who want to integrate themselves into the social system, *the word* becomes the driving force that imposes them. Rica Venturiano, Nae Catavencu, Tache Farfuridi do not act as much as they talk. Hence, the abundance of styles: epistolary, journalistic, oratorical, etc. Losing its signification by using in ready-made stereotyped contexts, the word does not transmit, but mimes communication. Beyond the grammatical correctness of maintaining the rhythm of a message, the

articles do not mention anything: “*The Roman Democracy, or rather the target of the Romanian Democracy, is to persuade the citizens that no one should eat from our solemn debts our fundamental covenant, holy Constitution (A stormy night, I, IV)*).

This comic type with its super-type value brings Caragiale closer to the modern theater, which has often used it as a representative character.

Constantinescu is distinguished by his modern vision of criticism dedicated to Caragiale. Thus, Caragiale’s theater can no longer be classified as a low comedy. The comic symmetry, fundamental in the traditional theater, disappears at Caragiale, so there is no character to illustrate, in contrast to countless vicious, a virtue or another. The grotesque comic, other than the traditional farce, aims life in its entirety, the world of Cațavencu being a hopeless world. The author of *the Lost Letter* is considered by Constantinescu to be one of the precursors of the modern tragedy, and Caragiale’s character announces the character of the Ionian tragic low comedy, through his isolation and abnormality, through impossibility of communication. Constantinescu gives great importance to the dramatic event that determines the action, the destiny of the characters and leads to an outcome. “According to the modern vision, the Romanian playwright the event does not really happen, which seems to be an event, it’s just a rehearsing event. The absence of action itself and of the event is in accordance with the absence of man” (Papadima, 1999). Man’s absence in Caragiale’s theater would come from the “sleepiness of thought” and “the lack of thought”, from the total absence of opinion and the absurd collusion of ideas that indicate the interior of the character. Thus, Caragiale’s world appears as a quasi-hallucinating world, but no less true, a world of human schemes of unusual gravity.

From the same modern vision appears also B. Elvin’s observation of the Caragiale heroes. Elvin starts from Calinescu’s view: “Caragiale’s characters are minimal” (Papadima, 1996), claiming that the hero of Caragiale’s work is not complex but schematic. The arguments of this idea would be that the characters that embody a social and human phenomenon with a generalized value do not evolve, that the heroes have no physical portrait, the author preferring to show that beyond the individual peculiarities we find the same schematic soul structure. Significant in this respect is the fact that characters often bear a symbolic name or anonymous name, in which the stereotype of the characters, their lack of identity is read. In Elvin’s view, the new element comes from dramatic construction. Thus, separately examined, comedy techniques are traditional. And yet the particular correlation of these processes is, in a certain sense, close to that of contemporary theater. The critic

gives as an example the intrigue of *a Lost Letter* which, from the thickening of the effects, has a very modern meaning. The appearance of Agamita Dandanache in the logical scheme of the play already contains a mechanical element. In turn, this is nothing more than a puppet automatically set in motion. It is therefore noticed at the end of the play that the living, rational element gradually takes its place in a mechanical, inert principle.

Caragiale's characters were most often analyzed in terms of the types and characters that they outline. Liviu Papadima proposes another angle from which the gallery of the heroes can be seen, namely their consistency during the play. It has been rightly said that comedies lack the evolving characters, who will suffer inward transformations. Moreover, most of the heroes are eventually found after a temporary disorder, in the same situation as in the beginning. However, Papadima notes, "there is a difference in how characters react in different circumstances" (Vianu, 1998).

Trahanache and Catavencu are the heroes that can be categorized to the extremes: one imperturbable, seeming to be unable to move out of his "stereotypes", the other, adapting with an enormous ability to sudden changes of conjuncture. Under aesthetic aspect Caragiale's characters were judge because of their excess of schematization and the fact that many of them often use stereotypical formulas.

The critic points out that these rehearsals have a different characterization value in relation to the character, or often get varied meanings and denote distinct intentions according to context. Last but not least, they are one of the sources of Caragiale's comedy. Among the patented techniques of the comic, Papadima attaches great importance to the contrast between appearance and essence. At character level, it takes the form of discrepancy between claim and reality, what the protagonists think about themselves and how they are in fact.

In the chapter *The resources of the comic* the critic discusses the mechanisms of the comic, identifying the comic of characters or morality, the comic of situation and language as main types. Of all, the comic of character is related to the writer's tendencies towards individualization. Ridiculous are the distress, the discrepancies between claims and reality, total selflessness, stupidity, illiteracy, credulity, demagogy, mimetism, servility and cowardice. The critic notes, however, that the exploitation of these human weaknesses is not enough to achieve the comic effect. "They are not the way of realization, but its material" (Zarifopol, 1971). And the language comic holds a privileged place in the sense that replicas exchange contributes to typology sketching. The critic emphasizes the extraordinary ability of

the playwright to get comic effects in the way that most of his characters twist the language or use it improperly in communication. Caragiale's great boldness is to deform a language that had just been formed. Therefore, agramatism is the most striking feature of Caragiale's heroes. He often denotes the illiteracy, the status of upstart or stupidity, the narrowness of the horizon confronted with a language too difficult to be understood by the characters. All these are, according to the critic, subsumed in the comic portrayal of some phenomena specific to the transition epochs. By stopping to search for links of the work with fiction or reality, the current critique looks at Caragiale's world beyond history, because in this post-historical world any evolution has come to an end. Also, the innocence of this world is at the same time simulated and real, and the conscience of sin is absent because this entire world is sinning. Still talking about freedom of speech, one can see the equivalence between the right to speak and the right to chat which is, in fact, more a duty than a right, in this world everything that is not forbidden is obligatory. The noise produced by those who have opinions and options, and expresses them noisy in public, is considered the key to winning the carnival above truth and reality.

The "triumphal march" at the end of *The Lost Letter* seems to confirm the victory of fiction over reality.

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