

POLITICS AND LITERATURE

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Abstract. This paper focuses on two of Caragiale's comedies – *Conu' Leonida față cu reacțiunea* (*Mr. Leonida Faces with Reaction*) and *O scrisoare pierdută* (*A Lost Letter*) – as theatrical metafiction, which divulge the tragic-comical mechanisms through which the public show of political power perpetuates itself. The former is a utopian projection that perfectly illustrates the stereotypes the genre. The phantasmagoric social project, with an obvious subversive function, namely, of denouncing the imperfections of the present, Leonida's utopia engages great imaginative energies, clearly constructing an example of incongruence between historical and social reality. Its unnamed model, turned into an object to satire, seems to have been Plato's ideal republic. The latter comedy stages an electoral masquerade on which the democratic illusion nourishes. Blackmail and corruption – universal and atemporal political weapons – are the two infallible engines of the machinery that generates political power. The two great obsessions of Caragiale's theater, eroticism and politics, perfidiously interpenetrate, reveal each other's backstage, while the reduplication of the mechanisms from the provincial town to the Capital suggests possible and disturbing projection in repetition. Everything is performance, mere appearance, supported by perfidious visual and aural illusions. Electoral nonsensical discourses are pathetic monologues on the improvised stage of the electoral fair, while the strings are being pulled from the center, through the wire of the telegraph. Caragiale uses them as an occasion to dynamite language, to unveil the extreme conventionality of ossified theatrical forms. Through his theater of great modernity, Caragiale is a precursor of Eugen Ionescu, one of the first to observe the radicalism of his fictional universe.

False Treatise of Political Science: Leonida's Utopia

The problem of power and influences governing political life has always fascinated great writers. In Romania, the most compelling example is I.L. Caragiale (1852-1912), a “stunningly original nineteenth century playwright”, as Shakespeare scholar Ton Hoenselaars puts it (12). His works, bridging the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, point a ruthless mirror to the Romanian society of that time, especially to political struggles to attain and uphold the power. Two of his comic plays, which I intend to analyze here: *Conu' Leonida față cu reacțiunea* (*Mr. Leonida Faced with Reaction*, 1880) and *O scrisoare pierdută* (*A Lost Letter*, 1884) are specially designed as metafiction of political power, unveiling the way in which actors,

directors, scripts and sceneries operate on the fascinating stage of the real world. They both contain embryonic elements of the theatre of the absurd.

The one-act farce *Conu' Leonida față cu reacțiunea* is an intriguing theatrical creation, which builds on the principle of the utopia. Generally defined as an escapist experience, the utopia is a kind of scientific fiction applied to politics, a flight of the imagination, always subversive, always denouncing the degraded present. It consumes a great deal of imaginative energies thus being closely related with literary and theatrical fictions. Theorizing upon the two modalities of the social imaginary: ideology and utopia, Paul Ricoeur emphasized that the function of utopia is to project imagination outside the real, into an elsewhere which is also a nowhere, and to this spatial exteriority of the utopia we should also add a temporal exteriority. So, it is not only an out of space experience, but also an out of time one. The unity of the utopian phenomenon does not reside in its content, but in its function to put forward an alternative society.

The complexity of the genre convinced Caragiale to stage a utopian representation of the social and political aspirations of his age. *Conul Leonida față cu reacțiunea* is a theatrical experiment articulated on dreams and expectations for a better tomorrow. In his study Ion Luca Caragiale, Eric D. Tappe resumed its subject crystal-clear: "Leonida, a pensioner aged sixty, and his wife Efimița, are sitting in their room ready for bed. He is describing the excitement in Bucharest fourteen years before at the overthrow of Prince Cuza. The couple goes to bed, and he tells her what the benefits of a republic would be. Very soon after they have gone to sleep, shots and shouting are heard outside. Efimița wakes up and rouses Leonida. As the noise has ceased, he supposes that she has been dreaming; he calms her, and they go to bed again. Once more they are roused by the noise. Leonida says it cannot be a revolution, as the Liberals are in power; then, looking at his Liberal newspaper, he sees a warning against the forces of reaction. Scared by the danger he is in as a known republican, he and Efimița barricade the door against the supposed reactionaries. No sooner have they done so than knocking begins. As the shots and shouting fade away into the distance, they realize that the person knocking at the door is their own daily servant, Safta, come to light the fire early. When admitted, she explains that there has been an uproarious party nearby and that the noise was due to revelers going home." (Tappe 1974: 15)

The old couple is fantasizing about the miraculous transformations which might be brought about by possible changes into the structure of political power.

Their naïve expectations describe a compelling example of a social and political utopia. On the other hand, such ideas illustrate a very common ‘Romanian’ way of discussing politics, one of the prominent obsessions of Caragiale’s world. Leonida’s ideal world is a caricature of Plato’s *The Republic*, which makes him a caricatured philosopher. His ideal republic builds on a utopian episteme adapted to the needs of Caragiale’s age, or maybe to those of any transitional epoch. Following the method of his Greek predecessor, Leonida constructs a textual *Politeia* which is delivered to the public rather as a process, than as an already-made world, allowing the spectators to discover its foundation, its development and its unbelievable advantages. Efimița, the first eyewitness of Leonida’s utopian establishment, exclaims enchanted: “Well! The way you put it, one should stay and listen forever; you are one of the kind, my duckling”(the translations from Caragiale’s texts are mine, unless otherwise stated).

Enhanced by the authority of his favorite newspaper, Leonida creates a well-established ideal society, coherent to the utmost details with its utopian generating principle. His textual republic challenges the constructive powers of language, its ability to originate non-referential worlds. The ritual of daily conversation reveals its absurdity, through the nonsense imposed by language to life. To talk substitutes to think and the metamorphosis goes on, as to live becomes synonymous with to wait. Time passes by with great difficulty for the inactive couple, whilst the expected fabulous social change does not happen. They wait it, and praise it, but, at the same time, they are a little afraid of it. In the very first scene of the play, Leonida calls upon the overthrow of Prince Cuza, as the time of revolution and absolute freedom, including the liberty to let ones imagination run riot. His version of revolution turns out to be a real spectacle: “Leonida: I say: dress up quickly! Mițule, and let us go to the revolution. So, we dress up and hurriedly walk to the theatre...”

“To dress up” and “to go to the theatre” are deliberately equivocal expressions, so that political life is reflected by the histrionic world of theatrical representation, by means of the same mechanisms as later on, in *O scrisoare pierdută*. The most impressive part of the political spectacle is “the fury of the people”, and Leonida really fears it, hence anticipating his confrontation with the reaction. In Leonida’s version, the revolution is a kind of huge popular party: “Flags, music, whooping, havoc, hurly burly, big deal, and people, so many people that we’ve got dizzy”. So, he waits and hopes to witness again a revolution, this time accomplished by his fictional hero Galibardi, which would bring about the utopian

republic. The inventory of advantages in Leonida's republic is impressive: no more taxes, new privileges added to the old ones, and, of course, no obligations: "Efimița: ... so, what a big deal would this republic of yours be? / Leonida: ... well, you could gain some profit from it. (...) Then, just keep these in mind; let me tell you: first of all, in a republic no one pays taxes... I swear to God ... Secondly, each and every citizen is paid a good monthly salary, all in perfect equality. (...) You have my word on that... Me, for instance... (...) You can see it crystal-clear; that would be additional to the pension, which is my lawful right according to the old system; in a republic rights are indisputable; the republic is the warrant of all rights (...) and thirdly, a moratorium is proclaimed. Meaning that no one is permitted to pay his debts."

Who could possibly inhabit in such a wonderful out of time, out of space, and out of logic world? Leonida provides the answer: no one. Anyway, it would be lovely, so the spectacle must go on. Like a charismatic politician Leonida is staging the impossible, making his auditory happy. The spectators/readers easily recognize the zones of ambiguity and contradiction in his speech and the resulting textual orchestration which ensures that the text gives rise to divergent readings. Efimița, in some ways a rational mind, wonders where the money would come from in a state where no one pays taxes, but Leonida does not worry about such a trifle matter: the state is capable of solving all the possible problems of the citizens of his republic.

Karl Mannheim, in his book *Ideologie und Utopie* (1929), commented that, due to the incongruity of utopia to social and historic reality, this type of approach is not concerned with practical aspects. Utopian representations of reality disregard the ideological and institutional availability of a real system. They have no interest in giving applicable examples to support their arguments, as their true essence resides in their fictionality. Caragiale's Leonida fully illustrates this mentality.

The *Odyssey* of the utopist foundation needs a redoubtable hero, a super-human. Like Beckett's Godot, „Galibardi” is capable of virtually anything, however absurd or fantastic. He has almost nothing to do with the real Italian hero Garibaldi. What Leonida needs for his revolution is rather a god, as: “everybody worships him like a Christ”. He is the only one capable of changing the world miraculously: “Leonida: Well, give me another one like him, and till tomorrow evening – I don't need more time – I will make you a republic... (with regret) But there is no one like him!”. They cannot find the proper hero to make their life better, but they will be waiting for him until the end of their dull, miserable lives.

Although Leonida's favorite party is in power, the current system is still unbearable, and it could be enhanced throughout a revolution. Only his favorite newspaper *Aurora Democratică* (The Democratic Aurora) holds the answer to his dilemma: "It is not a revolution, it is the reaction". According to the political forces in power, the opposition is always defined as "reaction". The 'sacred' newspaper is the only element of stability in the ever changing world, the core of their *theatrum mundi*.

The situation of this original scenic couple was redesigned by Eugen Ionesco in two of his plays: *Les Chaises* (*The Chairs*) and *Délire à deux* (*Frenzy for Two or More*). Leonida's impossible republic is echoed by the inexistent "message" which is to be delivered to the world, in front of the empty chairs, and in both *Conul Leonida față cu reacțiunea* and *Délire à deux* the rational character is the woman, while the man is rather committed to absurdities and impossibilities.

Romanian Elections: A Lost Letter

The second astonishing metafiction of power is to be found in Caragiale's best known comedy: *O scrisoare pierdută*. Tappe remarked "the ingenuity of the plot, in which the transitions, the exits and entrances are very skillfully contrived. (...). Though there is not the perpetual motion of a farce, the action is lively and never flags"(1974: 30).

While Leonida envisioned his private utopia, the characters of this play are in charge with the public scenario meant to support the huge spectacle of electioneering. We are allowed to eye-witness the production of power behind the scene, to apprehend the mechanisms of getting hold of political power and carrying it on. The ultimate, infallible weapon of this confrontation is blackmail, since corrupted politicians always have something to hide from the public eye. At the beginning, it seems to be an isolated case, happened in a county town in the mountains. But finally, we learn that the winner imposed from Bucharest, who is a ridiculous mixture of the two local candidates, made use of exactly the same campaign stratagem.

And the ever growing spiral of corruption menaces to whirl incessantly in time and space. That is why, played in Japan, for instance, Caragiale's play was a success, and the spectators wondered how the Romanian playwright could possibly know the secrets of their own elections. Caragiale's universality was thus made

obvious. This way, the intracultural dimension of the play changes into a transcultural one, in the sense described by Patrice Pavis: “The transcultural transcends particular cultures and looks for a universal human condition (...) which supposedly unites all human beings beyond their ethnic differences and which can be directly transmitted to any audience without distinction of race, culture or class.”(1992: 20)

The theme of the compromising love letter becoming a political weapon was not new. Poe used it successfully in his *The Purloined Letter*. Up to a certain point, the motif functions in the same manner: an important document lost by an influential lady becomes the temporary source of power for a political opponent, but it is finally recuperated and the scandal is avoided. Caragiale, a great admirer of Poe’s techniques, chose to reduplicate the motif and let *Agamiță Dandanache* win the elections, using another love letter, in identical circumstances. The play ingeniously combines the two main obsessions of his fictional world: love and politics, into a complex algorithm, emphasizing their common irrational core. Once they enter into the hallucinating *Maelström* of erotic desires combined with political ambitions, Caragiale’s characters are losing their identity becoming vivid theatrical entities in full action, exhausting their inner energy up to self-denial and self-annihilation. The empty puppets are struggling to survive, and to save the social appearances, while the great puppeteer Caragiale is indulging us to see the wires. The politic fiction becomes self-reflective, unveiling its theatrical qualities. From this point on everything is possible.

Zoe Trahanache, the wife of the old chairman of the local electoral committee, lost her love letter from the young prefect of the county Ștefan Tipătescu. It was found by the Drunken Citizen, (an elector who wants to know one thing: how to cast his vote), and then stolen by Nae Cațavencu, the editor of a local newspaper belonging to the political party in opposition, who now blackmails Zaharia Trahanache: unless he gets a seat in Parliament, he intends to publish the compromising letter. The “full-blow love letter” bears all the marks of authenticity; Trahanache easily identifies the persons and circumstances mentioned in it: “Trahanache: I’ve read it ten times, maybe; I know it by heart! Just listen ‘My dear Zoe, The Honorable (that’s me) is going to the meeting this evening (that’s the meeting the night before last). I (that’s you) must stay at home, because I’m expecting dispatches from Bucharest, to which I must reply by return. Perhaps the Minister may even call me to the telegraph. So don’t expect me; you must come

(that's my wife, Zoe) to your ducky (that's you), who adores you as always, and sends you a thousand kisses. Fănică'"(Tappe 1974: 12).

Nevertheless, at the same time as he recognizes Tipătescu's handwriting, he still takes it for granted that the letter is an overdone forgery: "I understand forgery up to a point, but to such a point as this...it's beyond me. Look, Fănică, you should see the imitation of your handwriting! You'd say it was your own; you'd swear it, you would indeed!"(Ibidem)

It is the first climax of the comic situations and techniques. The public is laughing copiously of his apparently huge naivety, but finally, he who laughs last laughs longest, as his forgery theory proves to be right: Trahanache catches Cațavencu with a false receipt. So, the unuttered conclusion leads to the almost compulsory association between politics and forgery. Had the compromising love letter not existed, it would have been invented anyway. The political confrontation ingeniously intertwines with a different type of conflict, that of ethical values. The synchronic usage of different signifying stage systems reveals discrepancies which add details to the comic effects. Trahanache's words contradict his gestures and mimics: while the husband proclaims the obviously authentic document to be a forgery, in the same time the stage directions (which I consider an important part of the authorial speech) indicate that he "looks hard at Tipătescu, who is extremely agitated". Caragiale is thus multiplying the openings of the plot and encourages the spectator to read the text at one or another level: either he considers the husband as the classical naïve cuckolded, or he admits that Trahanache finds some revenge into the young man's agitation and turmoil. Too busy with the electoral process, he has no interest in discussing the adultery proved by the love letter, but his final replica: "Who could imagine the lengths that human viciousness would go to?" is intentionally equivocal, with double address to Cațavencu's dirty game, on the one hand, and to the imprudent lovers on the other.

In the company of his friends, Caragiale used to wonder loudly whether Trahanache knew or ignored the fact that Tipătescu was the lover of his wife. So it is obvious that the author used this ambiguity designedly, acknowledging that the polysemy of the stage image enriches the typology of the characters. Trahanache's non-verbal behavior has so great an influence on the spectator's understanding of the dramatic situation, to the detriment of his replica. The ambiguity of the situation is also enhanced by Dandanache's permanent confusion between Zoe's husband and

her lover. This way, behind the apparently homogeneous façade of the comic plot, the spectator deciphers the moral standards of the political milieu.

As a chairman of the local electoral committee, Trahanache wishes to conserve the equilibrium of power, so he needs the prefect's help both as a political ally and as an intimate friend who takes good care of his young wife, while he is away, busy with politics. For now, his main concern is to follow the orders from Bucharest and elect Dandanache unanimously. He has an image to preserve, especially now, when Farfuridi - the presumptive candidate of the government party - taxes the prefect with treachery, and Cațavencu blackmails him to publish the compromising love letter.

He is the main administrator of the great spectacle of the elections and has to deal with all the political actors, regardless of their ideologies, or personal ambitions. The electoral speeches in Act III are pure theatrical interpretations upon a stage, as by the end of Act II, the government party's candidate was already decided from Bucharest. Nevertheless, to sustain the illusion of a political combat, the two local candidates are placed in manifestly asymmetrical positions, defined both by their discourses and by their spatial functioning on the stage.

At the beginning of Act III, when the curtain is lifted up after the break, Farfuridi is by now standing at the tribune, and the subliminal message is that he represents the party which is already in power. Later on, the public witnesses Cațavencu's ascent to the tribune and the gesture is significant for his desire to get the power. By means of the same contrastive effects, the format of Farfuridi's speech, in spite of the numerous interruptions, is a long unique replica, meant to inspire the idea of political stability and continuity, while Cațavencu's discourse is fragmented into different replicas, to suggest a progressive series, and the idea of political change.

Farfuridi's speech is a perfect example of the way in which language itself can be destructed, deprived of its power to communicate. None of his sentences is semantically and grammatically correct; none of them is at least intelligible. Befuddled with his own words, he becomes totally incoherent in the end, while discussing the possible revision of the constitution. He epitomizes all his incongruities into a famous dilemma: "Allow me, choose one of the two: either it should be revised, I accept! But nothing should be changed; or it shouldn't be revised, I accept! But in that case some things should be changed here and there, namely the essential points... You cannot escape this dilemma. I said!"

Semantically speaking, it is the perfect example of tautology; politically, it is a pure illustration of emptiness, of lack of consistency.

Eugène Ionesco, one of the most sophisticated readers and translators of Caragiale's theatre, commented: "Understanding nothing about historical evolution, even the least fortunate of these worthy citizens still had a kind of ambition to understand something, but without success: Caragiale shows us this mental effort too, collapsing under the strain, in all its distressing glory"(1964: 140).

Cațavencu's demagogic rhetoric is not far from that of Farfuridi, and it also serves as an efficient self-undermining device, with humongous comic effects. He is betrayed by language when he tries to assert his legitimacy as a political candidate: "I want what is due to me after so long a fight. I want my deserts in this town of nitwits, where I am the first... of the political leaders."(Tappe 1974: 24) The perfidious rupture of the phrase proclaims him "the first of nitwits" in stead of "the first of the political leaders". Caragiale always uses language as a resourceful comic device of his theatrical representations, and Cațavencu seems one of his favorite creations. Some replicas of his electoral speech became usual citations illustrative for the poetics of the nonsense. One is his praise of industry: "Romanian industry is admirable, is sublime, one might say, but it is completely nonexistent. What, then, do we and our cooperative acclaim? We acclaim labor and toil, which are unknown in our country".(Tappe 1974: 26) Another one is that referring to commerce: "in Iassy we haven't a single Romanian merchant, not one! (...) And yet all the bankrupts are Jews! Explain that phenomenon, that mystery, if I may so express myself! (...) this way of things is intolerable! How long are we to have no bankrupts of our own? England has her bankrupts, France has her bankrupts, even Austria has her bankrupts; in short, every nation, every people, every country has its own bankrupts! We alone have no bankrupts of our own!"(Tappe 1974: 26-27) Romanian merchants are supposed to become bankrupts even before they started a business.

The comic effects are irresistible as all he acclaims are inexistent entities. His political message has been emptied of any kind of meaning, and the vacuity of the discourse accompanies his nullity as a potential political leader. The inextricable collage of theatrical signifying systems is orchestrated in such a way to illustrate a generalized nothingness. We acquire paradoxical schemas of thinking that enable us to deepen our knowledge of the artistic codifications at work here. We must observe with Eugène Ionesco that "what is depressing is that the ideas themselves, seen

through this intellectual fog, are degraded and lose all significance, so that in the end everything is compromised, both man and ideologies.”(Ionesco 1964: 139)

Like Farfuridi, Cațavencu is rather producing an anti-discourse. He is not speaking in order to say something, but in order to prove his implication and his sensitivity to the problems of the electors. It is his crying not his speaking that is punctuated by applause from his group of supporters. His unique target is to seduce his audience, not to indicate an ideological pattern. Political oratory implies a kind of hypnotic influence over the auditory who becomes fascinated not with what is said but with how is said. Like in the case of Conu' Leonida, Cațavencu stages his political utopia as a complex theatrical production, where movements, gestures and words are meant to impress.

But both Farfuridi and Cațavencu are overpowered by the candidate imposed from Bucharest. “I have made them both win”- Caragiale used to explain - “Agamiță Dandanache is more of a fool than Farfuridi and more of a cad than Cațavencu”. He has no political values or beliefs of any kind, yet he was “in every Parliament, with every party, as an impartial Romanian”. And he would never accept to be left aside from the political games of power: “it wouldn't have done for me not to be elected. I and my family, since '48... fight and fight... all the time... and to think that I should be left out in the cold just at present... without a constituency... very nearly not elected, old man” (Tappe 1974: 28). The unexpected introduction of Dandanache is definitively a coup de theater, and at the same time a reduplication of the political farce of the elections. Theatre's reflection on itself becomes really hallucinating.

Dandanache is the ideal elected for an elector like the Drunken Citizen, who has no political options of his own and asks everybody how to cast his vote. Their vices are their only qualifications and they are both dizzied: the Drunken Citizen, always tanked with wine and beer, is swaying amid hiccups, while Dandanache is not only chronically muddle-headed but also bemused by the fatigue and the jingle-bells which accompanied his journey. The theatre-goer, preoccupied with grasping their internal functioning, ends up by semiotizing their image, transforming it into a symbol of the incongruity of political behavior. Patrice Pavis explained this process of stage codification: “In theatre, stage and actor play on this ambiguity of the natural milieu and the artificial, constructed object. Everything tends to transform itself into a sign, to become semiotic. Even the natural utilization of the actor's body is inscribed in a mechanism of meaning, which claims from the reluctant flesh its share of artificiality and codification”(Pavis 1992: 10).

Dandanache's parallel success story is amazingly similar to the provincial intrigues of Cațavencu: "The central committee didn't want me and there you are. They said I was not outstanding. Fancy, me not outstanding! I was lucky; very lucky I was. Just listen to this. One evening somebody... I won't say who... a person of note... but a bachelor... comes and plays cards at my house... and when he goes away he leaves his overcoat behind. Next day, I try to put it on – thinking it's my own –and see that it's not mine. I look through all the pockets and find –what do you suppose? (...) A love letter to my bachelor from the wife of a friend... I won't say who... a person of note...."(Tappe 1974: 28) The usage of the document is also similar: "Find me a constituency, or I'll hand the letter to the papers." But, unlike Cațavencu, who intended to give the letter back after the elections, proving a rather myopic view of his political career and limiting his efforts for the present campaign, Dandanache is keeping the compromising document for the next campaign. It is his final lesson in the schooling of the provincials. Listening to his story, Zoe Trahanache instantaneously learns the dirty game of politics, so she is keeping the receipt forged by Cațavencu, just in case; especially now, when his apprenticeship in power moves forward. That is why everybody seems to pivot around her. She qualifies as a central character for both the erotic and the politic plots of the play. She could now savor the victory, as her former tormentor depends on her mercy. The triumph of entropy was only temporary. Finally, order is reinstated: power stays where it used to be, and however cynical it may look, it will stay there for a long, long time, as scoundrels got a strong hold up of it.

Eric Tappe remarked: "The striking thing about this comedy is its detachment. Our sympathy is not given to any character or set of characters, nor yet, despite their corruption, are we revolted by any. The prefect Tipătescu is hasty and violent; Zoe is heartless; and both are selfish. The amiable Trahanache is fatuously trusting. Cațavencu is a scoundrel, though his demagogic gifts fascinate us. The policeman Ghiță is dishonest and unprincipled. Dandanache is not only fatuous but a blackmailer. The Drunken Citizen is a complete sot. And the reconciliation of all these people in the finale is remarkably cynical. Yet as a whole the comedy is delightful and leaves no unpleasant taste behind"(1974: 30).

A much more radical reading of this play and of the entire theatrical universe of Caragiale is given by Eugène Ionesco, himself an important disciple of the Romanian author: "Caragiale is really a critic of all man and any society. What is

peculiarly his own is the exceptional virulence of his criticism. Indeed mankind, as it is presented to us by this author, does not seem to deserve to exist. His characters are samples of humanity so degraded that they leave us with no hope. A world in which all is base and ridiculous can only give rise to the purest and most pitiless comedy. Caragiale's chief originality is that all his characters are imbeciles"(Ionesco 1964: 139).

Who is right? Only the public could judge that. I believe with Ionesco that Caragiale is indeed "the greatest of the unknown dramatists", and his theatre should be present on all the prestigious stages of the world, which I hope it will soon happen.

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