



# Measuring Tragedy—and Drawing Its Borders

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**Abstract:** This article introduces the METRA project, in which 22 researchers coordinated by Franco Moretti will analyze the tragic form in a dozen European cultures, using literary geography, comparative poetics and various computational analyses. This special issue of *Transilvania* is a preliminary exploration of the project's theme, aimed at presenting the METRA methodology and discussing the generic, chronological and geographical limits of the tragic form.

**Keywords:** tragedy, the tragic, European literatures, network semantics, definition

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In an article published on June 24, 2016, a day after the validation of the Brexit vote, a journalist from *The Guardian* referred to the downfall of David Cameron as "a European tragedy."<sup>1</sup> Kettle's phrase was an intertextual allusion drawing on a widespread cultural perception. He was, of course, referring to Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy* (1925), but this title itself was appealing precisely because it seemed to contradict the common understanding of the tragedy as a "highly specific affair,"<sup>2</sup> i.e., a quintessential European construct. In fact, from Friedrich Nietzsche to Earl Miner (who opposed the Aristotelian poetics, based on drama—more specifically, on tragedy—to Asian theories, based on the lyric<sup>3</sup>) and beyond, the idea persisted that tragedy—and, even more, "the tragic" and its derivatives, the Dionysian and the Faustian—mark "a long tradition of European civilization."<sup>4</sup> According to Walter Benjamin, tragedy, with its unique capacity to combine horrific stories of murder and torture with some of the most beautiful language ever written, illustrates the inner contradiction of European history, for "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."<sup>5</sup>

Tragedy as European form. But which form? And which Europe? Bringing together a team of 23 researchers from Romania, Poland, and Norway, the METRA project (an acronym for *Measuring Tragedy: Geographical Diffusion, Comparative Morphology, and Computational Analysis of European Tragic Form*) sets out to answer these questions by combining cultural geography with comparative poetics and content analysis with network semantics. Specifically, we pursue the study of tragedy in two ancient cultures—Greek and Latin—and in ten modern European cultures, among which five—English, French, German, Spanish, and Italian, with openings toward the American one—belong to the core of the world literary system, and the other five—Norwegian, Swedish, Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian, with openings toward the Russian one—belong to its (semi)peripheries.

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1. Martin Kettle, "The Downfall of David Cameron: A European Tragedy," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/24/david-cameron-downfall-european-tragedy>, accessed on August 8, 2024.

2. Terry Eagleton, *Tragedy* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2020), 1.

3. Earl Miner, *Comparative Poetics. An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 8.

4. Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966), 15.

5. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt, Preface by Leon Wieseltier (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 258.

Regarding its theoretical underpinning, METRA relies on three main theses developed by Franco Moretti:

1. Tragedy is a symbolic form of radical conflict, specifically of civil war. As the theater only disposes of a small space and a handful of characters, civil war is inevitably transformed and is equated to *the war within the family*: early on, with the family as lineage, and later with the family as couple—with a long transition between the two lasting from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Ultimately, with the spread of the tragic form to (semi)peripheral European cultures, other communities of class, race, and gender are added to the family, as hypothesized by Andrei Terian. How this dominant role of the family/community shapes our perception of political conflict will be the main historical and interpretive task of the research.

2. Theories that see conflict as the central aspect of tragic form tend to point out how conflict manifests itself in language, thus interpreting tragic dialogue as the perfect embodiment of the form itself. Accepting this as its starting point, our project will show that the relationship between word and deed is far from linear, and results in a whole spectrum of dissonant constructions. In terms of literary theory, the project thus lays the foundations—via a corpus that includes thousands of texts and a methodology consisting of computational and hermeneutic approaches—of *a unified theory of style and plot*, which have so far been the objects of completely independent disciplines.

3. From an epistemological point of view, METRA will construct its argument by focusing not on “typical” tragedies, however they may be defined, but by *working with extreme cases*, often set in opposition to each other (*Antigone* by Sophocles and *Danton’s Death* by Georg Büchner, Racine and Shakespeare, etc.). Extreme cases are an indispensable tool of both interpretive and quantitative criticism: being one-dimensional, they are extremely clear, thus allowing us to think about the genre in terms of a field of forces, whereby different historical pressures give rise to a variety of morphological solutions.

Returning to our previous questions (“Which form?” and “Which Europe?”), METRA regards tragedy, on the one hand, as an essentially dramatic form, which can only be thought of within the performing arts. Of course, this does not entail that “the tragic” as existential category cannot exist outside theater; but not *as a form*. On the other hand, our project does not adhere to the Steinerian argument that tragedy “died” in the 18th century.<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, we believe that the birth and development of a “modern tragedy,” regardless of how we understand it, enabled the presence of this form not only in core European cultures, but also in certain (semi)peripheries, which underwent a belated development in relation to the former. However, we have not tried to impose this contention upon the contributors to this special issue. Our aim during this initial mapping was to mark the limits of tragedy not by blindly applying a predefined concept but by exploring more nuanced and intricate cases that could pose additional challenges and questions. Incidentally, this is the reason why, although most of the contributors are members of the METRA team, this issue also includes invited contributors who are not involved in the project.

Therefore, our special issue includes 9 contributions signed by 11 authors, covering a wide range of literary genres (theater, film, short story, novel, political and philosophical texts), periods (from Antiquity to the Russo-Ukrainian War), and cultures (Greek, English, French, German, American, Russian, Norwegian, etc., with a predictable focus on Romanian culture). The contributions address various aspects pertaining to the project and tragedy in general. Moretti’s article (“Network Semantics. A Beginning”) bridges the latter two of the three aforementioned theses with “network semantics,” a concept that he developed in the early 2010s and continued to refine ever since. As a possible result, by studying “extreme cases,” we can hope for “a possible conjunction of plot and style,” that is, “a synthesis literary theory so far never achieved”—and, through this, even “a small-scale model to study ... fundamental features of human societies.” Andrei Terian’s text has a theoretical scope as well, as it advances a new definition of tragedy, even if his examples focus primarily on Romanian literature, where this form has presumably never existed or was completely devoid of relevance. Arguing both

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6. See George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press), 1996.



against definitions that regard tragedy as a more radical rendition of drama, as well as against those that disregard its theatrical dimension and see in it only its philosophical core (“the tragic”), Terian argues, on the one hand, that tragedy as genre cannot be conceived outside of the dramatic form, and, on the other hand, that it is not the intensity, but the irreversible nature of the suffering (manifest through death or mutilation) that characterizes the fate of the tragic hero.

The following three contributions in our special issue explore the shifts and delimitations of modern tragedy, with a focus on 19th century phenomena. Thus, Snejana Ung’s article pleads for the existence of tragedy in Romanian literature prior to World War I. Fueled by three successive waves of translations, which Ung categorizes as “latecomers,” “cognates,” and “diversifiers,” this genre is often disguised in early modern Romanian literature as historical drama built on an “inter-imperial” plot. In the same vein, Ovio Olaru undertakes a comparative analysis of the works of Norway and Romania’s two “national playwrights”—Henrik Ibsen and Ioan Luca Caragiale. According to Olaru, even if they have profoundly different views on these phenomena, the two authors have at least three essential common denominators: the idea of revolution as a rupture of the existing social order, the interest in the “legalization” of the world through various forms of bureaucracy and describing the bourgeoisie as an up-and-coming social class. The issue of tragic content is also the subject of Ștefan Baghiu and Anca Simina Martin’s article, which discusses the relationship between the vampire trope and the tragic form, from the classic writings of John Polidori and Bram Stoker to Anne Rice’s novels. The explanation for the low chemistry between tragedies and vampires resides in the fact that “vampires represent a world of post-tragic plots,” in which “tragedy is impossible since they live too long after the tragic event had already occurred.”

The transformations of tragedy in contemporary society returns and calls for a reflection on its generic forms in the essays authored by Radu Vancu and Mihai Iovănel. Based on Moretti’s thesis regarding the incompatibility between tragedy and modern liberalism, Vancu states that certain historical events, such as the Russian-Ukrainian war, have rekindled the possibility of tragedy in the contemporary world through the circulation of totalitarian ideologies. However, tragedy is no longer contained in the conventional dramatic form but seems to prefer confessional genres such as poetry and the diary. This, in its turn, does not necessarily mean that theater has become obsolete as a way of expressing contemporary tragedy. On the contrary, as shown by Iovănel in his contribution, playwrights still regarded Hamlet as a source of inspiration and a way to address contemporary issues not only in the communist period, but in post-communism as well. For example, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi and Boris Akunin’s rewritings after Shakespeare betray—despite the progressive stances shared by both authors—the anguish of transitioning from one socio-economic system to another, manifest in the belief that “the power provided by the possession of capital dictates the laws of human configuration.”

The tragic as the result of a clash between two opposing mindsets or systems of beliefs constitutes the common theme of the last two articles featured in this issue. Teodora Dumitru draws on a short story by Gib I. Mihăescu to study how the vulgar perception of a medical phenomenon (malaria) leads not only to the psychotic behavior of one of the characters but—by clustering similar canonical Romanian writings—to a true allegory of a national tragedy. A similar divide is analyzed by Cosmin Borza and Claudiu Turcuș in their article, where, in shifting the focus away from the opposition between science and pseudo-science, they show the discrepancy between idealized images and “real” experiences of Romanian emigrants from the 1990s and how they were reflected in prose and cinema. Even if this discrepancy is not necessarily tragic, but rather tragicomic, it clearly exemplifies the diversity of the forms of tragedy in contemporary times.

The METRA project is hosted by Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu (ULBS) from January 1, 2024, to June 30, 2026. Among the results it aims to achieve is the compilation and open access publication of the first Romanian corpus of dramatic works, which we hope will be integrated as a distinct section in the European DraCor platform (<https://dracor.org>). Additionally, our project pursues the organization of an international conference, the publication of at least one single-author monograph, the editing of a collective volume, as well as the publication of at least 20 scientific articles. Besides these academic deliverables, METRA will also disseminate its findings through a series of lectures and presentations dedicated to the wider public, such as those already held by Moretti in January 2024 at ULBS’ Faculty of Letters and Arts, or by Terian at the International Platform of Doctoral Research in the Fields of Performing Arts and Cultural Management with the occasion of the Sibiu International Theater Festival in June 2024. All project results will be mentioned on the METRA website, <https://grants.ulbsibiu.ro/metra/>.

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# Network Semantics. A beginning

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**Abstract:** This article follows two previous attempts at using networks for the understanding of drama, “Network Theory, Plot Analysis” (2011)—also in Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (New York & London: Verso, 2013)—, and “Simulating Dramatic Networks,” *Journal of World Literature* (2020). Franco Moretti shows here the steps of “visualizing dramatic structure as a network” and critically engages the idea of symmetry in tragedy. In the course of the next two years, the METRA project will continue to investigate the heuristic potential of dramatic networks.

**Keywords:** tragedy, dramatic networks, network semantics

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## I. Nodes, edges, weight, direction

Visualizing dramatic structure as a network requires four successive steps.<sup>1</sup> First, one displays the play’s characters (in **Figure 1**, Racine’s *Phèdre*) as so many potential “nodes”, which are then linked together (**Figure 2**) if they speak to each other. It’s a first snapshot Racine’s character-system: Ismene is only linked to the play through Aricie, Théràmène delivers the most famous narrative speech in the history of French drama from a peripheral position, Phèdre is the title-character, but Thésée has more connections (technically, “edges”) than she does, and is in this sense more “central” in the play’s structure. In **Figure 3**, each edge acquires its specific “weight”, proportional to the number of words exchanged among the two characters involved; here Phèdre is the prominent figure, largely because of her exchanges with Oenone—her *confidente*, this great invention of French classicism—whom she addresses more often than her husband Thésée or her would-be lover Hyppolite. Finally, the arrowheads of **Figure 4** indicate the direction of the dialogue: some edges are balanced and others are not,

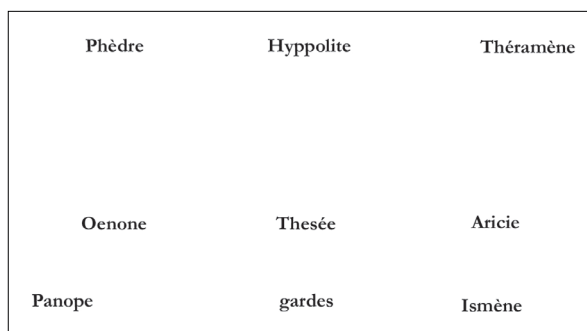


Figure 1: Phèdre, nodes

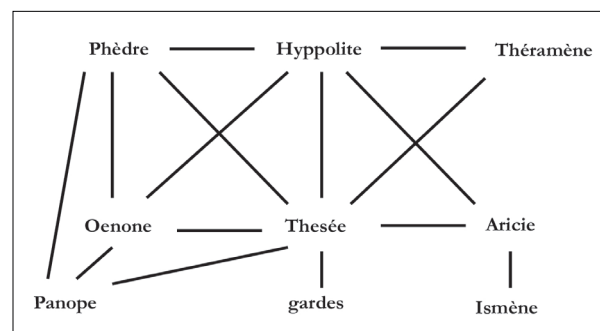


Figure 2: Phèdre, nodes and edges

1. This article follows two previous attempts at using networks for the understanding of drama, “Network Theory, Plot Analysis” (2011) – also in Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (New York & London: Verso, 2013) –, and “Simulating Dramatic Networks,” *Journal of World Literature* (2020). In the course of the next two years, the METRA project will continue to investigate the heuristic potential of dramatic networks.

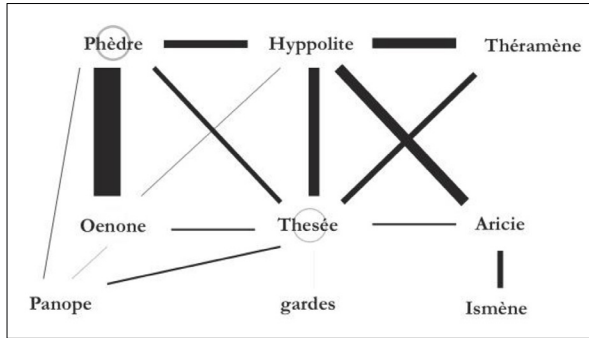


Figure 3: Phèdre, nodes, edges, weight

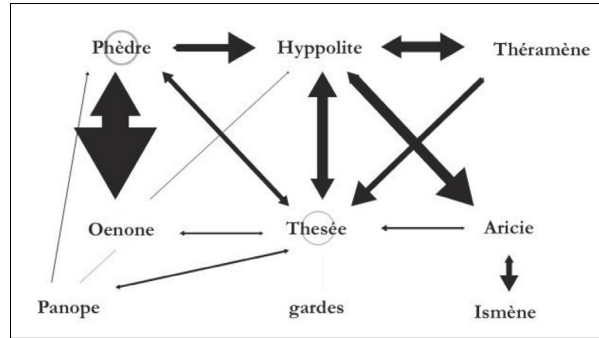


Figure 4: Phèdre, nodes, edges, weight, direction

exchanges between Phèdre and Oenone proceed mostly from mistress to servant for instance, as do those between Phèdre and Hyppolite—and in conclusion, one aspect at a time, Racine’s dramatic network has taken its shape.

Yet a problem remains—one which network theory hardly addresses, but literary study cannot avoid. Edges, weight, and direction are ways to measure the quantity and the position of the words spoken in a play. Good. But what do these words actually say?

**II. Most Distinctive Words**

Let’s suppose we want to know what words characterize, not a single character, but a recurring one, like the Chorus in Greek tragedies. One way to do so—one we came to use at the Stanford Literary Lab around 2011, calling it Most Distinctive Words, or MDW – consists in finding the frequency of all the words in the corpus, and then, given how large the Chorus’ word-space is, calculating the frequency with which each of them should be used. On this basis, for instance, we would “expect” the Chorus to say “song” 16.1 times every 10,000 words, “lovely” 9 times, “sing” 7.6, and so on. We then observe how often the Chorus *actually* utters those words, and it turns out that “song” is used 54 times every 10,000 words (and not 16), “lovely” 29, and so on. At this point (after having filtered against freak results, like the high frequency of “handkerchief” in Shakespeare’s tragedies), dividing the observed by the expected values (**Figure 5**) shows that the chorus uses “song” 3.3 times more often than expected, “lovely” 3.2 times, “sing” 2.9 and so on. These are the Chorus’ Most Distinctive Words: the vocabulary that sets it apart from other characters. Apart, in two opposite directions: words the Chorus uses more often than expected, of course, and those it uses *less* often (**Figure 6–7**).

word	exp	obs	obs/exp
song	16.135778	54	3.34660032
lovely	9.08796695	29	3.19103273
sing	7.60421724	22	2.89313144
dance	12.4264038	35	2.81658319
queen	14.6520283	38	2.59349758
golden	22.4417143	58	2.58447279
cry	26.3365573	67	2.54399234
strife	15.5793719	39	2.50331016
divine	17.9904652	44	2.44573998
bacchus	10.3862479	25	2.407029
ares	12.9828099	31	2.38777277
winged	11.3135915	27	2.38651007
cyclops	8.16062338	19	2.32825351
wisdom	12.0554664	28	2.32259783
aphrodite	10.3862479	24	2.31074784
blessed	16.5067155	38	2.30209335
river	7.41874853	17	2.29149161
cries	13.5392161	31	2.28964512
loud	14.4665596	33	2.28112287
anguish	9.64437308	22	2.28112287
blows	7.97515467	18	2.25700952
lamentation	9.8298418	22	2.23808281

Figure 5: Greek Chorus MDW

**From the long lists of words which constitute the Chorus’ Most Distinctive Words we can extract some reasonably consistent semantic fields: among positive correlations, the fields of song and dance, divinity, and geography; among negative correlations (which are also important, because what we never say defines us just as much as what we repeat all the time) the fields of the first person singular and of the family.**

By and large, the MDW of **Figures 5-7** are unsurprising: the Chorus sings and dances, no wonder those terms appear often; it is a collective creature, of course it doesn’t use the first-person singular. At this stage in the argument, though, unsurprising results are not disappointing, because we’re not yet trying to use Most Distinctive Words, but only to test its reliability: had we *not* found the Chorus speaking of song and dance, we would have had quite a problem. Rediscovering “what we already knew” has proven that MDW can be as good as an informed human being. Can it also be a little better?



POSITIVELY correlated:

song sing dance

divine Bacchus Ares Cyclops Aphrodite Zeus dawn golden winged wings

river mountain flowing streams shore Ida Thracian

Figure 6: Greek Chorus: MDW

NEGATIVELY correlated:

my am mine

father brother concern piety dearest regard

Greek citizens

standing began going doing seeking begin

Figure 7: Greek Chorus: MDW

### III. Extreme cases

Let's now place alongside the Chorus a second recurring figure of Greek tragedies – the Messenger. There is a subterranean affinity between Chorus and Messenger, as the two main sources – collective lament, and epic storytelling – of tragic art. Characters, yes, but not really persons, these two *anonymous* figures have remained untouched by the individualization that is so typical of drama; not by accident are they the two characters *who never die*, as if existing near the borders of tragedy proper.

Their early prominence becomes visible in the oldest surviving tragedy, Aeschylus' *Persians*, where Messenger and Chorus utter almost 60% of the play's words (**Figure 8**); in the following decades, as the interaction among the other characters increases their space shrinks drastically (**Figure 9**). Dramatic *dialogue* has come into its own, and has taken over from the initial, non-dialogic forms of expression.

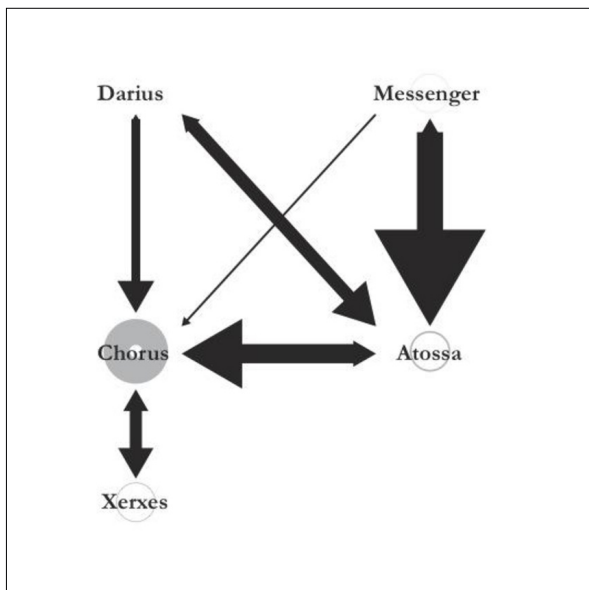


Figure 8: Aeschylus, *Persians*

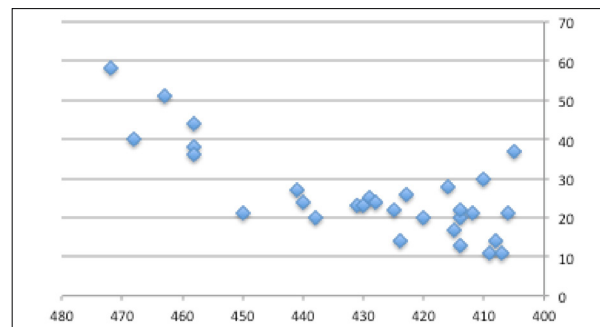


Figure 9: The Space of Chorus and Messengers in 5th-century tragedy

The extreme value of the Messenger's word space in *Persians* is due to the fact that the central "action" of the play is the detailed report of the Persian defeat at Salamis: a sign that, when a Messengers appears, the crucial fact is not the arrival of a character, but the fact that some kind of *event* is becoming visible through his words.

In terms of MDW, the main findings for the two groups appear in **Figures 10–11**: Messengers were characterized by a lot of verbs, and Choruses by a lot of adjectives. This of course doesn't mean that Choruses don't use verbs or Messengers adjectives: it means that *they don't use these parts of speech often enough to be characterized by them*. The specific contents vary from writer to writer, but the formal pattern holds, bringing to light the two extremes of tragic structure: the Messengers' past tenses and action verbs—*struck found won rushed seized fell*—define the pole of *narration*; the Chorus' evaluative adjectives—*deadly impious wise unhappy lawless*—that of *judgment*. Events—and comment. Within network semantics, the *morphological extremes* of tragic structure have become visible.

Reporting tragic events, judging them ... but what about *generating* tragedy?

**Aeschylus**  
*Chorus:* raise holds  
*Messenger:* perished kept told open had were struck found assured command held gave bound

**Sophocles**  
*Chorus:* –  
*Messenger:* wailing went behold guide having struck called won stands spoke perished

**Euripides**  
*Chorus:* –  
*Messenger:* stood began spoke rushed cried drew seized fell running armed took said dragged drove entered dying lying raised

Figure 10: Chorus and Messengers: Most Distinctive Verbs

**Aeschylus**  
*Chorus:* royal deadly low blessed impious divine further grievous Persian  
*Messenger:* whole black Persian

**Sophocles**  
*Chorus:* golden mighty wild swift fierce heavy white great wise mortal unhappy new deep  
*Messenger:* high straight former

**Euripides**  
*Chorus:* lawless fairest winged green heavenly Phrygian godless lovely swift honored golden unjust  
*Messenger:* guilty straight

Figure 11: Chorus and Messengers: Most Distinctive Adjectives

**IV. (A)symmetry**

Let’s leap two millennia, to the age of Shakespeare and Racine—the great bifurcation in the history of tragic form. Opposite settings, passions, temporalities, styles ... and network shape. Here is *Andromaque* (Figure 12): four main characters and four *confidants*; the latter only speak to their masters or mistresses, who for their part interact frequently among themselves, on the basis of two opposite principles: the logic of power (where Andromaque is subject to Pyrrhus who is subject to Orestes, and indirectly to Hermione), and that of eros, which is its mirror image (Orestes in love with Hermione, in love with Pyrrhus, in love with Andromaque). The result is an extremely balanced overall structure, which returns regularly in other Racine plays (Figures 13–15)

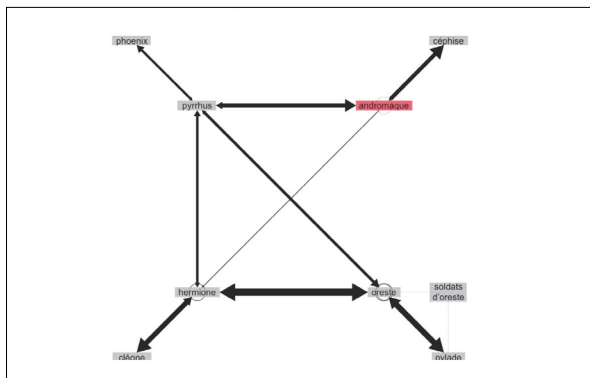


Figure 12: Racine, *Andromaque*

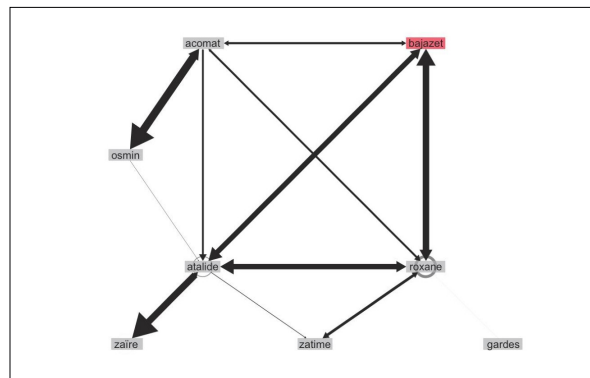


Figure 13: Racine, *Bajazet*

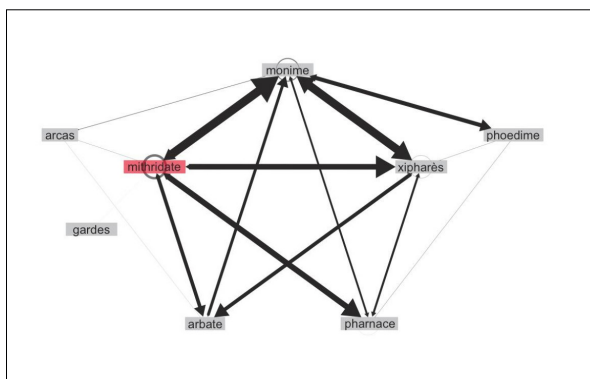


Figure 14: Racine, *Mithridate*

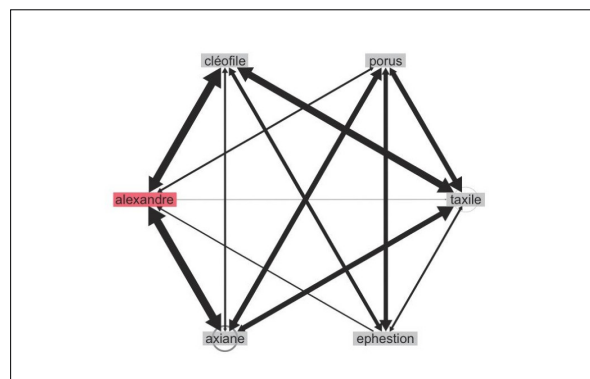


Figure 15: Racine, *Alexandre le Grand*



“Through various types of geometrizing forms [Racine] creates forms of symmetry that are not in the Greek precedent [...] invents oppositions and accentuates parallelisms”<sup>2</sup>

This plot-counterplot of power and eros is moreover entirely conveyed in rhymed couplets: there isn't a single verse that does not have an echo, or that doesn't split into nearly equivalent halves. Such ubiquitous symmetry seems almost indispensable to tragic action. René Girard: “If one were to define tragic art in a single sentence, one could only mention the opposition of symmetrical elements. There isn't an aspect of tragic plot, form, or language, where symmetry doesn't play a key role [...] the balance of forces makes it impossible for us to predict the outcome of their conflict.”<sup>3</sup>

No aspect of tragedy where symmetry doesn't play a role. Then one turns to English drama with Racine in mind, and—**Figures 16–18.**

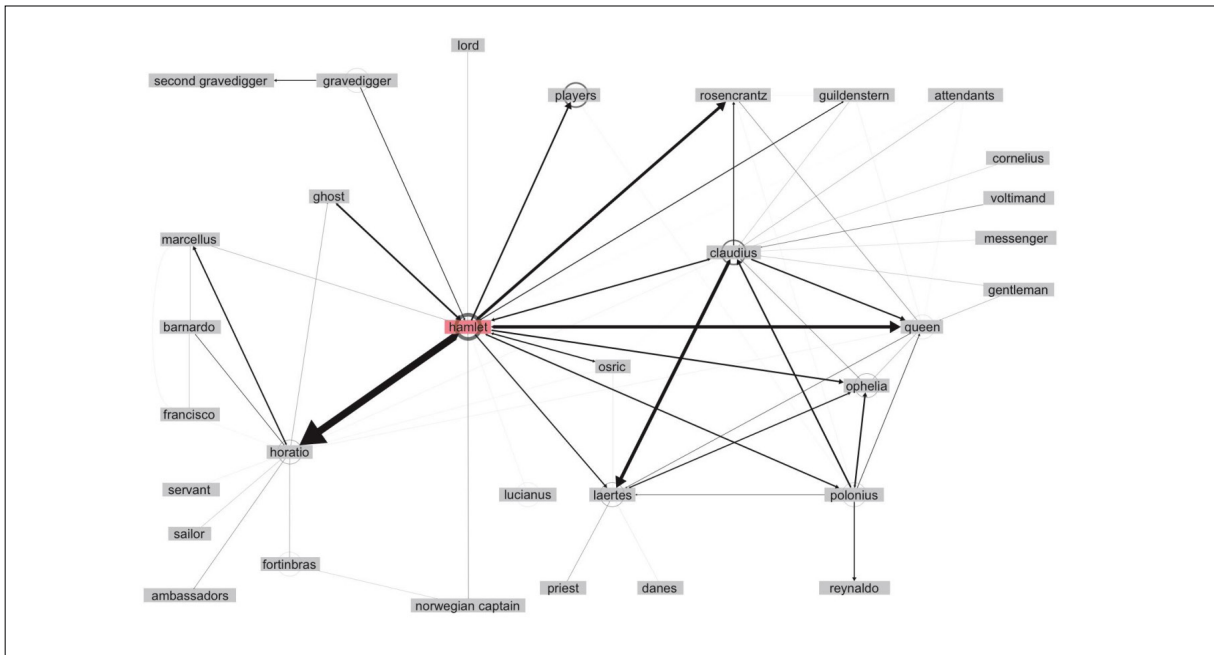


Figure 16: Shakespeare, Hamlet ↑

Figure 18: Shakespeare, Macbeth →

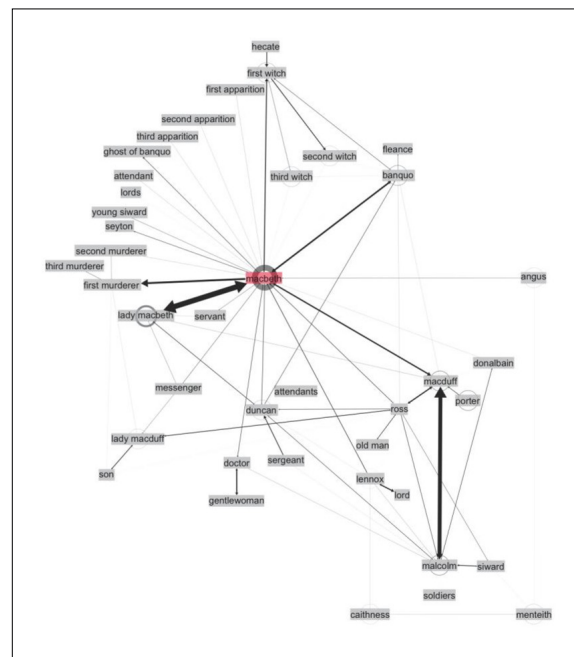
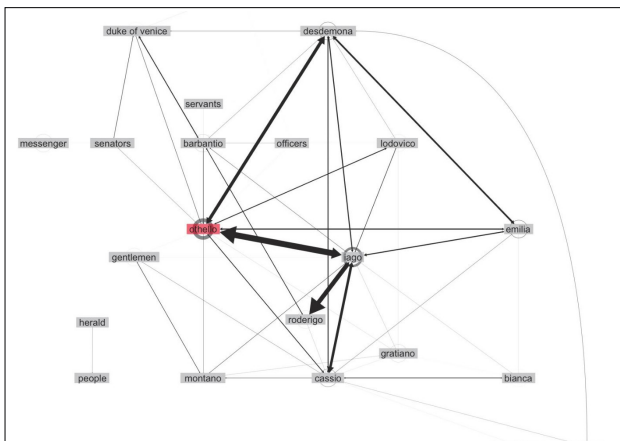


Figure 17: Shakespeare, Othello ↓



2. Elena Rossi, “Les detours obscurs”. *Le annotazioni di Racine alle tragedie greche* (Fasano: Schena, 1994), 196–7.  
 3. René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Pluriel, 2010 [1972]), 71.

No symmetry at all. Almost certainly, because the networks are now much larger, and as the number of nodes grows, the system becomes inevitably unbalanced. Unbalanced, in more than one way. **Figure 19** is a histogram of how much the characters in *Antigone* speak: Creon utters 29 percent of the words in the play, the Chorus 20, Antigone 17; in *Phèdre* (**Figure 20**), Phèdre 29 percent, Hyppolite 21, Thésée 14, Oenone 12. The central character speaks 40-50% more than the next one, but the various word spaces remain comparable. But in *Macbeth*, Macbeth speaks 32 percent of the play's words, Lady Macbeth 11, and Malcolm 9; in *Hamlet*, Hamlet 39 per cent, Claudius 14, Polonius 9 (**Figures 21-22**). Not 50% more than the next character, but *three times* more. Here it's a-symmetry that seems to be intrinsic to tragic form. And which generates, as one would expect, major semantic consequences.

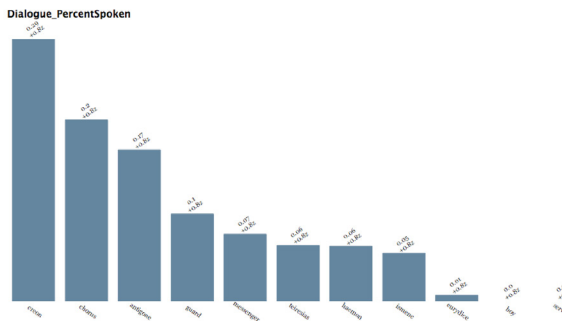


Figure 19: The word-space of tragic characters: Antigone

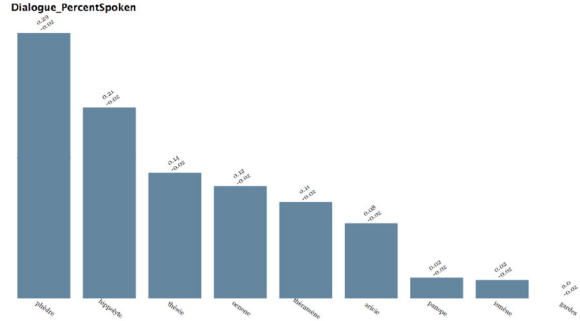


Figure 20: The word-space of tragic characters: Phèdre

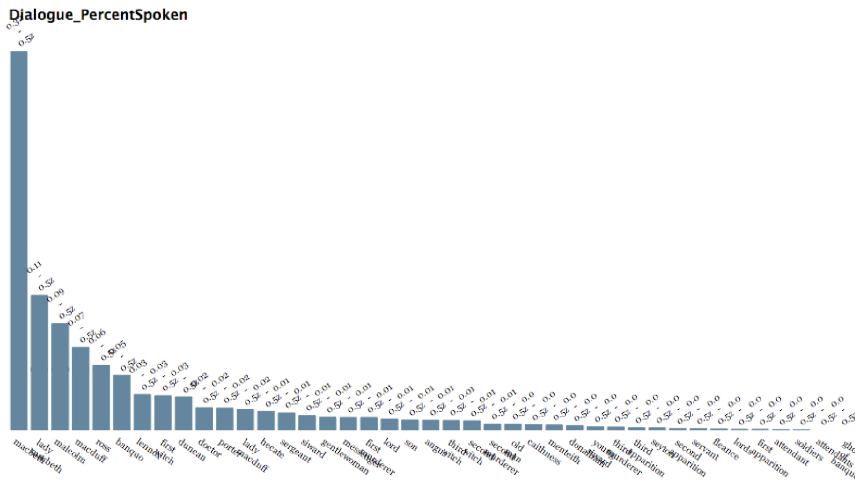


Figure 21: The word-space of tragic characters: Macbeth

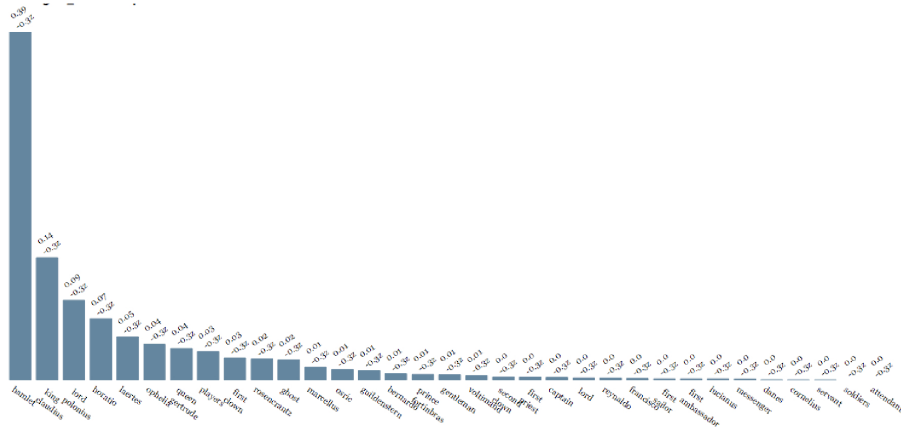


Figure 22: The word-space of tragic characters: Hamlet



## V. Network Semantics

Early on, I have introduced network semantics via specific characters like the Chorus or the Messenger. Shakespeare's systematic asymmetry suggests a different approach, which leaves aside a character's social nature, to focus on its *network position* instead. Specifically, one of three positions: the core (for the two-three characters at the center of dramatic conflict), the periphery (for those at the margins, usually with a single link to the network, and uttering just a few words in the entire play), and a more diverse group placed between the two extremes.

These three regions have their distinctive semantics, but for now I will only focus on a list of nouns that appear among the core's MDW: *plague, beast, whore, black, feed, laugh, poison, gold, and madness*. What these terms have in common is a feature with no equivalent among the MDW of the other two network positions: potentially, they are all metaphors—and in fact most of them *are* metaphors (though of course in *Hamlet* poison is “real”, and madness is “really” pretended). In the plays there are many more metaphors than these of course, but the fact that, at the core of the network, metaphors *are frequent enough to become a distinctive trait*, suggests that different network regions, besides using different words, make *a different use* of words: as if the central position possessed a greater stylistic energy than the other two. And if this sounds obvious, this time it isn't: a masterpiece of stylistic analysis, Spitzer's essay on Racine's *klassische Dämpfung*, not only never feels the need to specify “where” in the character system the words he analyzes are uttered, but in fact claims that “Racine has taught all his characters to speak with his own voice.”<sup>4</sup> And for Racine he is right, but there is no such thing as “Shakespeare's voice”—only a range of voices of varying complexity, which are all strongly correlated to a specific network position.<sup>5</sup>

Here ends this initial foray into network semantics. As the argument has developed, its ultimate ambition has become clear: the conjunction of edges and speech operated in network semantics points to a possible conjunction of plot and style, or narratology and stylistics—a synthesis literary theory has so far never achieved (and in fact almost never attempted). Beyond plot and style, an even more ambitious project can be glimpsed: treating drama as a small-scale model to study two fundamental features of human societies: plot, to understand how individual exchanges evolve into complex systems made of thousands of interactions; and style, to study how human beings make sense of such actions. What we do, and how we think about it: this is what a plot-style continuum may illuminate. But the road ahead is still very long.

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4. The sentence occurs in another of Spitzer's Racine essays, “Il ‘Récit de Thérémène’” (1948), in *Critica stilistica e semantica storica* (Bari: Laterza, 1975), 172.

5. Famous comic passages like those of the gravediggers in *Hamlet* and of the porter in *Macbeth*, for instance, occur regularly at the periphery of the network. In *King Lear*, the Fool acquires its enormous symbolic power precisely by being so unexpectedly close to the center of the network.

# Tragedy in Romanian Literature: Some Conceptual Delimitations

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**Abstract:** This article examines the presence and manifestation of tragedy as a literary genre in Romanian literature until the establishment of the communist regime. My analysis begins with an overview of the arguments that various critics, playwrights, and essayists have invoked in trying to explain the alleged absence of tragedy in Romanian culture and continues with a discussion about the errors and confusions inherent to such a position. Starting from these misconceptions, I propose a new definition of tragedy as a dramatic/theatrical genre and then employ that definition in identifying the most important tragedies in Romanian literature from the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. The conclusion of my article, strongly contradicting the dominant idea in the history of Romanian drama studies, is that tragedy not only existed in Romanian literature, but that the genre represented a fundamental coordinate of the Romanian cultural tradition.

**Keywords:** tragedy, Romanian literature, the tragic, drama, violent death

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The strongest prejudices are those whose source is difficult to trace back. Moreover, this fuzziness makes them even more difficult to dismantle; precisely because "everyone knows" a certain fact, it is difficult to correlate it with a certain set of definite statements, as well as with a set of evidence and grounds on which to challenge it. The argument that I intend to challenge within the present article belongs to this very category of well-known "facts," namely that Romanian literature has never had any tragedies. The idea currently circulates as an axiom, including within didactic contexts where, even when not explicitly stated, it is institutionalized to the highest degree (for instance, through the Baccalaureate curriculum in Romanian Language and Literature, where the dramatic genre includes comedy and drama alone, but not tragedy, despite the indisputable prestige of the latter).<sup>1</sup> However, if I had to provide a concrete formulation of this interpretation, I would prefer the following one, expressed by a textbook author with the occasion of a polemic regarding school textbooks:

"there are no tragedies in Romanian literature in the classical and rigorous sense of the word ... there are, instead, attempts from the second half of the 19th century, obscure, hybrid, classicizing and romantic in a minor style ... everything dubbed as tragedy in the 20th century (such as a play by Mircea Eliade titled *Iphigenia* or *Iona* by Marin Sorescu) has as much to do with Sophocles as Joyce's novel *Ulysses* has to do with Homer."<sup>2</sup>

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1. See *Examenul național de bacalaureat 2014. Programa de examen pentru disciplina limba și literatura română. Filiera teoretică – profil umanist. Filiera vocațională – profil pedagogic*. [https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/Programa\\_Bac\\_2014\\_Lb\\_si\\_literatura\\_romana\\_profil\\_uman.pdf](https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/Programa_Bac_2014_Lb_si_literatura_romana_profil_uman.pdf), accessed on 01.06.2024. The 2014 curriculum remained valid for 2024.

2. Dumitrița Stoica, "Manualele de limba română între profesionalism și impostură," *Observator cultural*, no. 346, November 9, 2006. <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/manualele-de-literatura-romana-intre-profesionalism-si-impostura-2/>, accessed on 03.06.2024.



There are several things worth discussing in this statement. First and foremost, the ambiguous precaution implied in the phrase: “in the classical and rigorous sense of the term.” “Classical”—does this refer to Antiquity, to French classicism, or to the idea of a European tragic canon (which would perhaps include Shakespeare, but also Goethe)? Things differ from case to case. Second, what does it mean that there were “attempts” at tragedy in the 19th century? The term seems to evoke unfinished texts, the publication of which was hampered by various obstacles, rather than artistically unredeemable texts, as the author of the quote actually implies; because, if the texts are complete and mostly respect the genre’s norms, it is inappropriate to call them “attempts,” regardless of how unsatisfactory they may seem. Finally, the comparison is not exactly suitable. Notwithstanding that Iphigenia’s destiny was immortalized by Euripides and not Sophocles, most of the Romanian authors who wrote tragedies based on ancient patterns throughout the 20th century—from Victor Eftimiu and Nicolae Iorga to Mircea Eliade and Radu Stanca—have intended to revive ancient myths *sub specie temporis nostri* in a completely different manner than James Joyce did (i.e., by changing the characters’ destinies while maintaining their names, and not disguising them as contemporary surrogates).

### “Why don’t we have tragedy of our own?”

Beyond these detailed observations, the fundamental question remains as to whether or not tragedy exists in Romanian literature. A preliminary observation is that, despite the consistently negative response provided by successive scholars to this question, a thorough analysis of this phenomenon has not yet been undertaken. More precisely: not only is a scholarly overview of the Romanian tragic form missing, but also a more or less substantial essay examining the possibility of the genre’s existence in Romanian literature (through a careful examination of the works that would fall under this category) or, at least, the reasons behind its absence. I should add that I mainly refer to the period during which modern Romanian drama was first established and flourished (namely from its origins until after the Second World War), and less so to the communist period, when, on the one hand, the instauration of a totalitarian regime and, on the other, the experimental hybridization of forms specific to the entire international post-war drama make the Romanian rendition of this literary genre problematic. Choosing, therefore, to end my investigation with 1948, it is worth remembering that even Romanian literary histories focused on drama do not address this issue; or, if they do, they do so in an imprecise and superficial manner. For instance, the third volume of *Istoria teatrului în România* [History of Romanian Theater], coordinated by Simion Alterescu, albeit admitting that Victor Eftimiu wrote “Greek-inspired tragedies,” and that these plays mark a distinct “category” in his oeuvre,<sup>3</sup> unreservedly delegates the author’s dramatic activity to the chapter on “Historical Drama.” But what can be “historic” in depicting characters such as Prometheus, Oedipus, or Agamemnon? Furthermore, in the first—and only—volume of the *Istoria literaturii dramatice românești* [History of Romanian Dramatic Literature], which analyses the genre’s renditions up to 1890, Vicu Mîndra is perhaps the only historian of Romanian theater that makes use of the concept of tragedy—in employing the phrase “tragic plays.”<sup>4</sup> But he does so in an utterly unprofessional manner, understanding “tragic” as simply “solemn” and thus transforming it into an umbrella term covering the most diverse dramatic forms possible (the historical drama, the “passional melodrama,” the “historical melodrama,” the “rural drama,” etc.).

And yet, to deliver a plausible answer to the question that gives the title of this section, we can only navigate among the fragments, articles, and essays at hand. In this sense, it should be noted, first, that the issue was approached from two complementary directions. First of all, the lack/non-existence of tragedy in Romanian literature was viewed as a response to a *specific* problem (Romanian society and/or literature, on account of their particularities, refused tragedy) or to a *generic* one (the modern era, regardless of country, was incompatible with tragic form). The former idea was intensively explored in the first half of the 20th century and was linked more or less explicitly to the illusion of Romanian exceptionalism. For instance, in a 1933 article, suggestively titled “Sensibilitatea tragică în România” [Tragic sensibility in Romania], Emil Cioran argued that the tragic is lacking not only in Romanian art, but in the entire Romanian society: “I cannot speak of a generalized tragic sensibility within our nation, widespread in a broader sphere and creating an atmosphere, but only of a certain tragic sensibility

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3. Simion Alterescu, coord., *Istoria teatrului în România 3. 1919-1944* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1973), 151.

4. V. Mîndra, *Istoria literaturii dramatice românești*, vol. 1. *De la începuturi până la 1890* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1986), *passim*.

shared by a few individuals.<sup>5</sup> The list over these individuals is hilarious due to its heterogeneity—in fact, it only comprises four names: Lucian Blaga, Mircea Eliade, Petru Manoliu, and Anton Holban—and Cioran does not feel obliged to explain his selection, being content to state in passing that “the essential reason” for this absence of the tragic is to be found “in a constitutive deficiency, in a defect pertaining to [the country’s] essence and psychic conformation.”<sup>6</sup> Inspired by foreign (from Friedrich Nietzsche to José Ortega y Gasset) or national models (Vasile Pârvan, Nae Ionescu, etc.), such arguments are frequent among young Romanian intellectuals of the 1930s, from whom D. D. Roșca, Vasile Băncilă, Dan Botta, Mircea Eliade, Petru Comarnescu, Mircea Vulcănescu, Haig Acterian, and Ion Frunzetti stand out, notwithstanding their pronounced ideological differences.<sup>7</sup> Collectively praising tragic form, they mourn its absence or celebrate its presence in Romanian society and culture, without undertaking an applied study of its Romanian rendition.

Even the young critic I. Negoïtescu, who, in his postwar correspondence with Radu Stanca, will try to transform the tragic into a key component of his “Euphorionic” program, designed as a synthesis between Classicism and Romanticism, does not undertake such an investigation—although he would have had both the interest and the means to do it. Negoïtescu draws on the statement that, unlike Molière’s heroes, “none of [Ioan Luca] Caragiale’s characters has a moral structure and therefore none of his heroes are tragic.”<sup>8</sup> Mutatis mutandis, the situation is somewhat similar to that of Camil Petrescu, in whose novels the characters “do not enact a moral drama, but an existential and therefore casuistic one: their soul does not choose between Good and Evil, but between pleasant and unpleasant, comfortable and embarrassing, useful and useless, etc.”<sup>9</sup> A forced generalization is only a step away: “And so on with the whole of Romanian literature.”<sup>10</sup> As for the cause of the tragic’s absence, the explanation is one that often circulates within Romanian culture—the natives’ passivity, their transactional nature, their habit to “adapt to the circumstances” instead of fighting against them: “there lies dormant in us a *historical lethargy* that always subjects us to circumstances.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, although he draws on two of the fundamental Romanian writers (I. L. Caragiale and Camil Petrescu), Negoïtescu reaches a similar conclusion as Cioran, invoking a socio-historical-existential explanation for an artistic deficit. Indeed, even if he had remained in the field of literature, the critic’s approach would have been improper: he raises the problem of the tragic while first referring to a genre that opposes it (comedy) and then to a non-dramatic genre (the novel).

But is tragedy still tenable in the modern age? A negative answer to this question was delivered long before George Steiner’s famous contribution (*The Death of Tragedy*, 1961)<sup>12</sup>, and was wholeheartedly embraced in Romania. For example, in his *Estetica* [Aesthetics] (2 vols., 1934-1936), the most important Romanian book of its kind, Tudor Vianu remarked that starting from the 19th century

“it was possible to note the disappearance of tragedy as a literary genre and even of tragic feeling within the whole literary production: a process that gave no sign of diminishing in intensity during the last century. Emerging at the same time with the heroic conception on life, that is to say, at the same time with the attitude of Man who is so empowered and self-conscious to the point where he dares enter a destructive struggle against the forces of nature and destiny, the tragedy could not be maintained within the levelling democracies of the last century. And because the tragic hero can no longer be identified amongst the bourgeois and conformist masses ... the old tragedies continued to be read and admired, but they no longer speak to anyone with the same warmth felt by the younger and more individualistic hero of past societies, in which life was a continuous struggle against nature, against an unknown destiny, and against merciless gods.”<sup>13</sup>

5. Emil Cioran, *Opere 2*, edited by Marin Diaconu, foreword by Eugen Simion (Bucharest: Academia Română-Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă, 2012), 422.

6. *Ibid.*, 423.

7. For an overview, albeit incomplete, see Gabriel Petric, *Viziune și spirit tragic în literatura română a secolului XX* (Florești: Limes, 2014), 101-138.

8. I. Negoïtescu and Radu Stanca, *Un roman epistolar*, edited by Ioan Cristescu and Ion Vartic, Afterword by Ion Vartic (Iași: Polirom, 2022), 134.

9. *Ibid.*, 135.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1996).

13. Tudor Vianu, *Estetica*, edited by Vlad Alexandrescu, Foreword by George Gană (Bucharest: Orizonturi, 1996), 371.



Vianu's considerations were inspired by the ideas of Adriano Tilgher,<sup>14</sup> whom he also quotes. It might be possible that the Italian philosopher was also G. Călinescu's source, who stated in 1964: "In the modern era, tragedy has practically disappeared, what Racine offers us is a theater of poetry. In life, hilarious seriousness and grim seriousness go hand in hand. The new formula for character analysis is drama. Shakespeare wrote only dramas and comedies."<sup>15</sup> It is true that George Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* had also been published by then, but Călinescu's attitude towards Shakespeare and Racine makes it unlikely that this was his inspiration. Instead, Steiner is directly invoked in the 1970 *Farsa tragică* [Tragic Farce] by Romul Munteanu, who admits that the death of tragedy is "a real phenomenon," even if he criticizes the English comparatist for "a certain timidity," as well as for offering "only a partial explanation for a much more complex phenomenon."<sup>16</sup> In any case, instead of "death," Munteanu prefers to talk about the "degradation" of tragedy, which would thus justify its "mixture between comedy and tragedy" and, implicitly, his concept of "tragic farce."<sup>17</sup>

### A problematic definition

Therefore, regardless of whether they identify it as a more general issue or a specific one, local theorists seem to agree that there was no tragedy in Romanian literature. But what do they mean by tragedy? The aforementioned examples illustrate that the majority of scholars who have discussed the manifestations of tragic form in Romanian literature have worked with improper definitions of the genre, drifting towards at least one of two common misconceptions. The first confusion was denounced by Radu Stanca in a posthumous text published in 1967:

"in Romanian culture and maybe not only in it, tragedy was considered (at least among theater scholars and practitioners) as a kind of drama that is 'somewhat more horrendous' than actual drama, and in any case 'unrulier'. In tragedy, the misfortunes of drama acquire frightening proportions, and the more dreadfully the actor depicts these misfortunes, the more 'tragic' the tragedy is."<sup>18</sup>

This tendency to assimilate tragedy into the category of drama is illustrated from the very first applied Romanian text on the dramatic phenomenon, namely *Teoria dramei* [The Theory of Drama] (1899) by Iosif Blaga, where, despite the title, the author admits that he "first of all and more broadly discussed tragedy," which he considered a "genre of drama" alone, even if the genre presented "the most artistic value."<sup>19</sup>

The second misconception refers to the two coordinates identified by Péter Szondi in the first lines of *An Essay on the Tragic* (1961): "Since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling there has been a philosophy of the tragic."<sup>20</sup> In other words, most of the Romanian critics cited above confuse *tragedy*, a literary (dramatic) genre formalized almost 2,400 years ago, with *the tragic*, an aesthetic-existential category produced by German idealist philosophy around 1800. Admittedly, the idea of *the tragic* was developed out of *tragedy*, hence it always retains an inextricable link to its prototype. But it is no less true that the tragic as a philosophical construct often reached such a degree of autonomy in relation to its literary model that it paradoxically became its point of reference.<sup>21</sup> The problem with such an approach is not necessarily that it can show us, by use of retrospective reading, that "the Greek tragedies were not tragic,"<sup>22</sup> according to William Marx. A more disturbing conclusion is that, as Hans-Thies Lehmann points out, "a considerable portion of extant theories of tragedy could

14. Adriano Tilgher, *Studi sul Teatro Contemporaneo*, third edition (Rome: Libreria de Scienze e Lettere, 1929).

15. G. Călinescu, *Opere 11: Publicistică 1963-1965. Conferințe*, edited by Nicolae Mecu, Foreword by Eugen Simion (Bucharest: Academia Română-Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă), 2012.

16. Romul Munteanu, *Farsa tragică*, second edition (Bucharest: Univers, 1989), 10–11.

17. *Ibid.*, 9.

18. Radu Stanca, *Aquarium. Eseuri programatice*, edited by Marta Petreu, Foreword by Ion Vartic (Cluj-Napoca: Apostrof, 2000), 178.

19. Iosif Blaga, *Teoria dramei. Cu un tractat introductiv despre frumos și artă* (Brașov: Editura Autorului, 1899), 4.

20. Péter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, translated by Paul Fleming (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

21. "[T]he analysis of a specific literary form that was the object of the *Poetics* was replaced by a philosophy of 'the tragic' as a self-standing entity." Franco Moretti, "Two Theories," *Daedalus* 150, no. 1 (2021): 16.

22. See William Marx, *The Tomb of Oedipus: Why Greek Tragedies Were Not Tragic* (London & New York: Verso, 2022), especially 41-87.

have been written as they stand if a *theatre* of tragedy had never existed at all<sup>23</sup>—when, in fact, “no tragic experience exists without theatrical experience.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, the greatest inconvenience of existing theories on the tragic is not that they extend the tragic beyond tragedy—which is only natural, otherwise one of the two concepts would have become redundant—, nor that they claim that some (most?) ancient tragedies were not “tragic,” but that they fundamentally exclude tragedy (i.e., theater) from the definition of the tragic, turning it into an optional accessory to it.

But what definitions and theories are we hereby referring to? I will not take up the Romanian scholars again, given that they do not excel in originality by any means, but I will also not linger on the German philosophers, where the disconnect of the tragic from the tragedy is more than obvious. As a starting point, I will address a volume whose very title aims to offer *A Definition of Tragedy* (1961) and who is also authored by a playwright with intimate knowledge of the tragic phenomenon, namely Oscar Mandel. His definition sound like this:

“A work of art is tragic if it substantiates the following situation: A protagonist *who commands our earnest good will* is impelled in a given world by a purpose, or undertakes an action, *of a certain seriousness and magnitude*; and by that very purpose or action, subject to the same given world, necessarily and inevitably meets with *grave* spiritual or physical *suffering*. [author’s emphases]”<sup>25</sup>

It is not difficult to see that Mandel’s definition illustrates not only one, but both of the aforementioned misconceptions. On the other hand, he does not approach tragedy as a dramatic/theatrical genre, but as an aesthetic category that can be found in any “work of art”: not only theater, Mandel seems to imply, but also other forms of artistic expression—the novel, for example—could be categorized as “tragic” if they meet the conditions stipulated in his definition; yet, moving the emphasis from the form to the “situation” opens the possibility of ultimately projecting the “tragic” outside the sphere of art. On the other hand, according to Mandel’s definition, tragedy is dissociated from drama not in a structural way, but in a gradual manner: “suffering” is also found in full in drama (and most of all, in melodrama), and the simple qualifier of “grave” is insufficient in distinguishing between the two dramatic forms. Equally controversial are the other two parts of the definition that Mandel himself emphasized, on the grounds that they would require additional clarification: “our earnest good will” betrays an attitude that is excessively generous towards the tragic characters, since respecting this principle would remove numerous works with ambitious and averse characters at their center from this definition of tragedy, such as Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (1592); while the property “of a certain...magnitude” places Mandel’s definition in the realm of Greek or, at most, Elizabethan tragedy, thus drastically limiting the possibility of considering works with bourgeois protagonists that were written after and/or along the lines of Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck* (1836).

But the main problem of Mandel’s definition remains the “suffering,” which cannot help in distinguishing tragedy not only from drama, but also from comedy; a “drastic ... suffering” can ultimately be found in Argan, the hypochondriac from Molière’s *The Imaginary Invalid* (1673), even if the play cannot possibly be considered a tragedy. Of course, there is an intimate connection between tragedy and suffering, but we are only referring to *a certain type of suffering*. To better understand this connection, perhaps it would be better to start from the way tragedy—and the suffering that generates it—was conceived by the most important tragic author in world literature: William Shakespeare. Admittedly, Shakespeare was not a theoretician per se, but from the occurrences of this term in his work, J. V. Cunningham extracted as early as 1950 a “Shakespearean conception of *tragedy*,” which he summarized as follows:

“The tragic atmosphere and the anticipation of the tragic catastrophe is fearful; the catastrophe woeful. The process by which the catastrophe comes about involves intrigue, hypocrisy, political conspiracy and treason, acts of sin, and is conducted by responsible agents. These are the connotations of *tragedy*. The denotation is violent, unexpected death—murder, death in battle, suicide. To these is added rape.”<sup>26</sup>

23. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, translated by Eric Butler (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 1.

24. *Ibid.*, 3.

25. Oscar Mandel, *A Definition of Tragedy* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 88.

26. J. V. Cunningham, “Tragedy in Shakespeare,” *English Literary History* 17, no. 1 (1950): 43.





Even if this “conception” does not qualify as a definition of tragedy, but rather as its description—more precisely, a description of how tragedy is reflected in the works of a single author—, Cunningham’s strong point is that he links the causes of the “suffering” felt by tragic heroes (what he, rather improperly, dubs “connotations”) to an extremely concrete effect (coined “denotation”). And what unites all of these “denotations”—murder, suicide, rape, etc.—is not so much the “gravity” of suffering (when death occurs “unexpectedly,” the suffering does not last too long either), but the fact that they leave some *indelible traces* on the tragic protagonist. What has been done can never be undone—this is the element that indicates the specificity of tragedy, which can therefore constitute a solid starting point for a new definition of the genre.

### **Towards a new definition of tragedy**

Therefore, the definition I hereby propose is the following: *Tragedy is a dramatic form that represents in a serious manner how the play’s protagonists end up suffering a severe, violent, and irreversible deterioration, oftentimes concluding with their own demise, as an inevitable but regrettable result of their actions.* Let us analyze the components of this definition one by one:

1. “Tragedy is a dramatic form...”: I state from the outset that the subject of my article is *tragedy as dramatic form* (“genre” or “species”), and not the “tragic” as an aesthetic and/or existential category, which seems to be neither a necessary nor—most of the time—an appropriate concept to understand tragedy. In other words, I don’t think *tragedy* can exist outside the theater (except, at most, through a metaphorical extension of the concept). Whether and to what extent the *tragic* exists outside of tragedy or art—that is a problem that does not concern me in the present article.

2. “...that represents in a serious manner...”: the so-called “tragic” events can be approached in various ways, including within the techniques of comedy. But their treatment as comedy automatically extracts the resulting text from the conventions of tragedy. This is the reason why the very first Romanian play, *Occisio Gregorii in Moldaviae Vodae tragice expressa* (written c. 1778–1779 by an unidentified author) is not a tragedy; although it claims to have been “expressed in tragic form,” the farcical tone that underpins it often invalidates its tragic dimension. This does not mean, however, that tragedies cannot also contain comic moments, intended to humanize the characters and increase the authenticity of the discourse. Two conclusive examples in this regard are *Manasse* (1900) by Roman Ronetti and *Patima roșie* [Red Passion] (1916), by Mihail Sorbul, whereby characters such as Zelig Șor or Sbilț constantly dissolve the dramatic tension. But making use of humorous inserts does not diminish the tragic character of the works in question.

3. “...how the play’s protagonists...”: tragedy is a form centering on its main characters; they are the most important agents and the most important objects of the plot. That is precisely why many tragedies have a name as their title, possibly accompanied by a brief description (*Agamemnon*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Phèdre*, *Despot Vodă*, *The Master Builder*, *Danton*, *Caligula*, etc.), or a collective noun (*The Persians*, *Bacchae*, *Atrizii*, etc.), both indicating the tragic destiny of a certain individual or group going through a calamity. The relevance of the protagonist is crucial, because only focusing on a character that has been carefully developed throughout the play can lead to a tragic effect. In this sense, the death of episodic or secondary characters, however pathetic and regrettable, cannot constitute the defining material of the tragedy. Thus, the death of Mercutio in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), although very important in the play’s unfolding, is insufficient, by itself, to support its tragic character. A borderline case in this regard is represented, however, by characters who die *instead of* the protagonists, yet not by accident (such as Mercutio, who does not pursue suicide), but as a result of their own or the protagonists’ conscious decisions. Two illustrative examples in this regard are the suicide committed by Ion from Caragiale’s *Năpasta* [The Plague] (1890), as the character cannot come to terms with the thought that he served 9 years in prison for a crime he did not commit, whereas Dragomir continued to live unpunished, and the lynching of the Old Man from Lucian Blaga’s *Tulburarea apelor* [Whirling Waters] (1923), because of the Priest’s lies. Both plays thus constitute borderline tragic forms—or, which can be discussed in relation to this genre.

4. “...end up suffering a severe, violent, and irreversible deterioration, oftentimes concluding with their own demise...”: in tragedies, the protagonists—or their substitutes—meet a violent death or a comparable mutilation. Generally, the main characters die, regardless of whether their death is by murder or suicide, and regardless of the instrument used to bring about this denouement (poison, rope, firearms, or melee weapons ranging from knife and sword to guillotine). In particular cases, maiming

and mutilation are also acceptable as tragic instead of death, as is the case in *Oedipus Tyrannus* (429 B.C.) by Sophocles, which would have remained a tragedy even if Oedipus' self-inflicted blindness had not been accompanied by the hanging of Jocasta. At the same time, even if the idea of mutilation suggests damage inflicted *on the body*, it is not mandatory that the tragic outcome leaves visible physical injuries. The death of Manasse from the eponymous play by Ronetti Roman is also tragic; the protagonist, a traditionalist Jew, has an ischemic stroke because he is unable to accept that his niece will marry a Christian. Therefore, what defines tragedy is not necessarily the intensity of the suffering experienced by the protagonist, but its irreversible character leading to death or mutilation. There are numerous other plays where the characters have revelations that cause them a lot of distress, but they ultimately manage to compensate for or even reverse these negative emotions—or, at the very least, come to terms with them in the end. The same category also includes plays where the characters suffer serious but curable injuries. This is the case of *Suflete tari* [Strong Characters] (1922) by Camil Petrescu, at the end of which Culai informs us that the protagonist Andrei Pietraru survived his suicide attempt. Moreover, the success or failure of a suicide attempt can be a defining trait for the classification of a play as a tragedy or as a drama. This is the case with Anton Pavlovich Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1896), where we do not know for sure whether or not Konstantin Treplev's second suicide attempt led to his death (although most indications suggest that it did). In any case, the defining characteristic of tragedy is that the death/mutilation of the protagonist is violent (primarily because it is deliberate, caused by a human agent), regardless of whether it is caused by physical or mental factors. Predictable death caused by "natural" causes, such as the prolonged illness of Stephen the Great from *Apus de soare* [Sunset] (1909) by Barbu Ștefănescu Delavrancea, does not fall within the definition of tragedy, nor does sudden death caused by transcendent factors, such as Radu's demise in *Cruciada copiilor* [The Children's Crusade] (1930) by Lucian Blaga. None of these situations correspond to the tenet of *violent* death. On the other hand, it is not mandatory that the characters die on stage, in view of the audience. In many tragedies conceived in the late 19th and early 20th century, there is an unwritten rule that, especially with regard to suicide, the characters die offstage, as in *Daria* (1925) by Lucian Blaga. Moreover, sometimes this death is only suggested as imminent, without being confirmed post factum, as it happens in most of the plays inspired by Danton's life: *Danton's Death* (1835) by Georg Büchner, *Danton* (1901) by Romain Rolland, *Danton* (1931) by Camil Petrescu, etc. Certainly, we must also hereby take into account that the limited technical means of the era made it extremely difficult to set up and manipulate a guillotine on stage in such a way as to "realistically" suggest the protagonist's death. After all, the technical limitations have pushed the central episode of the tragedy—violent death—away from the stage, starting with the very first work historically attested as belonging to this genre, Aeschylus' *The Persians* (472 B.C.), where the playwright had no way of bringing the entire invading army on stage, which had perished on the battlefield anyway and had not killed itself in a palace.<sup>27</sup>

5. "...as an inevitable but regrettable result of their actions": ultimately, the death of the tragic hero occurs towards the end of the play, as its conclusion; otherwise, the effect is diluted, and the play tends to turn into the drama of those having to emotionally deal with the protagonist's death. The violent events that befall the heroes result from their actions; however, it is important that the reader does not seek a sense of satisfaction, but, on the contrary, is sympathetic toward the tragic character. In other words, the hero of a tragedy cannot be a sadistic and self-centered criminal, but a person endowed with reason and a minimum amount of moral sense. For example, Delavrancea's 1912 *Viforul* [The Hurricane] is not a tragedy, since, although Ștefăniță dies in the end, poisoned by Mrs. Tana, the audience finds satisfaction and feels a sense of justice upon learning this news. Instead, Albert Camus's *Caligula* (1944) remains a tragic play, despite the protagonist's cruel character, as his cruelty is explained by the immense suffering that Drusilla's death caused him. Last but not least, Eugene Ionesco's *The Lesson* (1951) cannot be classified as a tragedy, given that it is difficult for the viewer to accept that an alleged grammar mistake could ever constitute a motive for murder. Moreover, the moral (or, at least, psychological) justification of the heroes' actions and the inevitable (or, at least, plausible) character of the consequences that they face remain key aspects of the tragedy, which also explains why it becomes problematic to discuss this genre after the emergence of the theater of the absurd. But that is another topic entirely.

27. This technique also has quantitative effects. For example, in *The Persians*, "Messenger and Chorus utter almost 60% of the play's words"—Franco Moretti, "Network Semantics. A Beginning," *Transilvania* no. 5 (2024): 5-11.



### Tragedy in Romanian literature

Let us now return to my initial question: was there tragedy in Romanian literature? And, if the answer is affirmative, how significant was it? Testimonies regarding the activity of Romanian playwrights from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century speak of numerous tragedies written and subsequently lost, either before or after their performances. For instance, Cezar Bolliac was remembered by his contemporaries as the author of several tragedies, including *Matilda* (1835), claimed to be “the first tragedy dictated by the Romanian muse.”<sup>28</sup> We have no reason to doubt this information, but we cannot comment on texts that are no longer available to us either. Therefore, in the question of periodizing Romanian dramatic works, it is much more relevant to take into account the year of a play’s publication rather than the year of its public representation or writing. From this perspective, probably the first Romanian tragedy that has survived to this day is Alexandru Pelimon’s *Curtea lui Vasilie-Vodă* [Vasilie-Vodă’s Court] (1852). Built on the model of Greek and Shakespearean tragedies—parricide: a son kills his father, an Avenor at the court of Vasile Lupu; the dead father’s ghost appears before the other son, Stroe; Stroe is not, in fact, the son of the Avenor, but of Vasilie-Vodă, as revealed in a final anagnorisis, etc.—, the text does not excel through its artistic qualities, but at least it strictly adheres to established patterns of tragedy.

Furthermore, *Curtea lui Vasilie-Vodă* paves the way for a direction that will eventually become dominant throughout Romanian drama up until World War I, namely that of historical tragedy—regardless of whether or not it is presented as such. The most valuable “serious” Romanian plays of the 19<sup>th</sup> century belong to this category, among them *Răzvan și Vidra* [Răzvan and Vidra] (1867) by Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu, and *Despot Vodă* [Prince Despot] (1880) by Vasile Alecsandri.<sup>29</sup> Both deal with the figure of the ambitious foreigner who infiltrates Romanian society but is ultimately excluded from the nation. Another representative corpus of Romanian tragedies published until the end of the Great War consists of adaptations of ancient plays, however without yet making use of the pantheon of Greek mythology. This series debuts with *Rhea Silvia* (1873) by N. Scurtescu—“the first Romanian tragedy of a classical type,”<sup>30</sup> as considered by G. Călinescu—and also includes plays such as George Bengescu-Dabija’s *Pygmalion, regele Feniciei* [Pygmalion, King of Phoenicia] (1886) or *Amilcar Barca* (1894). Notwithstanding, this is still an insignificant category until the publication of *Cocoșul negru* [Black Rooster] (1913) by Victor Eftimiu, which, adapting the Faustian plot to a local folklore material, represents the first attempt in contouring a specific mythology of Romanian tragedy. Lastly, the third type of plays brings tragic subjects into contemporary life, focusing on aspects such as the characters’ class, ethnicity, and gender; it is essentially a project analogous to Ibsen’s, i.e., “capturing the dark side of modern private life, and giving it a ‘public’ significance.”<sup>31</sup> This direction is spearheaded by Ion Luca Caragiale’s *Năpasta*—which, in the absence of a well-established Romanian bourgeoisie, focuses on the peasant class<sup>32</sup>—and continued by Ronetti Roman’s *Manasse*, which addresses the condition of the Jews, and by Mihail Sorbul’s *Patima roșie*, which addresses gender relations.

In any case, the previous examples are sufficient in helping us draw an initial conclusion. Even if tragedy manifested itself in Romanian literature up to World War I mainly through mediocre plays and imitating western models—which can be said, in the end, about any literary genre from any culture and era—, it also includes six indisputably valuable plays (*Răzvan și Vidra*, *Despot Vodă*, *Năpasta*, *Manasse*, *Cocoșul negru*, *Patima roșie*), including a masterpiece (*Manasse*). This is not spectacular, but it is also not negligible by any means, especially if we compare tragedy with the other “lengthy” literary forms of pre-WWI Romanian literature. Leaving poetry and short prose aside, given that their comparison with the novel or drama would lead to false conclusions, we should note that the Romanian novel up until the Great War hosts a comparable number of successful works: Nicolae Filimon’s *Ciocoii vechi și noi* [Upstarts Old and New] (1863), Ioan Slavici’s *Mara* (1894), Duiliu Zamfirescu’s *Viața la țară*

28. Simion Alterescu, ed., *Istoria teatrului în România 1: De la începuturi până la 1848* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1965), 230.

29. For a more detailed discussion on this subgenre, see Snejana Ung, “Importing and Writing Tragedy in Nineteenth-Century Romanian Principalities,” *Transilvania* no. 5 (2024): 23-31

30. G. Călinescu, *History of Romanian Literature*, translated by Leon Levițchi (Milan: UNESCO-Nagard, 1988), 330.

31. Franco Moretti, “Simulating Dramatic Networks: Morphology, History, Literary Study,” *Journal of World Literature* 6, no. 1 (2020): 39.

32. For a comparison between Caragiale and Ibsen, with a focus on the social classes represented in their works, see Ovio Olaru, “Satire Meets Critical Realism in the European Semiperiphery: A Study on Ibsen and Caragiale,” *Transilvania* no. 5 (2024): 32-41

[Life in the Countryside] (1894) and *Tănase Scatiu* (1898), Alexandru Vlahuță's *Dan* (1894), and Ion Agârbiceanu's *Arhanghelii* [Archangels] (1913); the only difference is that novelistic production was considerably larger, with a total of over 500 novels vs. less than 50 tragedies. Among the comedies, only Caragiale's four plays are worth mentioning—*O noapte furtunoasă* [A Stormy Night] (1879), *Conu' Leonida față cu reacțiunea* [Mr. Leonida and the Reactionaries] (1880), *O scrisoare pierdută* (The Lost Letter, 1884), and *D'ale carnavalului* [Carnival Scenes] (1885)—, in comparison to which Alecsandri's comedies seem childish today. As for the dramas, only Alecsandri's *Fântâna Blanduziei* [The Blandusian Fountain] (1883) and *Ovidiu* (1885), Alexandru Davila's *Vlaicu Vodă* [Prince Vlaicu] (1902), and Delavrancea's *Apus de soare* stand the test of time. Therefore, I must conclude that not only was tragedy present in Romanian literature, but it was *perhaps the most developed Romanian literary genre until World War I*.

Unfortunately, things will change radically for tragedy and for the entirety of Romanian theater following the war. I will not expand on the reasons why interwar drama underwent a significant regression in relation to poetry and prose—not only in Romania, but on the entire continent. Suffice it to say that “serious” plays (regardless of whether tragedies or dramas) suffered a major setback in relation to the “tradition of Caragiale-inspired satirical comedy of manners,”<sup>33</sup> which became the dominant genre during that era. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, registering varying degrees of artistic success. Among them is Victor Eftimiu, the only interwar Romanian author who programmatically focused on the tragic genre, addressing ancient subjects and labelling his plays as “tragedies,” such as *Prometeu* [Prometheus] (1919), *Thebaida* [Thebaid] (1924), and *Atrizii* [The Atreides] (1939). But, unlike *Cocoșul negru*, Eftimiu's “classical” tragedies are unconvincing, especially due to certain stylistic and compositional shortcomings. For example, *Thebaida* combines the plots of three Greek tragedies: *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles, *Seven against Thebes* by Aeschylus, and *Antigone* by Sophocles. The play's plot is chronologically accurate, but its artistry leaves much to be desired due to the conflict's lack of coherence and the excessive oscillation between catastrophe and anticlimax.

For the interwar period, much more representative are two authors who, without claiming to practice this genre, wrote the most important tragedies of Romanian literature: Lucian Blaga and Camil Petrescu. Blaga made renewed attempts to align tragedy to a Romanian mythology, drawing on Eftimiu's *Cocoșul negru*, but reaching a higher degree of symbolic depth and artistic complexity. His approach begins with the sacrificial tragedy *Zamolxe* [Zalmoxis] (1921), in which the Dacian prophet Zalmoxis incites an angry mob to lynch him so as not to be transformed into the idol of an institutionalized religion, and culminates with *Meșterul Manole* [Master Builder Manole] (1929), a dramatization of a pan-European legend that the Romanians reframed as a medieval anecdote: a prince asks a mason to build a church, but this absolutely requires a human sacrifice; the victim is the master builder's wife herself, while the husband ends up questioning the ethical foundations of the religion he serves and ultimately commits suicide. Conversely, eschewing any mythical-religious projection entirely, Camil Petrescu's tragedies are fully anchored in the historical reality of the modern era, whereby the political and social positions of the characters confront their biographical contingencies. For example, in *Jocul ielelor* [The Fairies' Dance] (1919), the journalist Gelu Ruscanu's intention to provoke the resignation of a corrupt minister is ultimately thwarted both by the possible repercussions of such a gesture on his circle of friends and by the discovery of a troubled family past; unable to renounce his ideal of justice, Ruscanu takes his own life. Somewhat similar, yet approached from the opposite perspective, the plot of *Danton* opposes the “human” pragmatism of the protagonist to the ideological inflexibility of Robespierre and his henchmen, even if it is precisely this superior understanding of human imperfections that will ultimately lead him to the guillotine.

Probably the last notable attempt to revamp tragedy in pre-communist Romanian literature owes to Radu Stanca. Although extremely prolific in the early postwar period, when he wrote around a dozen plays, Stanca was unable to publish any of his works due to ideological restrictions, until his untimely demise, aged just 42. For this reason, he is an exception to the chronological threshold I was announcing in the beginning of this section. In any case, the young playwright is still extremely relevant for the history of Romanian drama, in that he not only penned tragedies, but carefully explored all dimensions and limitations of the tragic phenomenon. On the one hand, Stanca wrote several (quasi) tragedies, starting with the biblical triptych *Drumul Magilor* [The Magi's Road] (1944)—*Turnul Babel*

33. Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu, *Literatura română între cele două războaie mondiale*, vol. 3: *Dramaturgia și critica literară* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1975), 7.



[Tower of Babel] (1945)—*Rege, preot și profet* [King, Priest, and Prophet] (1946), and ending with *Ostatecul* [The Hostage] (1958), a queer tragedy. On the other hand, the author explored and often exceeded the limits of the tragic, imagining plays in which Oedipus finds his redemption on the way to Colonus—*Oedip salvat* [Oedipus Saved] (1947)—, Don Juan has a female double—*Dona Juana* (1947)—, and the Olympian gods are featured as characters of comedy—*Critis sau Gâlceava zeilor* [Critis or the Quarrel of the Gods] (1946).

In conclusion, I consider that, contrary to the dominant narrative in the history of Romanian dramatic literature, not only Romanian literature did, indeed, possess the form of tragedy, but also this genre represented a fundamental coordinate of the Romanian cultural tradition.

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# Importing and Writing Tragedy in Nineteenth-Century Romanian Principalities

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**Abstract:** This article examines the overlooked import and production of tragedy as a literary genre during the long nineteenth-century Romanian literature. It is not that Romanian tragedies had not been written until 1918, but they were not reprinted, and the critics' interest in these early tragedies diminished considerably over time. Starting from the observation that this poor acknowledgment is a result of a narrow and de-contextualized perspective, one that leaves aside the earlier as well as non-canonical literature, I investigate what and how tragedies were imported as well as written at the time. Whereas the imports were oriented predominantly towards the Romance-speaking countries and cultures—more than towards the Greek Antiquity—, local production explored, as expected, the historical (inter-imperial) past of the Romanian Principalities. More important, however, is the configuration of imports, which can be divided, as I aim to argue, into three categories: the latecomers, the cognates, and the diversifiers. Hence, this taxonomy, along with the local production, cast light on the fact that not only do we have tragedy—translated and local—but also that it was, as most of the cultural production, instrumentalized to promote the national ideals.

**Keywords:** tragedy, Romanian Principalities, long nineteenth century, import, local production.

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In a 1927 article, Mihai Ralea sought to answer the same pressing question Nicolae Iorga had posed nearly 40 years earlier: why do we Romanians have no novels? If Iorga attributed this phenomenon to a lack of professional writers,<sup>1</sup> Ralea advanced a different, more nuanced explanation; first, he argued that the lack of epic poetry hindered the natural evolution of genres from epic poetry to novels, leading instead to imitations of Western novels.<sup>2</sup> Second, he pointed to the belated emergence of the bourgeoisie and the high illiteracy rates in Moldavia and Wallachia as contributing factors to this delay.<sup>3</sup> However, another remark Ralea made in the same article is even more intriguing.

Comparing the novel with other literary productions, Ralea argues, "one can ask themselves why we didn't import the novel from the very beginning of our literature, a century ago that is, as we did with the theater (neither theater was preceded by anything in popular literature)."<sup>4</sup> This suggests that, unlike the novel, theater was well represented in Romanian literature. In fact, Iorga's article describes a similar evolution process; according to the critic, theater precedes the novel and is then replaced by it,<sup>5</sup> supporting the idea that we Romanians had drama before we had Romania.

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1. Nicolae Iorga, "De ce n-avem roman", *Lupta*, no. 1090 (1890): 2-3.

2. Mihai Ralea, "De ce nu avem roman?", *Viața românească*, no. 4 (1927): 83-84.

3. *Ibid.*, 86-88.

4. *Ibid.*, 85, translation mine. Original: "[s]-ar putea întreba, de ce n-am importat romanul încă de la începutul literaturii noastre, adică de acum un veac, după cum am făcut cu teatrul (nici el n-a fost precedat de nimic în literatura populară)".

5. Iorga, "De ce n-avem roman?", 2.

It is true that at the time when the novels mentioned by Ralea were published—Duiuiu Zamfirescu's 1894 *Viața la țară* [Life in the Countryside] and Alexandru Vlahuță's 1894 *Dan*<sup>6</sup>—several authors, including Vasile Alecsandri,<sup>7</sup> I.L. Caragiale,<sup>8</sup> and B.P. Hasdeu with his *Răzvan și Vidra* [Răzvan and Vidra] (1867), had already published plays that were re-released and staged over time. However, few well-known plays were explicitly entitled or surtitled “tragedy,” and they were only occasionally referred to as such. For instance, in a preface to an edition of Hasdeu's play, the author notes that “the dramatist is the first to elevate *historical plays* from the obscurity of run-of-the-mill productions.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, both this preface and Ralea's article reveal a paradoxical reception of theatrical production: they discuss theater without truly engaging with it. Specifically, they acknowledge the existence of a rich domestic theatrical tradition—or, in any case, richer than that of novels—without providing substantial information about it.

This study begins by addressing the neglect of non-canonical literature and tragedy, given the prevailing preference for comedy and drama. This absence, I propose, results from a narrow and decontextualized perspective on both translations and the local production of literary<sup>10</sup> and dramatic products. In the first section of the article, I will demonstrate that, counterintuitively, the greatest interest before 1918 lay not in Greek tragedy but in modern tragedy, particularly Italian and French. In the second section, I examine what Margaret Cohen terms “the small unread”<sup>11</sup> of domestic production, which did not make the canon; rather, this umbrella includes lowbrow literary works and theatrical plays. My argument is that both translations and domestic productions are intrinsically linked to the process of nation-building and were therefore instrumental in promoting the national ideals that shaped Moldavia's and Wallachia's socio-cultural milieu until 1918.

### Translating Tragedies: Latecomers, Cognates and Diversifiers

In an 1885 theater review, I.L. Caragiale highlights the supposed diversity of productions at the National Theater in Bucharest by noting that within just five days, the theater featured an Italian opera, an English tragedy translated from French, a Greek play, and a French comedy.<sup>12</sup> As I will demonstrate, most of the tragedies rendered into Romanian were indeed French, Italian, Greek, and English. However, their success varied; the greatest interest was shown in what I term “cognates,” referring to Italian and French tragedies. They were followed by Greek works, whom I classify as “latecomers,” and then English and German works, which served primarily as “diversifiers” in the theatrical repertoire.

When Goethe coined the term *Weltliteratur* in 1827, he placed the Ancient Greeks at the top of the literary hierarchy.<sup>13</sup> This observation alone might justify the delayed translation of Greek tragedies into Romanian; these masterpieces appear to have been read in their original language. Indeed, the development of an educational system in the Principalities was influenced by Western models, as

6. Ralea, “De ce nu avem roman?”, 82.

7. Vasile Alecsandri's series of comedies have Chirița as the protagonist and were published between 1850 and 1875.

8. I.L. Caragiale published his most notable comedies in the second half of the nineteenth century, as follows: “O noapte furtunoasă” [“A Stormy Night”] (1879), “Conu Leonida față cu reacțiunea” [Master Leonidas Faces the Reactionaries] (1880), “O scrisoare pierdută” [“A Lost Letter”] (1884), and “D-ale carnavalului” [“Only During a Carnival”] (1885).

9. Mihai Drăgan, “Prefață”, in B. P. Hasdeu, *Răzvan și Vidra* (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1975), ix. Emphasis mine.

10. Although when it comes to prose and poetry, there are several analyses that approach the relationship between local production and translations during the long nineteenth century. See, for instance, Ștefan Baghiu, “Translations of Novels in the Romanian Culture During the Long Nineteenth Century (1794–1914): A Quantitative Perspective,” *Metacritic Journal* 6, no. 2 (2020): 87–106, or Vlad Pojoga, “The Last Bastion of European Romanticism: A Quantitative Analysis of Poetry in the Romanian Literary Magazine *Convorbiri literare* (1867–1916)”, *Primerjalna književnost* 47, no. 2 (2024): 9–30, <https://doi.org/10.3986/pkn.v47.i2.01>.

11. For the concept of “the great unread,” see Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 23.

12. I. L. Caragiale, “Cronica teatrală”, in *Opere*, vol. 4 (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură, 1965), 158.

13. See J. W. von Goethe and J. P. Eckermann, “Conversations on World Literature”, in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 22: “but, if we really want a pattern, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind if constantly represented. All the rest we must look at only historically, appropriating to ourselves what is good, so far as it goes.”





evidenced by the 1833 *Regulament Școlar* [School Regulation],<sup>14</sup> but it was several decades after *Regulament* was published that discussions appeared on Greek works in schools. A relevant example in this regard is D. Bănescu and Iuliu Valaori's debate, which took place in a series of articles in *Revista Generală a Învățământului* [The General Magazine of Education]. In his reply to Bănescu's article, Valaori reemphasized the need to include only Sophocles and specifically *Oedipus at Colonus* in the curriculum, justified primarily by the limited number of classes per week and the main goal of studying such works, namely that of translating from Greek.<sup>15</sup> In this context, it is worth noting that a *systematic* translation<sup>16</sup> of Sophocles' plays was undertaken only in 1909–1910, when Eugeniu Dinescu released three volumes, which included Romanian renditions of *Electra* and *Philoctetes* (vol. 1), *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* (vol. 2), and *Ajax* and *Women of Trachis* (vol. 3).<sup>17</sup> The intensification and diversification of translations picked up only in the 1920s, after the unification of the Principalities, when several new translations and editions appeared.

Before examining the translations that preceded the systematic translation of Greek tragedies, it is essential to address the Principalities' problematic relationship with the Greeks and, by extension, the Greek language. In his landmark study of the Balkans, Misha Glenny begins his discussion of the nineteenth-century Principalities with Tudor Vladimirescu's 1821 uprising against Phanariot rule.<sup>18</sup> Glenny describes this uprising as "driven by hostility to Greeks,"<sup>19</sup> noting that "[t]hroughout the eighteenth century the *hospodars* [the Greek princes] ... had administered an economic regime that forced Romania's indigenous aristocracy, the boyars, to sell a large part of their produce to Constantinople at prices fixed below the value of the goods in western Europe."<sup>20</sup> Consequently, while an extremely small portion of the population<sup>21</sup> could read Greek tragedies in the original, there was a general reluctance to invest in translating from Greek due to the boyars' strained relations with the Phanariotes.

It is in this context that the dream of uniting Moldavia and Wallachia began to gain prominence among the intellectuals from the two Principalities. As previously suggested, the translation of tragedy was intertwined with the national project. The translation and publication of Shakespeare's plays, such as *Julius Caesar* (1599) in 1864 and *Hamlet* (1623) in 1887,<sup>22</sup> should be seen as exceptions to the rule, given that Italian and French modern tragedies were more prevalent. For example, in 1836—the same year that Cezar Bolliac published the first Romanian essay about Shakespeare's drama in the magazine *Curiosul* [The Curious]<sup>23</sup>—Vittorio Alfieri's tragedies *Saul* (1782) and *Virginia* (1777–1783) were published in Romanian translation. An even earlier translation is that of Voltaire's *Alzire ou les Américains* (1736), released in 1835.

The intellectual who likely played the most crucial role in the dissemination of Italian and French modern tragedies in translation was Ion Heliade-Rădulescu (1802–1872). His extensive activities significantly impacted at least four areas: printing, theater, translation, and language. For instance, the three tragedies

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14. See Alex Drace-Francis, *The Making of Modern Romanian Culture: Literacy and the Development of National Identity* (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), 100: "The decisive regulation, the *Regulament Școlar*, entered into force in May 1833: its authors, Barbu Știrbei and Costache Moroiu, had been educated in the West and were advocates of the modern pedagogical systems of Beccaria and Pestalozzi."

15. Iuliu Valaori, "Lectura tragicilor greci în liceu (un răspuns)," *Revista Generală a Învățământului*, no. 1 (1906): 23–24.

16. Various plays were translated before these editions but they were not part of a larger project. For instance, *Philoctetes* was translated by I. P. Simon in 1888, *Oedipus Rex* by Th. Aslan in 1894, and *Antigone*, by Mihail Dragomirescu in 1896.

17. See Sofocle, *Tragediile lui Sofocle*, vol. 1–vol. 3, transl. by Eugeniu Dinescu (Câmpulung: Tipografia, Legătoria și Librăria N. Vlădescu, 1909–1910).

18. The Phanariotes, who were members of Greek families in Phanar, ruled in the Principalities from 1711/1716 until 1821.

19. Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War, and the Great Powers (1804–2012)* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2012), 58.

20. *Ibid.*, 57–58.

21. Drace-Francis, *The Balkans.*, 3: "However, the dissemination of ideas through 'culture' (meaning here literary activity, even if such a definition is generally problematic) rarely took place very smoothly. In Romania, most of the population remained illiterate to the end of the nineteenth century."

22. On the early translation and critical reception of Shakespeare's play into Romanian, see Anca-Simina Martin, "Critical Reactions to and Early Research into Shakespeare's Bawdy (Worldplay) in Romania(n)," *Transilvania*, no. 9 (2019): 45–50.

23. See Dan Grigorescu, *Shakespeare în cultura română modernă* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1971), 45–49.

mentioned in the previous paragraph were all published by Heliade's printing house, as indicated in the paratext: "În tipografia lui I. Eliad" [In I. Eliad's Printing House]. Regarding theater, Heliade, along with Costache Aristia—the translator of Alfieri's *Saul* and *Virginia*—and others, founded "Soțietatea Filarmonică" [The Philharmonic Society] in 1833, which operated until 1838, while in 1852, he participated in founding the National Theater in Bucharest. One of his translations was even performed by graduates of the Philharmonic Society as part of their practical examination. However, what interests me at the moment is how Heliade used certain translations to advance his linguistic ideas.

Heliade's focus on emphasizing the Latin origins of the Romanian language and its similarity to other Romance languages is well-known.<sup>24</sup> Less recognized, however, is the fact that many of his ideas were also disseminated through his translations. One such example is the Romanian rendition of Lord Byron's *Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice* (1821). In the notes following the preface, Heliade offers a justification for the "poor" orthography: "Readers, if you find in this translation the old orthography with ь and ж<sup>25</sup> and others like these, I must explain that this tragedy started to be printed in 1837 and even though it has just been finished, neither the translator nor the printing house could change the orthography once we had begun this way."<sup>26</sup> Although an admirer of Byron, Heliade seems more interested in contributing to the development of the Romanian language. This conclusion is supported by (1) his acknowledgment that the translation<sup>27</sup> was made from A. Pichot and E. de Salle's French version, which was considered a rather mediocre rendition, and (2) statements such as that of Petre Grimm, who finds Heliade's translation interesting only from the perspective of the history of the Romanian language.<sup>28</sup> However, a more important question remains unanswered: Why Byron? Does this discussion not concern, as I argued before, the import of Italian and French modern tragedy? The answer, I believe, comes once again from Heliade. Surprisingly, Byron's name is not mentioned in the preface signed by the Romanian intellectual. Instead, Heliade focuses on Marino Faliero and, by extension, Italian culture. For him, "everything about Venice is or was extraordinary; its scenery—a dream and its history—a novel,"<sup>29</sup> and his goal seems to be that of "[bringing] into the Romanian language a historical deed worth remembering."<sup>30</sup> It follows, then, that Heliade's concern is neither tragedy per se nor its structure, but simply the plot or, more precisely, the mere story.

Returning to the theatrical representations of two tragedies translated by Heliade, they include Voltaire's *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète* (1739), published in 1831, and Felice Romani's *Norma* (1831), released in a bilingual edition in 1843. The reason why I have chosen these two works is because their reception differed considerably. For instance, the Romanian rendition of Voltaire's tragedy went almost unnoticed by the wider public (likely due to the low literacy rates at the time as well). Notes from a critical edition of Heliade's translations, published in 1985, indicate that the print run of the first edition was resold under a new cover in 1834.<sup>31</sup> That same year, on August 29, the play was staged by the students of the Philharmonic Society as part of their examination, suggesting an effort to disseminate the translation. Conversely, *Norma* was met with success from the very beginning. Vladimir Drimba, the editor of the critical edition, notes the existence of three renditions published in quick succession: G. Asachi's, Heliade's, and M.A. Canini and I.G. Valentineanu's. He also speculates that Heliade's rendition was likely prompted by the visit of an Italian opera ensemble whose series of shows was to start with *Norma*.<sup>32</sup>

24. See, for instance, Ion Heliade-Rădulescu, "Repede aruncătură de ochi asupra limbei și începutului rumânilor," in *Scrieri alese* (Bucharest: Albatros, 1984): 183–192.

25. These two letters are the equivalent of ă and â in the current Romanian Latin alphabet.

26. I. Eliad, "Însemnare a traducătorului," in *Din operele lui Lord Byron*. Transl. by I. Eliad, vol. II (Bucharest: Tipografia lui I. Eliad, 1839), xix, translation mine. Original: "Cetitorule, de vei vedea în această traducție încă ortografia veche despre ь și ж și altele sunt dator a-ți da socoteală că această tragedie începuse a se tipări încă din anul 1837 și cu toate că s-a săvârșit acum, dar nici traducătorul, nici tipografia n-au putut a schimba ortografia în vreme ce se începuse odată altfel".

27. Petre Grimm, "Traduceri și imitațiuni românești după literatura engleză," *Dacoromania* (1924): 301.

28. Ibid.

29. I. Eliad, "Prefață," in *op. cit.*, v, translation mine. Original: "Toate câte țin de Veneția sunt sau au fost extraordinare; privilegiștea ei seamănă un vis și istoria ei un romanț".

30. Ibid., xiii, translation mine. Original: "am adus în limba noastră o faptă istorică vrednică de pomenire".

31. I. Heliade Rădulescu, *Opere*, vol. 4, critical edition by Vladimir Drimba (Bucharest: Minerva, 1985), 571.

32. Ibid., 685.



What both narratives highlight is a high interest in Italian and French modern tragedy, driven by the growing influence of national ideas, and the emergence of a local literary field in which translations play a significant role. However, translations were imported fairly neither geographically nor chronologically. The broader picture reveals three possible categories of renditions: latecomers, cognates, and diversifiers. Latecomers, which include Ancient Greek works, were *studied* but not widely *read* until the early twentieth century. The cognates, or Romanians' "Latin siblings"—the Italians and French—had their tragedies translated from the first half of the nineteenth century, instrumentalized to promote national unity. Diversifiers, including English, German, and other tragedies from core literatures, played a limited role compared to the first two categories; they were neither studied extensively nor relied upon to promote national values.

### Local Tragedies: The Hidden Inter-Imperiality

One of the innovations highlighted by modern tragedy is what Moretti refers to as "the deconsecrated king."<sup>33</sup> Moretti's analysis reveals significant differences not only between Ancient Greek and modern tragedy but also within modern tragedy itself, particularly between Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy.<sup>34</sup> In another work focused on the novel, Moretti describes novelistic production in peripheral literatures as a compromise between foreign form and local content,<sup>35</sup> a process "usually prepared by a massive wave of West European translations."<sup>36</sup> Before proceeding, several points need to be addressed. First, while tragedy and the novel are distinct genres, it is useful to view Romanian tragedy as a form of compromise. The import of foreign tragedies, as discussed earlier, raises concerns about local production: the nationalistic selection of translated tragedies and the focus on language over text may have influenced how local tragedies were written. Second, an exhaustive analysis of the tragedy form is beyond the scope of this research. Instead, I aim to provide an overview of literary production, highlighting several overlooked or lesser-known authors, followed by a brief reinterpretation of Hasdeu's notable play. Third, and stemming from the previous point, the lack of a nuanced discussion might overlook an important detail: the "purity" of the genre or the potential misclassification of these plays. Much like the emerging Romanian novels, which Ralea suggests may not fully conform to the novelistic form, the tragedies produced in the nineteenth-century Romanian Principalities may not be purely tragedies;<sup>37</sup> they might also be historical plays.

Conversely, works identified as drama might also be considered tragedies. In this context, B.P. Hasdeu's *Răzvan și Vidra* (1878), often labeled as a drama or historical play, can also be interpreted as a tragedy, as I will demonstrate later. Addressing the crucial issues of slavery abolition and Roma emancipation, the play is deeply rooted in its social context. This led G. Călinescu to remark that "[l]eaving aside its social intention, the drama remains in itself an admirable work with an *original* conflict."<sup>38</sup> Less enthusiastic, Caragiale acknowledges the play's formal flaws but concludes that it is an "honest" play and the only one worth noting from the entire theatrical output.<sup>39</sup> However, a critical rereading reveals a more significant flaw related to social emancipation, specifically that it does not exclude racism. For example, Răzvan, a free Roma man, tries to help a beggar, but his help is rejected solely because he is Roma: "had you been Romanian, I would've let you! But a Gypsy, I'd hope not! I'd hope not!"<sup>40</sup>

The stigma relates to an enduring insistence on "pure" Romanian origins, a theme prevalent in almost all tragedies published in the nineteenth century. Most of these plays feature eponymous characters who were rulers of Moldavia, as seen in Alexandru Pelimon's *Curtea lui Vasilie Vodă* [Vasilie Vodă's Court] (1852), Samson Bodnărescu's *Alexandru Lăpușneanu* (1884), Iuliu I. Roșca's *Lăpușneanu* (1886),<sup>41</sup>

33. Franco Moretti, "The Great Eclipse: Tragic Form as the Deconsecration of Sovereignty," in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*. Trans. by Susan Fischer, David Forgacs and David Miller (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 42.

34. *Ibid.*, 42–82.

35. Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 2, no. 1 (2000): 58.

36. *Ibid.*, 59.

37. Ralea, *art. cit.*, 82–83.

38. Călinescu, *History of Romanian Literature*, transl. by Leon Levițchi (Milan: Nagard Publishers), 1988, 318. Emphasis mine.

39. I.L. Caragiale, "Cercetare critică asupra teatrului românesc," in *Opere*, 133.

40. B.P. Hasdeu, *Răzvan și Vidra* (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1975), 12, translation mine. Original: "De-ai fi român, cale-vale! dar țigan, păcat! Păcat!"

41. The paratextual information indicates that the play was staged on March 5, 1881, prior to its publication, at Dacia Theater in Bucharest.

and N.A. Bogdan's *Bogdan I* (1890). Wallachia, by contrast, is less frequently depicted, with Toma Strâmbeanu's *Radu Leonu Vodă și miniștrii săi fanarioți* [Radu Leonu Vodă and His Phanariot Ministers] (1856) being a rare example of a tragedy set in this region with a Wallachian ruler.<sup>42</sup> Regarding Lăpușneanu, the interest in him as a protagonist likely has a literary basis. Costache Negruzzi's novella "Lăpușneanu" (1840), published in the first issue of *Dacia literară* [Literary Dacia], the most important literary magazine at the time, may have inspired these tragedies. Another thematic link exists between Pelimon's tragedy, featuring prince Vasile Lupu and his daughter Ruxandra, and Asachi's short story "Rucsandra Doamna" [Lady Rucsandra], which also focuses on Ruxandra Lupu. These comparisons are significant as they reveal a unique aspect of Romanian tragedy: a strong interest in exploring Moldavia's historical past. Historically, Moldavian rulers were often caught in inter-imperial struggles.<sup>43</sup> For example, Lăpușneanu, who ruled Moldavia between 1552–1561 and 1564–1568, was aided by the Poles in his accession to the throne, resulting in an oath of fidelity to the King of Poland, which complicated relations with the Habsburgs and the Ottomans. This overview of local tragedy highlights a tendency to align with broader cultural productions rather than drawing from Ancient Greek or modern tragedy, leading to further examination of whether these works belong to the category of tragedy or historical plays.

Before moving on to the final point of this article—a brief discussion of B. P. Hasdeu's play—I want to highlight an alternative pattern in Romanian tragedy. In the previous section, I showed that even when tragedies were translated from non-Romance literatures, there was a tendency to choose plays with plots rooted in the history or culture of Romance countries. This, I believe, is a subtle strategy to emphasize the similarities between Romania and the Romance-speaking world. However, in domestic production, the reliance on imported plots seems to gradually give way to local material. This point is far from redundant, given that Caragiale's study on theatrical repertoire categorizes plays into adaptations, plagiarism, and translations.<sup>44</sup> According to Caragiale, adaptations or plagiarisms often followed the French model, favoring comedies and boulevard melodramas.<sup>45</sup> This perspective invites us to scrutinize plays such as Samson Bodnărescu's *Rienzi* (1868), dedicated to Titu Maiorescu, and Sava N. Șoimescu's *Catilina* (1886). *Rienzi* focuses on Cola di Rienzo, a fourteenth-century Italian politician, while *Catilina* centers on Catiline, the Roman politician known for the Catilinarian conspiracy. These examples suggest that the importation of plots may extend beyond simple borrowing, indicating a fragile and unreliable boundary between translations and local productions.

Now, let us turn to B.P. Hasdeu's *Răzvan și Vidra*, a play that illustrates the inter-imperial predicament. First, I will explain why this often-called "Romantic drama" qualifies as a tragedy. On the one hand, the plot of the play checks all the attributes of the tragic form, as it is defined by Terian.<sup>46</sup> The "original conflict" in this play is not about the fate of princes or rulers but about a newly freed man. The failure depicted in the play is not just an individual's failure but the failure of an entire class, whose upward social mobility is continually obstructed. As the play shows, other characters do not oppose Răzvan because he is a ruler but because he belongs to a certain race and class: "I know that in Moldavia, there is only one Răzvan, I swear / It's a pity that he is a Roma... Damn it!... This is his only fault."<sup>47</sup> In his remarkable study on modern tragedy, Raymond Williams argues that

"[w]e must ask whether tragedy, in our own time, is a response to social disorder. If it is so, we shall not expect the response to be always direct. The disorder will appear in very many forms, and to articulate these will be very complex and difficult. A more immediate difficulty is the ordinary separation of social thinking and tragic thinking."<sup>48</sup>

42. An interesting case is that of *Moartea lui Brâncoveanu* [Brâncoveanu's Death] (1872), a play written by Antonin Roques, a French writer who came to Bucharest. See I. L. Caragiale, "Cercetare critică asupra teatrului românesc," in *Opere*, 134.

43. See Laura Doyle, *Inter-imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 4: "Both political leaders and everyday folks thus occupy what I call the condition of inter-imperiality, a fraught position, lived all at once in the neighborhood, at the imperial court, on the road, in the body, and amid the invasive stream of political events and news. The *inter-* of *inter-imperiality* refers to multiply vectored relations among empires and among those who endure and maneuver among empires".

44. See Caragiale, "Cercetare," 133.

45. *Ibid.*, 135.

46. See Andrei Terian, "Tragedy in Romanian Literature: Some Conceptual Delimitations," *Transilvania* 53, no. 5 (2024): 12-22

47. Hasdeu, *Răzvan*, 135, translation mine. Original: "Eu știu că-n țara Moldovei unul e Răzvan, mă jur! / Păcat că-i țigan... La dracu!... Țăsta-i singuru-i cusu!"

48. Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 88.



Of particular note here is the need to connect two ways of thinking. The social dimension is woven into the original plot, which is unusual for a tragedy. Instead of focusing on a king or a deconsecrated king, this play features a free Roma man, which is quite atypical for Romanian tragedy of that era. By the end, his struggle for upward social mobility becomes tragic. To paraphrase Williams, the tragedy of a free man can be as compelling as that of a prince.<sup>49</sup> Beyond social upheaval, reflected in class struggle and persistent racism, the character himself stands out. Unlike most contemporary tragedies, which feature protagonists from a single class, Hasdeu's play breaks this mold. As Lukács puts it, this represents a shift in the structure of tragedy that we can also observe in Hasdeu's work:

"Although in Elizabethan drama the representatives of several classes appear, the true human beings, the dramatic characters, are derived on the whole from a single class ... The lower classes merely take part in comic episodes, or they are on hand simply so their inferiority will highlight the refinements of the heroes. For this reason, class is not decisive in structuring the characters and the action of these plays"<sup>50</sup>.

The inclusion of diverse social classes is a distinctive feature of modern tragedy. However, Hasdeu's play still grapples with unresolved issues. While it is a modern tragedy that features a protagonist from the lower class and among marginalized groups, it does not resolve the underlying social disorder. Răzvan's tragic end bears a striking resemblance to the fates of princes and kings in classical tragedies.

According to Lukács, modern tragedy is also historicist and has a sociological foundation.<sup>51</sup> The abolition of slavery is a prominent issue, but it is only one aspect of the socio-historical context. Another significant factor is the presence of inter-imperial tensions. Răzvan's social mobility highlights the inter-imperial nature of the Romanian Principalities. Throughout the play, from the first to the fifth act, Răzvan evolves from a free Roma man and hajduk captain to a Polish army officer, eventually becoming a Moldavian hetman.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, Act III's setting at the fringes of the Moskal territory<sup>53</sup> underscores Moldavia's position at the crossroads of multiple empires—the Ottoman, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian Empires—and its experience of their internal and external conflicts.

Moreover, the play features ethnically complex characters, whose Romanian identity is frequently highlighted and questioned. A notable dialogue between Răzvan and a freeholder revolves around the latter's ethnic origins: "Was your father Polish?"<sup>54</sup> asks Răzvan, followed by, "And your mother, was she Hungarian?"<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Act III introduces new characters and further enriches the inter-imperial ethnic mixture. Alongside Răzvan, now depicted as a Polish soldier, the act presents other "Romanians," Polish soldiers and captains, a Moskal scout ("Iscoada Muscălească"), and three soldiers with no specified ethnicity. Despite this, the initial conversation among these soldiers reveals them as Polish and, as they claim, superior to the Moskals. Minski and Piotrowski's references to Răzvan are particularly telling; they do not view him as inferior due to his Roma heritage or lack of bravery—though Minski envies him for his bravery—but because they see him as "an old dummy from Moldavia" and a "*vir valachicus*."<sup>56</sup> This portrayal reflects the play's successful depiction of the heterogeneous and adaptable nature of ethnicity, shaped by the inter-imperial dynamics of the time.

Thirdly, the play's action underscores the inter-imperial context. Up to this point, the setting, the protagonist's social mobility, and the characters appear to have been all influenced by the interactions and tensions between competing empires. As Doyle argues, "[t]he *inter-* of *inter-imperiality* refers to multiple, overlapping relations among empires and among those navigating between them."<sup>57</sup> The play highlights victories against the Turks and Tatars, suggesting the Principalities' active role in shaping

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49. *Ibid.*, 73.

50. George Lukács and Lee Baxandall, "The sociology of modern drama," *Tulane Drama Review* 9, no. .4 (1965): 147.

51. *Ibid.*, 151–152.

52. Each Act starts with the list of the characters, where Răzvan's role is mentioned to indicate his social mobility, but each time this mobility is followed by an adjective denoting his belonging to an imperial army, for instance, "ostaș leșesc" [Polish soldier]. See Hasdeu, *Răzvan*, 5, 39, 69, 102, 129.

53. *Ibid.*, 69.

54. *Ibid.*, 121, translation mine. Original: "Tatăl dumitale a fost leah?"

55. *Ibid.*, translation mine. Original: "Însă maica dumitale, se zice c-a fost maghiară?"

56. *Ibid.*, 71, translation mine. Original: "Un nătărău din Moldova".

57. Doyle, *Inter-imperiality*, 4.

regional inter-imperial dynamics. However, several lines in the play also point to broader rivalries between empires that negatively impact the Romanians' fate. For example, after meeting with the hetman, Răzvan expresses his concerns to his wife, Vidra, about the complex interplay among empires: "He first told us that the Polish don't get along with the Germans, / and having connections with the Turks, they would like to secure them; / He also told us that Aron, the new ruler of Moldavia, / Is against the Turks, together with the German emperor."<sup>58</sup> Additionally, Bașotă voices deeper concerns about external politics: "We are fighting with the pagan powers, / And, as it is said, we may see that tomorrow / The Polish ... will help the Turk."<sup>59</sup> Moldavians appear to have little room to maneuver; they are essentially trapped between the competing empires. The same applies to the protagonist, whose actions are constrained by fellow Moldavians due to his ethnicity and by the imperial powers.

In summary, a new—though brief—reading of Hasdeu's play reveals that what seems like a purely local historical drama is actually a tragedy deeply rooted in the long history of inter-imperial relations. While the issue of slavery is undeniably important and deserves critical attention, focusing solely on this aspect oversimplifies the play's sociological foundation. Instead, the play reflects Romania's complex emergence from a lengthy and often overlooked inter-imperial legacy. Hasdeu's *Răzvan și Vidra* serves as a prime example of this. Other works, like those about Lăpușneanu, could also support this interpretation, revealing that behind the historical narrative and national focus lies a tragedy shaped by inter-imperial influences.

### Conclusion

Tragedy is notably absent from the canon. However, this does not mean that tragedy was not produced during the long nineteenth century, but rather that it was largely forgotten or obscured by subsequent generations of readers, audiences, and critics. It was forgotten because it was neither reprinted nor restaged, and it was hidden because critics such as Ralea and Drăgan discussed it without even mentioning specific titles. My aim has been to address this gap. In investigating the production and circulation of tragedy in the nineteenth-century Romanian Principalities, I have considered the peripheral status of Romanian culture within the global literary landscape. As evidenced by the study of the novel, Romanian literature was more focused on importing than on producing its own. Therefore, my analysis includes both translations and locally produced tragedies. Fundamental yet necessary questions needed to be addressed: What tragedies were translated? What tragedies were written? Answering these questions has led to the key finding of this study.

The main conclusion can be summarized as follows: while translations and local productions were geographically divergent, they were teleologically convergent. An overview of translations reveals a clear preference for modern tragedies from Romance-language countries, with Ancient Greek, and modern English and German tragedies receiving less attention. In contrast, local productions focused on exploring the Romanian context. This divergence reflects the national ideals and nation-building efforts prevalent before 1918. Thus, while imports aimed to reinforce the idea of Romanians as descendants of the Romans and integrate Romanian culture into the broader Romance cultural sphere, local productions sought to delve into the historical past of the Principalities, often highlighting inter-imperial dynamics. Returning to Moretti's concept, if there was a visible compromise, it was not formal but strategic: tragedy itself was compromised, repurposed to further the national ideals of the time.

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58. Ibid., 115, translation mine. Original: "Ne spuse dintâi că leșii sunt rău cu țara nemțească, / Și-având legături cu turcii ar dori să le păzească, / Ne mai spuse c-Aron-vodă, noul domn moldovenesc, / Ține-mpotriva Turciei, cu-mpăratul cel nemțesc".

59. Ibid., 125.



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# Satire Meets Critical Realism in the European Semiperiphery: A Study on Ibsen and Caragiale

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**Abstract:** Henrik Ibsen and Ion Luca Caragiale seem to have nothing in common but that each is considered the “national playwright” of Norway and Romania, respectively. The present contribution seeks to draw some parallels between the two (semi)peripheral authors from the late 19th and early 20th century based on their ideological positions in the literary fields of their countries. After tracing the relationship between their dramatic output and the idea of revolution, i.e., how revolution in several of its forms is reflected in their works, I work my way towards their common preoccupation for “legalizing” the world—either through bureaucracy or finance—and how this preoccupation finds its most suitable expression. Finally, I discuss how form plays a crucial role in officializing content and how Ibsen’s seriousness reflects the more prosperous, more established Norwegian bourgeoisie, whereas Caragiale’s mockery, satire, and absurdism lays bare the “frivolousness” of the new Romanian middleclass, as aspirational as it is morally precarious.

**Keywords:** tragedy, modern drama, realism, satire, Ibsen, Caragiale

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OLAF. Thank you. Then I don’t want to be a pillar of society.  
BERNICK. Oh, why not?  
OLAF. Because I think it must be so boring.<sup>1</sup>

It would be interesting to imagine how a meeting between a young Ion Luca [I.L.] Caragiale (1852-1912) and Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) would have played out. In a way, the result would have been a disaster; the laidback Caragiale would have probably irritated the solemn Ibsen. Notwithstanding, they are both critical voices within the (aspiring) bourgeoisie. Ibsen needs no further presentation, but Caragiale is lesser known to an international public. Born in Haimanale near Ploiești, a city north of the capital of the so-called Old Kingdom, Bucharest, the future playwright Ion Luca Caragiale showed a propensity for theatre, plays, improvisation, and comedy from his early youth.<sup>2</sup> The political climate during his upbringing was a very interesting, yet troubled one: on February 11, 1866, a coalition between the liberal and the conservative party forced Alexandru Ioan Cuza, credited with being the first Romanian ruler to govern the historical Principalities of Moldova and Wallachia, virtually unifying them under a single government and a single national assembly, to abdicate. A reformer, he introduced several crucial democratic changes—nationalizing the church’s massive estates, dismantling serfdom and introducing an agrarian reform that, albeit it misfired, virtually paved the way towards industrialization, effecting the leap from feudalism to capitalism, etc.<sup>3</sup> In short, he was the first “modern” Romanian leader. Following the 1864 agrarian reform, the nouveau riche, lawyers and entrepreneurs, replace the blue-blooded landowners, and later ultimately collaborate with them in removing Cuza from power.

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1. Henrik Ibsen, “Pillars of Society,” in *The Complete Major Prose Plays*, translated by Rolf Fjelde (New York: Plume, 1978), 116.

2. Șerban Cioculescu, *I.L. Caragiale* (Bucharest: Editura Tineretului, 1967).

3. Cornel Ban, *Dependență și dezvoltare. Economia politică a capitalismului românesc*, translated by Ciprian Șiulea (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2014).





Caragiale moves to Bucharest to study at the Conservatory, albeit not showing talent for acting, and returns shortly after, when his father, a lawyer himself, ensures him a position as copyist in the courthouse where he works in Ploiești. In 1870, as he still resides there, a series of events lead to the “Ploiești Revolution” against the German prince who had replaced Cuza on the Principalities’ throne, Carol I (Prince Karl of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen), a failed attempt at a coup d’etat<sup>4</sup> owing to the ruling classes’ Francophile sentiments and their siding with France against Germany in the Franco-Prussian War—and implicitly against their German-born ruler. Albeit he shared the inflamed spirits, Caragiale’s revolutionary ambitions were fortunately cut short by his mother. After his father’s death, he leaves for Bucharest again, where he becomes a prompter for the National Theatre, performing menial intellectual jobs, including translations of popular French plays. Later, after the success of his play *O noapte furtunoasă* [A Stormy Night] in 1879, Caragiale works as editor for the *Timpul* journal, from which he resigns in order to become an “inspector-acquisitor” for the insurance company *Dacia-Română*, where he is tasked with recruiting new clients: the bureaucratic banality of everyday life, reminiscent of Kafka’s work in the Prague branch of Assicurazioni Generali. In 1881, he becomes a school inspector for Romanian counties Suceava and Neamț, where he must inspect the wellbeing of rural schools—another similarity with traveling salesman Samsa, as well as with Kafka’s other *Heimatloser*, the country doctor. No wonder his plays feature the same outlandish absurdism. Caragiale then engages with the liberal press and writes articles for several satirical newspapers, in addition to his own plays, but never enters politics himself. Albeit integrated into the period’s literary scene and being met with admiration from the most outstanding literary circle of his time, *Junimea*, he can barely make ends meet and, in a twisted turn of events, eventually becomes a merchant and—of all trades—the owner of a restaurant and brewery. In a tongue-in-cheek reference, a popular contemporary beer brand features his portrait and is dubbed *Nenea Iancu* (“Mister” or “Uncle” Iancu, as Caragiale is said to have been nicknamed by his friends). After a series of plagiarism accusations, initially made under the penname Caion and later continued by fellow writer Alexandru Macedonski, which he easily rebukes, and after having received a significant inheritance from his late aunt, he decides to move to Berlin in 1904, together with his family, where he dies in 1912.

Notwithstanding lesser one-acts, Caragiale is known for four major comedies, the aforementioned *O noapte furtunoasă* [A Stormy Night] (1879), *Conu Leonida față cu Reacțiunea* [Mr. Leonida and the reactionaries] (1880), *O scrisoare pierdută* [The lost letter] (1883), *D’ale Carnavalului* [Carnival scenes] (1885), and last but not least, the tragedy *Năpasta* [The plague or Catastrophe]<sup>5</sup> (1890). His comedies are appreciated for the humorous manner in which they depict the emerging Romanian bourgeoisie in the late 19th century, criticizing it for its Western aspirations, its insufficient understanding of democracy and liberalism, and its moral corruption.

Both Ibsen and Caragiale criticise the bourgeoisie, but from different perspectives and with different ends. Caragiale is renowned for mocking it, while Ibsen deconstructs its morals. The former is short, punchy, tragic only in the cynicism that underscores its comedy, while the latter is tragic in what it doesn’t convey explicitly. Whereas Caragiale creates a moral landscape, opening up the stage from the start to welcome different actors of contemporary Romanian social life—hence his dynamic, humorous, at times vulgar style, Ibsen is slow in unpacking the stage, heavy, dwelling on ancient family histories and biographies, which makes him the “champion of individual freedom, the tireless campaigner against hypocrisy and complacency.”<sup>6</sup> Somebody leaves forever, somebody returns unexpectedly, letting the viewers wonder what happened before the curtain is drawn and what will happen after it falls. When discussing Caragiale and notwithstanding his unfair treatment of Caragiale,<sup>7</sup> Romanian literary critic E. Lovinescu drew a parallel to Ibsen as well, the first one I am familiar with:

“Dominated by a moral ideal, Ibsen’s theatre is a theatre of battle, the satire of a world, on the ruins of which he wants to build a new world. Lacking an ideal, Caragiale’s theatre is a satire with no other purpose, a collection

4. Masterly ridiculed in Caragiale’s short story *Boborul!* [The people!], from 1896.

5. Translatable simply as *Tragedy as well*.

6. Arnold Weinstein, *Northern Arts: The Breakthrough of Scandinavian Literature and Art, from Ibsen to Bergman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 41.

7. As a staunch proponent of Western values, Lovinescu regarded Caragiale as a reactionary force, going against the inevitably “progressive” bourgeoisie; it is precisely his “realism” that becomes the target of Lovinescu’s attack, a realism that correctly “identifies the issues of contemporary society, but is presumably blind to the sense of history [a la longue durée, my emphasis, O.O.]”

Teodora Dumitru, *Modernitatea politică și literară în gândirea lui E. Lovinescu* (București: Muzeul literaturii române, 2016), 149.

of imbeciles, immoral individuals, automatons of a single formula; however spiritual it may be in its sparkling form, it is sad as a hospital for moral and intellectual infirmities.”<sup>8</sup>

Whereas Ibsen “puts things up for debate,” as Georg Brandes articulated the ambitions of the so-called “modern breakthrough” of Scandinavian literature,<sup>9</sup> showing “not the surface of life but the hidden truth underneath,” Caragiale puts them up for show; one’s methodology is dialectics and the mannerisms of *business*—Nora discussing the household economy, Peter Stockmann’s verbal idiosyncrasies, betraying the obtuse entrepreneur-politician—, the other’s is *mise-en-scène*, mockery, ridicule. Hence the reason why Garabet Ibrăileanu called Caragiale’s theatre a “slum of the soul” where seriousness and dignity come to die, “the intellectual slums”<sup>10</sup> of the bureaucratic-demagogical newspeak created by liberalism. In a way, Caragiale criticizes the—in retrospect—risible liberal dream of the “Ploiești republic” in which he believed in his youth.<sup>11</sup>

### **Comedic form, civil war. Satire and revolution**

Speaking of the Ploiești Republic, revolution is a constant in Caragiale’s works. The event it usually makes reference to is the forced abdication of Alexandru Ioan Cuza on February 11, 1866. However, “revolution” occurs as an obsessive thought throughout all of his plays, and the form it usually takes is the slapstick comedy, the “revolutionary” chaos and unruliness generated on stage, the confusion and the breakdown of all communication. Nothing can be taken seriously, not even revolution. *Mr. Leonida*, dubbed “a farce” by its author, tells the very brief story of the 60-year-old “Conu” Leonida and Efimița, his wife, who have a conversation about the ousting of the Cuza regime right before going to bed. The political conversation, led by Leonida but fuelled by his loving wife Efimița, betrays a poor understanding of fiscal measures and the workings of the state: Leonida argues that under a republican government, state taxes will disappear, whereas pensions will go up. Efimița retorts by naively asking: how is one supposed to increase pensions and have a functioning state if one is to eliminate taxes, to which Leonida replies: “that’s the state’s business, what’s it doing? why do we have it? it’s its duty to make sure that people receive their salaries on time.” Later, during the night, they are awakened by a mob outside their windows. In light of their previous conversation and on account of an innate hypochondria, they believe it might be a revolution and act accordingly, barricading themselves inside their bedroom. They shortly hear repeated and insistent knocks on the door. Still in their pajamas and utterly petrified, they finally open to a confused servant who had dropped by to tend to the fire. It is revealed that tonight was “lăsata Secului” or Shrove Tuesday (also Pancake Tuesday or Pancake Day); there had been a party in the slums, and Nae Ipingescu, a low-ranking police officer who had already made an appearance in *A Stormy Night*, had gotten “wasted” and shot several times into the air in celebration. A farce as its name suggests, but nonetheless symptomatic of Caragiale’s tendency of suspending the conventions of realism. These two characters are empty shells, contentless forms—hence the endless repetitions and comedy of language, which all build a sense of revolutionary chaos, a total communication breakdown.<sup>12</sup>

This is the face Caragiale confers to the specters of the 1848 Revolution some 30 odd years later: outdated, hypochondriac, superstitious, and not completely aware neither of the significance of the revolutionary moment nor of the current political climate, showing how liberal Western aspirations are poorly internalized. Albeit part and parcel of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian cultural debates and frequently invoked whenever Romanian underdevelopment is brought to the fore, these contentless forms are the common denominator of all nations at the “periphery of capitalism,” to quote Roberto Schwarz’s book on Machado de Assis. For instance, in another book he argues about the bleak aftermath of assimilating Western culture in Brazil:

8. Liviu Calin, *I.L. Caragiale* (București: Eminescu, 1974), 91.

9. Georg Brandes, *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de aarhundredes litteratur. Emigrantlitteraturen*. (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag, 1877), 17.

10. Garabet Ibrăileanu, *Spiritul critic în cultura românească* (Iași: Junimea, 1970), 195.

11. *Ibid.*, 166.

12. Which will reach its paroxysm in *Only During a Carnival* (1885). It is precisely because of this exaggerated carnivalesque that the play is considered one of his least successful.



"Nothing seems more reasonable, for those who are aware of the damage [of precisely this assimilation], than to steer in the opposite direction and think it is enough to avoid copying metropolitan trends in order to achieve an intellectual life with greater substance [or content]. This conclusion is illusory, as we shall see, but has strong intuitive support. For a time it was taken up by both right and left nationalists, in a convergence that boded ill for the left and, through its wide diffusion, contributed to a low intellectual level and a high estimation of ideological crudities."<sup>13</sup>

And what is the couple's confusion but the symptom of the "low intellectual life" and the "ideological crudities" they—and most of Caragiale's characters, for that matter—keep repeating *ad nauseam*?

Admittedly, Ibsen does not feature revolutions but enacts them through the messianic calling of many of his protagonists. In leaving her husband, children, a fulfilling family life, Nora enacts a *revolution* in marriage. Rosmer renounces his aristocratic roots and adheres to the "radicals," while Stockmann raises hell against the city, his brother the mayor, (initially) his wife, etc., thus intentionally embracing the self-fulfilling prophecy of the "enemy of the people," as Peter mockingly calls him. "He talks about the baths, but it's a revolution he's after. He wants to put the government into different hands,"<sup>14</sup> they say about him at that public debate, after *Folkebundet* had refused to publish his study on the infected waters, to which he replies: "Yes, you're damn right I am, Mr. Hovstad! I'm fomenting a revolution against the lie that only the majority owns the truth." There is a sort of anarchic mission in every Ibsenian play: "Now there is absolutely no reasonable necessity for the individual to be a citizen," Ibsen wrote in a letter to Georg Brandes. "On the contrary, the state is the curse of the individual.... The state must be abolished! In this revolution I will take part!"<sup>15</sup> Ibsen sees Stockmann, Solness, Werle, and every other self-respecting troublemaker as a mirror image of himself, a "champion of no other ideology than the ideology of the negative assault."<sup>16</sup>

These two stances perfectly mirror the two types of revolutions the playwrights embody: the revolutionary farce in Romania, wherein major social revision is as frequent as it is inconsequential, and a sort of uncompromising moral revolution in the north, which always entails burning bridges forever. Two faces of the same semiperipheral predicament, two fundamentally different approaches, predicated on the (in)stability of the social class that adopts them.

### **Bureaucratizing the world**

While Caragiale draws on chaos, Ibsen seems to be obsessed with order. Not surprisingly, Péter Szondi talked about the "Ibsensche Gerichtsverfahren,"<sup>17</sup> the Ibsenian "legal procedure." Ibsen moved from Rome to Dresden in 1869, and "German order, clarity, and restraint [...] have now become essential to his art."<sup>18</sup> In creating modern drama, Ibsen used all the tricks of the legal apparatus: the letter, the legal document, the dowry, the slander, the trial. But in fact, Caragiale and Ibsen share several such motifs: documents and blackmail, pressing legal matters, as well as the tendency to "legalize" bourgeois life and present it against the backdrop of politics, the legal system, profits and business opportunities.<sup>19</sup> But this "legal landscape," so to speak, is slightly more nuanced, in that in both Ibsen and Caragiale, the plays alternate between the public and the private sphere, both of which are inscribed in a logic of broader legal/collective responsibility, which in its turn renders fluid the distinction between the public and the private, as we shall see.

Caragiale's *A Stormy Night* (1879), for instance, features Jupîn Dumitrache—dubbed Titircă Evil-Heart—, a small-scale timber-selling businessman and captain in the civil guard, Nae Ipingescu, a low-ranking officer and friend who mimics his every move, Chiriac—salesclerk and Dumitrache's factotum—, Dumitrache's wife Veta, and lastly her sister Zița. Chiriac has an affair with Veta, while Zița falls in love with Rică Venturiano, a lowly public servant and part-time journalist.<sup>20</sup> During a night out at a beer garden

13. Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced ideas: Essays on Brazilian culture*, ed. John Gledson (London & New York: Verso, 1992), 3.

14. Henrik Ibsen, "An Enemy of the People," in *The Complete Major Prose Plays*, translated by Rolf Fjelde (New York: Plume, 1978), 350.

15. Quoted in Robert Brustein, "Ibsen and revolt," *Tulane Drama Review* 7.1 (1962): 115-116.

16. *Ibid.*, 123.

17. Péter Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1956), 157.

18. Brustein, 134.

19. One of the first thoughts expressed by Peter Stockmann is how much the property prices will go up thanks to the municipal baths.

20. A play on "adventure," meaning "affair" in Romanian.

on Shrove Tuesday, Dumitrache is annoyed that a “bum”—Venturiano, of course—had been staring at his wife the entire evening and had followed them home. In fact, he is only interested in Zița and not in Veta. The confusion and the ensuing chaos stem from the fact that Veta’s and Dumitrache’s house bears the number 9 instead of 6—again, a reduction to the legal identifiers of urban life. Venturiano, in trying to get to Zița at number 9, inadvertently pursues Veta, which makes Chiriac—and not her husband, *nota bene*—jealous. The husband Dumitrache, however, shows nothing but disdain towards the “scribblers”<sup>21</sup> he thinks are romantically pursuing his Veta, whom he never suspects of any wrongdoing. Comedy, but closely related to the simulation of order and to the vain preoccupation with decency, with functioning mechanisms—in politics, marriage, and finance alike. Chiriac, the very man Veta cheats on Dumitrache with, is tasked by Dumitrache with “protecting his honour as a family man”—which in a strange way he actually does. From the public (outrage on account of Venturiano) to the private (familiarity with Chiriac), every reaction seems to pursue a logic independent from the characters.

The same tendency to officialise day-to-day life and inscribe it in a self-sufficient mechanism requiring minimal intervention is seen in *A Doll House*, where Nora, a typical Norwegian middleclass housewife, inadvertently becomes an entrepreneur. “But still it was wonderful fun, sitting and working like that, earning money. It was almost like being a man.” Clearly, business and work are delegated to men,<sup>22</sup> and Ibsen’s dramatic unfolding is reminiscent of legal procedures—the liberal dream wherein buying, selling, or saving your husband’s life and the honour of your family is subject to law, as uncomplicated as signing a contract and following the same rules.<sup>23</sup> Ideally, just like in a contract, after the debt is paid, it is as if it had never existed. But the seemingly clean and streamlined mechanisms again conceal their own contradiction: nothing is forgotten, least of all the sins against morals, bourgeois decency, and the Law. Krogstad blackmails her with the forged signature of her (then) deceased father, asking to use her influence over her husband to keep him in the bank—despite his own forgeries. In the end, Nora renounces her joyful demeanour and her justifications, as if denouncing the *man*-made hypocrisy of it all, and her language returns to the directness of indictment. A marvellous exchange, in stark contrast to the play’s opening discussion about money between the infantilized Nora and Helmer. In fact, everything is encapsulated in the first act: Nora is a “wood nymph,” a “squirrel,” a “singing bird” asking for money to adorn her nest—her nest being the bourgeois household, which she takes care of according with her allotted role. Hence the exciting strangeness of being “almost like a man” and taking things into her own hands behind Helmer’s back. Fru Linde herself infantilizes Nora, recalling her own financial downfall after the death of her husband. “One has nothing to *work* for”—she says, unaware that Nora’s maturity resides not only in *work* but in breaking the law—borrowing money without her husband’s consent and saving his life in the process.

But after the conflict closes in on itself and the illusion is broken, *there is nothing to return to*. The public “officialdom” – the watchful and critical eyes of society, business associates, servants – is satisfied, yet the private remains in a sort of dissonance, something lingers unresolved at the heart not of marriage as institution, but of precisely Nora’s marriage.

Hence the very solemn dialogue between a disillusioned Nora and Helmer: they finally “have a serious discussion about serious things,” but their language is unadorned, it exudes silence and heavy-hearted resolution. In Caragiale, on the other hand, there is this mutually assured hypocrisy and celebration of conventions. After the narrative arc closes, *things return to normal*, which is somewhat more realistic than the total breakdown of social ties through Ibsenian obstinacy. Because the satire-driven Caragiale reflects reality instead of trying to articulate intricate, perfectly consistent criticism against a political body or development. “I think we have a thirst for reality,” wrote Peter Brooks in the opening of his *Realist Vision*. “Which is curious, since we have too much reality, more than we can bear. But that is the lived, experienced reality of the everyday. We thirst for a reality that we can see, hold up to inspection, understand.”<sup>24</sup> Two old pensioners try and fail to understand their epoch, love affairs are covered up

21. A very middleclass disdain towards petty public servants and unsuccessful journalists, students, and every representative of “turbulent,” “revolutionary” young intelligentsia. However, this episode consolidates the moral relativism at play in all of Caragiale’s plays: Dumitrache reads a polemic article by Venturiano and praises it without knowing its author.

22. Albeit Caragiale’s female characters are the unconcealed forward drivers of plot.

23. The way in which the economy has made its way into everyday life and, through extension, into literary production. Just like increasing the organizational complexity of private enterprises during the latter half of the 19th century required the emergence of a bureaucratic workforce, the increasingly complicated social relations require at least some degree of officialization.

24. Peter Brooks, *Realist vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 1.



by the blindness of cheated husbands. But that is still not the reality of fiction—made visible, open to inspection, and intelligible, i.e., conveyor of ideas according to the logic of “realist” literature, encoded through a social and societal causality; instead, it is just the “lived, experienced reality of the everyday.” Comforting because it is recognizable, at the same time it does not try to sell any ideas, to construct coherent criticism; hence more realist than realism itself. And another reason it is delegated to the ranks of satire. As *A Stormy Night* concludes, the affair between Chiriac and Veta continues, Rică Venturiano marries Zița—whom he barely knows—, and the happy end is indicative of an ongoing illusion—or, even more so, of *the futility of dissolving it*. The characters are fully aware of each other’s faults and misdemeanours, and they all know that everybody else knows. “Deprive the average man of his life-lie and you’ve robbed him of happiness as well,” as Relling informs Gregers in the *The Wild Duck*, published in 1884, only five years after Caragiale’s play. Complicity is a sine qua non for Caragiale’s two major plays, *A Stormy Night* and *A Missing Letter*, because addressing the hypocrisy and the moral failure of it all would transform Caragiale into Ibsen by forcing the “moral superposition” to collapse.

Another comparison could be drawn to *A Lost Letter*, Caragiale’s 1883 social comedy. It, too, tells the story of a love triangle between the local leader of the ruling party branch in “the capital of a small mountainous county,” Zaharia Trahanache, president of the Permanent Committee, the Electoral Committee, the School Committee, and so on,<sup>25</sup> his wife Zoe Trahanache, and his friend Ștefan Tipătescu, the county prefect. The action takes place shortly before the election for the Chamber of Deputies, where two opposing political parties are striving to impose their candidates. The play debuts with a discussion between Ștefan Tipătescu and his loyal factotum, the local chief of police Ghiță Pristanda, about numbers: the number of flags Pristanda was supposed to install, about his salary, about the budget, about the number of mouths he has to feed from his meagre salary, and so on. After this introduction of great comical effect, reminding us of the importance of bureaucracy, Pristanda informs Tipătescu that Nae Cațavescu—a lawyer/upstart who weaponizes his newspaper, *Răcnetul Carpaților*, against political opponents—got hold of a compromising document he intends to blackmail Tipătescu with in order to ensure his position as a member in the national Chamber of Deputies. The document in question is a love letter from Tipătescu that Zoe had lost, subsequently found by the nameless Inebriated Citizen,<sup>26</sup> and stolen from him by Cațavencu. Upon finding out about the letter’s existence, Trahanache dismisses it as forgery, not once questioning his wife. The play concludes happily after a brawl, with the letter returning to Zoe thanks to the Inebriated Citizen and Trahanache discovering that Cațavencu, the blackmailer, had forged a check and is thus vulnerable to blackmail himself. Thus, the balance of power is overturned, and Cațavencu becomes the humiliated underdog, yielding to the play’s true “pillars of power,” as Trahanache dubs himself and his own, reminiscent of Ibsen’s 1877 *Pillars of Society*. As for the elections, they are won by a third candidate, sent from the center—his upward trajectory also resting on blackmail, as we find out. Ultimately, peace is restored, and the former enemies celebrate the victorious candidate. The same complicity again, threatening for a second to erupt in a real conflict but ultimately muffled.

The similarities with *A Doll’s House* are clear. Both Cațavencu and Krogstad are “lost” because they had signed false papers and, just like Zoe tries to persuade Trahanache to appoint Cațavencu as the county’s representative so as to not to spark a scandal because of her and Tipătescu’s affair, Nora tries to persuade Torvald Helmer to let Krogstad stay in the bank so that he does not betray her financial machinations and misconduct. Because telling Torvald basically signifies making it public. There is no distinction between public and family life, but this is a clearly gendered distinction: whereas Nora goes behind Helmer’s and everyone’s back, and what she does remains concealed provided she does not betray it to others, what Torvald *knows* instantly becomes public knowledge—and even worse, public opinion. In Caragiale, what Trahanache or Dumitrache know about their wives’ affairs does not matter at all. Even if Trahanache would be aware of Zoe’s infidelity, we can imagine him glad that it’s Tipătescu, his old friend, and not some random stranger. The same goes for *O noapte furtunoasă*. Dumitrache tells Chiriac to defend his “honor as a family

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25. A citizen who is supposedly fully engaged in the wellbeing of society as a whole. In fact, nearly all the characters are lawyers, politicians, in short: responsible. Yet, we both never see them work nor see the fruits of their labour. Whereas in Ibsen, the viewer got a glimpse, a suggestion of work—Solness looking over Ragnar’s plans, Helmer retreating into his study—, Caragiale spares us this spectacle. The titles and professions of his characters are unquestionable, yet do not materialize, with the exception of Pristanda, who talks about his family, his position, and most importantly his income. Within the play, he is but a pawn, delegated to a secondary role, but among Caragiale’s bourgeois plays, he is the only one who mentions money and for whom the means of existence are a genuine issue.

26. A similar drunkard is featured in *An Enemy of the People*, but without having as important a role.

man,” which he indeed does by having an affair with Veta and defending her against Rică—who is actually after Veta’s sister Zița—, who ultimately becomes Dumitrache’s brother-in-law. Both cheated husbands are blinded by their own *decency* and honor: they *choose* not to see the infidelities, as much as they choose to regard their own political corruption as necessary. Caragiale’s couples never argue, never disagree, are never in conflict. In one of his shorter stories, *Diplomacy*, a wife is said to “dupe” his superior into not only not firing her husband but downright promoting him and increasing his pay. This very process, of course, conceals an infidelity, which is portrayed by the husband as diplomacy and wit and appreciated as an act of love. In another one of his short stories, “The last legal tender,” a husband is criticized for having maimed his wife for infidelity, as “he couldn’t understand, like everybody else, that the most basic rules of gallantry obliged him to renounce any scandal.” In Caragiale, there is never any tension in the erotic ménage à trois. In Ibsen, however, Nora’s symbolic infidelity brings about disaster. As Weber explains regarding conflict resolution in kin groups—which presents many structural similarities with Caragiale’s “groups of complicity”:

“The kin group competes with political groups as an independent,<sup>27</sup> overlapping group deriving from common descent, which may be actual, fictitious or artificially created through blood brotherhood; it is a complex of obligations and loyalties between persons who may belong not only to different households but also to different political and even language groups.”<sup>28</sup>

Yet, Caragiale’s plays never possess a form of household head, no figure of authority whatsoever, for “[t]he kin group may be completely unorganized, a kind of passive counter-image of the authoritarian household” and “it does not require a leader with powers of control.” In Ibsen, we encounter many moral figures of authority—, so that the “mutually agreed arbitration” does not take place and every road leads to revolution.

Krogstad is Cațavencu, Nora is Zoe, but Cațavencu also presents traits common to Hovstad, editor of the *People’s Courier* in *An Enemy of the People*: the embodiment of opportunism and cowardice when faced with more powerful political adversaries. Again, Caragiale cultivates the serious farce: Trahanache cannot believe Cațavencu’s letter, which he thinks is forged but is true—because he loves his life and, more importantly, he believes in the institutional bond they share, the legal mechanism informing their relationship, and his “honor as a family man,” mirroring Dumitrache’s. Conversely, Ibsen focuses on the inflated tragedy of legal matters: Helmer takes Krogstad’s letter all too seriously—albeit the audience knows the conflict is resolved by now and that the letter is completely harmless. Caragiale’s characters, it seems, believe more in bourgeois institutions than do Ibsen’s.

The letter has always been this catalyst—even more so when it proved an infidelity or contained a confession. The letter through which Rodolphe breaks it off with Emma Bovary. The love letters sent to Effie Briest by Crampas, found years later by Baron Geert von Innstetten, which bring her ruin *despite* a now-content marriage. Again, these intransigent principles, whose severity cannot be ignored, even if the wrongdoings remain inconsequential and unknown. Again, the lacking distinction between public and family life, whereby the bourgeois man cannot forfeit his public mission of *telling the truth* for fear of losing his standing—or his morals—, even if the strive for absolute truth has life-threatening potential, as *The Wild Duck* has shown. The obsession with order, with legality: no wonder Rastignac was a law student, and no wonder Stockmann goes against his best interests to safeguard not public health, which is always a secondary concern, but “society” as a whole. “I love my home town so much I’d rather destroy it than see it flourishing on a lie,” he says, and we’re never quite sure whether his over-the-top idealism should be read within the conventions of satire or realism or, alternatively, whether the serious subject is taken in stride by “that comic vision [which] constitutes the drama’s central mode of seeing.”<sup>29</sup> If there is any consolation, neither did Ibsen: “I am still a bit uncertain how far I should call the thing comedy [*lystspil*] or a straight drama [*skuespil*]; it has something of both elements, or else lies in between ...”<sup>30</sup> Now, there is no doubt that Caragiale wrote comedies. As Romanian philosopher Alexandru Dragomir puts it in his interpretation of *A Missing Letter*, “‘comedies’ are the events that cannot be

27. Once the romantic conflict is resolved, infidelity ceases to be a problem, and the kin group reunites in the common goal of dealing with the new candidate sent from the center.

28. Max Weber, *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology*. Vol. 1. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 366.

29. Robin Young, “Ibsen and comedy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, ed. James Walter McFarlane, 58-67 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 65.

30. Quoted in Bjorn Hemmer, “Ibsen and the realistic problem drama,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, 68-88, 81.



elevated to the level of History and are meant to remain *des histoires*," i.e., inconsequential anecdotes.<sup>31</sup> But there is always an undisclosed amount of melancholy in Caragiale's inconsequential, interchangeable characters, a nostalgia after the unfulfilled potential of Romanian political and social development.

However, in both cases, there is contradiction between the officialization of life—business, paperwork, documents—and the influence of the subjective—that “rest” that escapes officialization. The “grey area,” as dubbed by Moretti: “What draws Ibsen to the grey area, I asked earlier ... This: it reveals with absolute clarity the *unresolved dissonance of bourgeois life*. Dissonance, not conflict. Strident, unsettling— Hedda and her pistols— precisely because there are no alternatives.”<sup>32</sup> I would add: unresolved and unresolvable dissonance, precisely because it is *internal*. Internal, hence a proof to the existence of a private sphere which is missing in Caragiale. Ibsen's public officialization – bureaucracy and the likes – retreats into a private and familial space – ruled by the same “official” conventions, but it fails: the unresolved dissonance manifesting itself. In Caragiale, there is no retreat, for the private does not exist.

Caragiale was dubbed “Romania's Moliere,” and just like Moliere, he questioned the dominant class not by showing its abuses against other classes, as Lessing showed the nobles playing with bourgeois lives, but by showing the contradiction at the heart of it. And Caragiale, just like Ibsen, does not address the peasantry, of which there was plenty in both the Norwegian and the Romanian semi-periphery. Which brings us to the question as to why Caragiale chooses comedy for his criticism of the bourgeoisie and places the peasantry on an entirely different level of dramatic potential.

### **Tragedy as class—inverted Ständeklausel**

When Caragiale does, indeed, discuss the peasantry, he does so in the only play that illustrates the characteristics of naturalism: *The Plague*. A story about a peasant woman, Anca, who lost her husband, Dumitru, to murder in a forest. The supposed killer, forester Ion, was found with some of his belongings and sentenced to 10 years forced labor, a sentence during which he is beaten to a pulp and forever loses his sanity. After 9 years, Ion escapes and accidentally reaches Anca's household one night, as she is home alone. She now lives with Dragomir, whom she never loved, because she always intimately knew that he is her first husband's actual killer. During that fateful night, the supposed killer and escapee Ion commits suicide because of his trauma, and Anca, in an act of revenge, frames Dragomir as his killer. Upon the police's arrival, he is drenched in Ion's blood. Thus, Dragomir will be sentenced for the murder of Ion and will in this way be finally punished for Dumitru's murder. The play ends with something along the lines of “an eye for an eye!” uttered by a cynical, revengeful, and ultimately human Anca. Short and punchy, *The Plague* is Caragiale's only tragedy and also the only play set in a rural environment<sup>33</sup>. In this sense, it represents an inverted Ständeklausel—the abolition of which gave us the *bürgerliches Trauerspiel*, the bourgeois tragedy<sup>34</sup>—, whereby *only the peasantry* can portray the tragic. Furthermore, it is the only play where he shows any kind of sympathy towards his characters.<sup>35</sup> In it, Sofia Nădejde sees a critique of the Romanian penal system: Ion is beaten to a pulp and tortured, hit repeatedly over the head in order to confess to a murder he did not commit, but in the process loses his mind and becomes a simpleton.<sup>36</sup> Knowledge of the law is also crucial for the whole plot, as illustrated by Dragomir's repeated question of how long it takes to be acquitted of murder. In the eyes of the law, 10 years. In the eyes of a wife, never. But the legal system, cold and indifferent, gives way to the “rest”—the “unresolved dissonance” not of “bourgeois life,” but of life in general—Anca's calculated revenge, her intuition regarding her husband's killer, whom she lived with for so long. Yet everything is set in the presumed backwardness of the rural.

What this tells us is that the tragic, once delegated to depicting the lives of the elites and “actions of state” [Staatsaktionen], is in Caragiale's case a staple of the peasants, whereas the comedy, the *Lustspiel* that “should deliver an image of the daily life of the lower classes,” as Martin Opitz puts it in

31. Alexandru Dragomir, *O teză de doctorat la Dumnezeu. Exerciții de gândire* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2016).

32. Franco Moretti, “Ibsen and the Spirit of Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 61 (2010): 117-31.

33. For some considerations about the position of *The Plague* in the history of Romanian tragedy, see Andrei Terian's text: Andrei Terian, “Tragedy in Romanian Literature: Some Conceptual Delimitations,” *Transilvania* 53, no. 5 (2024): 12-22

34. Karl S. Guthke, *Das deutsche bürgerliche Trauerspiel* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2016); Franziska Schöbner, *Einführung in das bürgerliche Trauerspiel und das soziale Drama WBG* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2015).

35. Ibrăileanu, *Spiritul Critic*.

36. Sofia Nădejde, “Năpastea,” in *I.L. Caragiale în conștiința contemporanilor săi*, ed. Rodica Florea and Stancu Ilin, 157-166 (Bucharest: Minerva, 1990), 158.

reformulating the Aristotelian principle,<sup>37</sup> now helps configure the lives of the Romanian bourgeoisie. Nowhere in his treatment of this latter class does the auctorial voice insert the slightest hint of tragic or seriousness, but Caragiale in this way ennobles the peasants as the more authentic, more resilient, and moreover more *stable* class. Notwithstanding his sympathy for the peasants—illustrated through his lengthy commentary about the 1907 Romanian peasant revolt, written as he was living in Berlin—, his choice mirrors the instability of this new class, understood as a result of the thoughtless assimilation of Western institutions, as C. Dobrogeanu Gherea talks at length about in his text on *Neoserfdom*.<sup>38</sup>

### Conclusions

One superstructural common denominator of Caragiale and Ibsen is the way in which they relate to dramatic forms and the issue of performativity. Ibsen is known for his distaste for French theatre: “Ibsen, writing in 1851 in the periodical *Andhrimmer (Manden)*, had severely criticized the whole tendency of French drama to place too great a reliance on ‘situation,’ at the expense of ‘psychology’.”<sup>39</sup> During his term as head of the national theatre in Bergen, nearly half of the productions were French and presented the classical, already clichéd traits of French dramas: the sensationalist, fast paced plot advancement, lack of nuance, “action [...] varied, complicated, and continuous in order to provide excitement and surprise and suspense in the theatre.”<sup>40</sup> Instead, he is known for his “German” way of understanding theatre, since he “published *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* rather than submitting them for performance.”<sup>41</sup> Conversely, the translator of French farces and plays Caragiale, who, albeit moving to Germany, never assimilated its cultural climate in full, cultivated a French manner of doing theatre<sup>42</sup>, concentrated, as discussed, on performance, on narrative unruliness, sensationalism, ostentatiously naïve plot twists, and so on. Exactly what Ibsen disavowed.

They present these very clear similarities, which begs the question of whether Caragiale was familiar with Ibsen’s work. As Gianina Druță remarks in her book, the similarities end with the gathering scene in both *The Lost Letter* and *An enemy of the people*, which appeared merely one year apart, and both contain a nameless Inebriated Citizen, an agent of chaos who is paradoxically invested with the most coherence and level mindedness. However, she argues, Ibsen was unknown in Romania and “no Ibsenian influence” can be traced in Caragiale<sup>43</sup>. Ibsen’s *Collected Works* had been published with Reclam publishing house in Leipzig in 1889-1890 – his popularity surely preceded that –, whereas *The Lost Letter* appeared in 1883. Albeit Caragiale did not read German, this surely deserves a more in-depth foray.

Ibsen is disillusioned with the rhetoric of social progress by way of bourgeois morals. His characters want to reach absolute truth, uncompromising—because the Norwegian bourgeoisie emerged organically, as the result of real socio-economic development. It has exhausted that in-betweenness of the Romanian bourgeoisie, with one foot still in the feudal conditions of the prior generation and one in the dream of Western standards of living. In the Romanian semi-periphery, the bourgeoisie is still in the process of forming and religiously respects the mechanisms it has imported—it is, in a sense, more virtuous, more principled than Ibsen’s agents of chaos challenging the status quo. Whereas Ibsen features these genial outsiders, whose dissonance creates tragedy, Caragiale’s characters are all concerned with respecting appearances—the semi-failure to do so creates comedy. The stability of the Norwegian middleclass—a country which had become relatively wealthy by 1870, with a GDP well above the European average, on par with developed Western countries and more prosperous than the Scandinavian counterpart it shared a border and a union with, Sweden—<sup>44</sup> creates a stable

37. Martin Opitz, *Martin Opitzens Aristarchus sive de contemptu linguae Teutonicae und Buch von der Deutschen Poeterey* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 53.

38. Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, *Neoioabăgia: studiu economico-sociologic al problemei noastre agrare* (Bucharest: Editura Librăriei Socec, 1910).

39. Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), 30.

40. *Ibid.*, 27.

41. *Ibid.*, 11.

42. In regards to the process of breaking free from foreign plots and styles in developing a specific national dramatic tradition, Snejana Ung makes a compelling argument about B.P. Hasdeu’s *Răzvan și Vidra* in Snejana Ung, “Importing and Writing Tragedy in Nineteenth-Century Romanian Principalities,” *Transilvania* 53, no. 5 (2024): 23-31.

43. Gianina Druta, *Ibsen at the Theatrical Crossroads of Europe: A Performance History of Henrik Ibsen’s Plays on the Romanian Stages, 1894-1947*. (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2024), 137.

44. Ola Grytten, “The Economic History of Norway,” in *EH.Net Encyclopedia*, ed. Robert Whaples. March 16, 2008. URL <https://eh.net/encyclopedia/the-economic-history-of-norway/>





form, mirroring the uprightness and moral surplus value of the social democracy that would lay at the heart of the “Nordic model.”<sup>45</sup> The frivolousness and improvised nature of the Romanian bourgeoisie—always under the threat of dissolving, always changing, always in-between and peripheral in regards to different cultures—can generate nothing but satire.

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45. Mary Hilson, *The Nordic Model. Scandinavia Since 1945* (London: Reaktion Books), 2008.

# Tragedy of Monsters: Vampire Fears, Melodrama, and the Modern Horror

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**Abstract:** The contemporary understanding of the vampire trope is not solely a literary construct but also the outcome of its theatrical adaptations, often following closely after the publication of the seminal works that shaped the myth. Despite the occasional reading of vampires as tragic figures, works featuring these creatures have yet to be staged as tragedies, translating instead to melodramas and musicals. This article examines theatrical renditions of John Polidori's "The Vampyre" (1819), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) and *The Vampire Lestat* (1985), demonstrating that although these literary works offer varying interpretations of the vampire trope, they consistently diverge from the tragic form once they are adapted for the stage. At the same time, vampires represent a world of post-tragic plots, where tragedy is impossible since they live too long after the tragic event had already occurred. Our theory is that the staging of vampire narratives coincides with historical contexts in which audiences experience disillusionment with tragedy's promise of catharsis, opting instead to look to other dramatic formulas for a reflection of their times. While tragedies often depict the protagonist's downfall due to an internal fatal flaw, vampire melodramas and musicals, in most cases, explore the collective trauma caused by external flaws, thus resonating more with the social and cultural milieu of their times.

**Keywords:** tragedy, modern novel, modern drama, horror, *Dracula*, *The Vampyre*, vampires

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In his essay on Balzac's novels, "Homo Palpitans" (1983), Franco Moretti stresses out that the main difference that the novel brings in respect to "tragic flaw" and the typical "fall" of the hero in tragedy relies in the presence of multiple determinants:

"In tragedy everything conspires concertedly *in only one direction*. In Balzac, although the basic tendency is clear, the high number of variables inherent to the systems of the city and the novel brings about the conclusion through a continuous and highly unpredictable series of ups and downs. In this way, suspense and surprise encourage city dwellers to believe that only rarely is 'everything lost'."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, in many ways, this *loosens* the plot and diminishes the catharsis. Tragedy—as theorized by Aristotle and further developed by classical and modern theorists—structured its plot in a specific way to ensure that the spectator focuses on the tragic development: it is short, confined to a limited space, and involves few characters. This approach ensures, on the one hand, that *the plot is there in its entirety*, and on the other hand, that once the hero's fall occurs, *everything is irrevocably lost*. However, within the evolution of the epic, from Homer to Balzac, tragedy also functioned as a kind of

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1. Franco Moretti, *Signs Takes for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs and David Miller (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 118. Original emphasis.



short circuit. The grand narratives of Homer were transformed by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, among others, into tragic stories drawn from what was once a “continuous and highly unpredictable series of ups and downs”: Greek mythology.

In modern times, the “polysemy of multiple paths” has marked a very strong difference between tragedy and the novel.<sup>2</sup> The character networks of *Antigone* and *Les Misérables* illustrate the different narrative quests that emerge from this evolution: “While Sophocles’s system is small, tight, and visibly centered around the fatal figure of Creon, *strategos* of Thebes, Hugo’s crowded network shows dozens of figures with a single link to the body of the text, evoking the ‘minor-minor’ characters of Alex Woloch’s *The One vs. the Many*.”<sup>3</sup> The more enclosed the world of the tragic is, the greater the damage, and the more powerful the activation of a narrative claustrophobic strategy—at least for the ancient Greeks. The internal network of tragedy is small because it must suffocate its plot. This explains the overwhelming fear of fate that pervades ancient and classical tragedy. The evolution of tragedy, however, involved the enlargement of the network—Shakespeare’s world is larger both in tragedies and historical dramas. To secure its powerful representation of absolute power, tragedy had to build more and more complex relations. This is also why the novel moved away from this claustrophobic narrative form: the “rise of the novel,” as described by Ian Watt and others, is a story of the rise of individual agency, meaning individual openness—open possibilities and multiple determinants again. If tragedy is claustrophobic, the novel is an extroverted celebration of expansion: the hero builds a world in “Do It Yourself” fashion, celebrating the open world of liberal development.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, the rise of the modern novel in late eighteenth-century Western Europe coincided with a renewed and fruitful interest in the theory of tragic form and the reshaping of tragedies themselves.<sup>5</sup> Schiller, Schlegel, Hegel, and others were “inventing” a new theory of tragic from 1782 to 1820, while Goethe published *Faust. / Eine Tragödie [Faust/ A Tragedy]* in 1808—with a first fragment in 1890. At the same time, in England, a new kind of modern fear was emerging:

“The fear of bourgeois civilization is summed up in two names: Frankenstein and Dracula. The monster and the vampire are born together, one night in 1816, in the drawing room of the Villa Chapuis near Geneva, out of a society game among friends to while away a rainy summer. Born in the full spate of the industrial revolution, they rise again together in the critical years at the end of the nineteenth century, under the names of Hyde and Dracula.”<sup>6</sup>

New theories of tragedy from German Romanticism, new forms of modern drama (particularly the “bourgeois” ones), and new fears—all emerged together during the early development of what Eric Hobsbawm labeled the “Age of Revolution,” continuing through the “Age of Capital.”<sup>7</sup> They all, in a way, reflected later in the historical materialism of Marx and Engels, in the modern drama of Ibsen, and Stoker’s *Dracula*. It is therefore legitimate to ask how these new theories, forms, and fears intersect. In the works of Karl Marx, one can already see them converging, particularly in the *Manuscripts of 1844* and later in *Capital* (1867–94): the theory of tragedy helps illustrate how money distorts reality, as seen in *Antigone* or *Timon of Athens*, which are his main examples in his chapter on “Money” and “Hoarding”: “[t]he ancients therefore denounced money as subversive of the economic and moral

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2. Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-system from Goethe to García Márquez*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 86.

3. Franco Moretti, “Two Theories,” *Daedalus* 150, no. 1 (2021): 16.

4. “From the Renaissance onwards, there was a growing tendency for individual experience to replace collective tradition as the ultimate arbiter of reality; and this transition would seem to constitute an important part of the general cultural background of the rise of the novel.” Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), 9.

5. The difference between tragedy and tragic has been put forward here by Andrei Terian: “In other words, most of the Romanian critics cited above confuse *tragedy*, a literary (dramatic) genre formalized almost 2,400 years ago, with *the tragic*, an aesthetic-existential category produced by German idealist philosophy around 1800. Admittedly, the idea of *the tragic* was developed out of *tragedy*, hence it always retains an inextricable link to its prototype.” Andrei Terian, “Tragedy in Romanian Literature: Some Conceptual Delimitations,” *Transilvania*, no. 5 (2024).

6. Moretti, *Signs*, 83.

7. Hobsbawm, Eric. *Age of capital: 1848-1875* (London: Hachette, 2010). Hobsbawm, Eric. *Age of revolution: 1789-1848* (London: Hachette, 2010). DEVINE Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of capital: 1848-1875* (London: Hachette, 2010). Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of revolution: 1789-1848* (London: Hachette, 2010).

order of things"<sup>8</sup>; while Goethe's *Faust* aids in explaining how "dead capital" attracts labor: "[i]n their difficulties our commodity owners think like Faust"<sup>9</sup>; finally, vampires are central to his vision of capitalist accumulation: "[c]apital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the labourer works, is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has purchased of him."<sup>10</sup> Tragedy, modern drama, and modern fears all together in the quintessential world view of modern revolutionary thought.

What we argue here is that, although vampires are far removed from traditional tragedies—since the fall of a tragic hero hinges on human flaws—the evolution of vampire narratives draws heavily on the modern reinterpretations of tragic form and tragic fear. Although written in prose, John Polidori's "The Vampyre" and Stoker's *Dracula* pay more tribute to tragic form than to the rise of the novel.

### Tragedy and Horror

The presence of monsters in tragedies is limited. As Ruth Scodel demonstrates, monsters were largely excluded from the world of epic in Ancient Greece, and since tragedies often rely on epic plots, monsters are similarly foreign or marginal to tragedy: "The epic presents a world in which gods frequently intervene in the lives of individuals; so does tragedy. Ghosts appear but not Lamias; monsters, following Homer, tend to be kept at the periphery."<sup>11</sup> This exclusion also stems from the main principle of tragedy, *mimesis*, which required the tragic plot to confront the viewer with the believable. While supernatural beings such as gods, furies, and centaurs appear, monsters in the modern sense do not. However, monstrosity is deeply connected to the human. What is monstrous is often defined as inhuman or non-human, but this only serves to highlight the uncanny aspects of humanity—Marx's monsters are human accumulators, for instance.<sup>12</sup> The monstrous cannot be conceived without reference to the human, and yet it cannot be fully considered as human either.

Among all monsters, vampires have captivated modern imagination the most. From period dramas to contemporary television, vampires have dominated Gothic drama, repeatedly transforming it into a world of tragedy.<sup>13</sup> The most compelling example of the connections—always present in some form—between tragic form and vampires is the 1920 expressionist movie *Genuine, die Tragödie eines seltsamen Hauses* [*Genuine: The Tragedy of a Vampire*], directed by Robert Wiene. *Genuine* tells the story of a succubus, the dream projection of the protagonist who, in typical late eighteenth-century Romantic fashion, paints the portrait of a high priestess and dreams ekphrastically. The movie followed Wiene's 1920 horror *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* [*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*], which Siegfried Kracauer interpreted as a critique of "the madness inherent in authority."<sup>14</sup> Its plot revolves around Dr. Caligari, who uses hypnosis to make the sleeping Cesare prophesy and then commit crimes. As Lorna Jowett notes, Kracauer—arguably the most compelling advocate for realism in German cinema at the time—believed it is an outspoken "revolutionary story," whose meaning "reveals itself unmistakably at the end, with the disclosure of the psychiatrist as Caligari reason overpowers unreasonable power, insane authority is symbolically abolished."<sup>15</sup>

8. Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, *Book One: The Process of Production of Capital* [1867]. First English edition of 1887, translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, edited by Frederick Engels (Moscow, USSR: Progress Publishers, 1887), 86. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf>.

9. *Ibid.*, 61.

10. *Ibid.*, 163.

11. Ruth Scodel, "Tragedy and Epic," in *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. Rebecca Bushnell (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 189.

12. See more on the general metaphors of vampirism in Anca Simina Martin, "The Trope of the Vampire (and *Strigoi*) in Romanian Culture and Cultural Products Imported to Romania (1839–1947)," *Transilvania*, nr. 7 (2023): 17–25.

13. See Lorna Jowett, "Horrible Histories? Vampire Television, Period Drama and Spectacle," *Horror Studies* 8, no. 2 (2017): 313–328.

14. Siegfried Kracauer, "Caligari," in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, a film by Robert Wiene, Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz*, ed. and trans. R. V. Adkinson (New York: Lorrimer Publishing, 1972), 11.

15. Kracauer, "Caligari," 9. For the general "transmedial triangulation" of vampire stories through cinema see Anca Simina Martin and Stefan Baghiu, "The transmedial triangulation of *Dracula*: how cinema turned the Gothic bloodsucker into a Gothicized serial killer," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11, 1015 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03531-2>.



When discussing the connections between tragedy and horror, Robert I. Levy argued that the rise of monsters in modern times must be linked to the social enactment of morals, since “life as theatre” involves “the problems of the wings of the social stage and the problems of the social drama itself”:<sup>16</sup>

“Shame, shyness, and embarrassment have to do with the presentability of an individual, the properness of his or her entrance into a situation or to a role, his or her general competence to engage in social action, the adequacy of his or her very existence as a social person. Guilt, empathy, and certain aspects of fear are specifically related to the regulation of the playing of the role once one is engaging in it.”<sup>17</sup>

Tragedy, Levy claims, represents the center of social life and social performance, while horror represents the margins. *Antigone* and *Dracula* exemplify two ways in which action influences social life; they are metaphors for “entering or (more properly) of not entering, of trying to escape any society.”<sup>18</sup> The comparison is apt because the character networks in both are limited. Unlike the modern novel, with the realist ambitions of Hugo, Balzac, and Eugène Sue, Polidori’s “The Vampyre” and Stoker’s *Dracula* rely on a small cast of characters. Here, as in the Greek tragedy, there is no need for extensive representations of a populated and diverse external world. Twelve characters are too many for Stoker; five are enough for Polidori. In this respect, *Dracula* aligns more with the world of tragedy than with that of the grand epic.

The aristocracy of the vampire is the next point to consider. The world of tragedy—from Sophocles to Shakespeare and Racine—is the world of aristocracy, not of the common people. As Lukács once noted, it was only with modern bourgeois drama that the middle class entered the scene, and only with Ibsen did the common man become central. Until modern times, tragic destiny was reserved for the noble. Lord Ruthven in Polidori’s “The Vampyre,” a portrayal of Lord Byron himself, is an aristocrat, just as *Dracula* is—although the latter coming from the “haunted” space of the periphery. Yet the horror presents vampires not as tragic heroes, but as tragic settings. Neither Ruthven nor *Dracula* are tragic figures themselves; instead, they create tragedies around them. This makes them ambivalent figures of tragic destiny, at the same time horrible and sympathetic:

“Harker is tempted to sympathize with *Dracula*, and to yield to him. To yield means not to be destroyed in one’s essential being (*Antigone*’s essential being, her social reputation, is something else) but to become like *Dracula* in his power, his transcendence of time and space, and of morality. One lives forever and is blessedly released from moral constraints. This promised escape is the great evil for it is the negation of the civic system of logic and morality. It is a matter of rejecting the system rather than making an error within it.”<sup>19</sup>

Vampires die hard. However, the connection between everlasting life and the desire never to have been born at all is crucial in vampire drama. “Rejecting the system” has its ultimate desire in living forever against. In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer suggest that monsters possess a kind of “legal” presence in mythology: “The mythical monsters under whose power he falls represent, as it were, petrified contracts and legal claims dating from primeval times.”<sup>20</sup> To fully grasp the solemnity of tragic destiny, a tragic hero must be positioned far enough from life to reflect on its insignificance. As Nina Auerbach notes when describing the “reproach to humanity” embodied by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro’s Count Saint-Germain,

“her vampire [...] is the only character strong enough—because he has learned from the tragic centuries he has lived in, because it is difficult though not impossible for him to die—to provide a humane perspective on the mass carnage that finds its domestic epitome in the degradation of women. Her mortal characters are too corrupt or too weak to appreciate the human tragedy.”<sup>21</sup>

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16. Robert I. Levy, “Horror and Tragedy: The Wings and Center of the Moral Stage,” *Ethos* 13, no. 2 (1985): 176.

17. Levy, “Horror,” 176.

18. Levy, “Horror,” 179. Original emphasis.

19. Levy, “Horror,” 180.

20. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 45.

21. Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 148.

It takes an eternity to grasp the tragedy of the human. If one is “human,” one cannot fully appreciate the human tragedy. As Anne Rice’s 1976 *Interview with the Vampire* suggests, “it was detachment that made this possible, a sublime loneliness with which Lestat and I [Louis] moved through the world of mortal men.”<sup>22</sup> But this is a modern perspective—the myth of calm and serene everlasting life, the myth of the undead’s wisdom. If we examine the history of the undead in tragedies, their unrest becomes clear: the ghost of Hamlet’s father is a specter of revenge, and the undead in Voltaire’s *Sémiramis* (1746) seeks retribution.<sup>23</sup> There is no wisdom here, only the hauntology of vengeance. Death is distressing because *it is unjust* in the cases of Hamlet’s father and Ninus, Sémiramis’ husband. Had they died by their own doing, by a “good death,” would they be tragic specters at all? Probably not. This is the fundamental difference between Gothic vampire drama and contemporary vampire stories:

“Frequently ghosts are capable of engaging sympathetic effects insofar as their return is not motivated exclusively by their thirst for revenge but also by their determination to right a wrong. This topos, already central to Greek tragedy and subsequently reworked by Elizabethan and Jacobean Revenge Tragedy, is still recurrent in fictional and filmic elaborations of the discourse of haunting.”<sup>24</sup>

Vampires live long. By living long, they become wise and elegant: “This was New Orleans, a magical and magnificent place to live. In which a vampire, richly dressed and gracefully walking through the pools of light of one gas lamp after another might attract no more notice in the evening than hundreds of other exotic creatures.”<sup>25</sup> Their disguise is not one of extravagance but of common elegance, at least in Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1976). “With the aged is wisdom, and with long life is understanding,” says the Book of Job (Jb 12:12). Here, Job is a tragic hero with an anti-tragic development. When the Devil tells God that Job will lose faith and curse Him if he loses all his possessions and loved ones, God agrees to put Job to the test. Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* presents a similar story of downfall. Timon loses all his wealth after generously spending and lending it to those close to him. In *Timon of Athens*, as Sartre might put it, “Hell is other people.” For Job, Hell is God Himself—this is the theodicy. Job does lose faith, but never in God, and ultimately, he is restored to his wealth and family. This is how the Bible diverges from tragedy: it restores individual faith through immutable belief, whereas tragedy traditionally implies a seamless submission to overwhelming destiny.

Timon, like Job, embodies *absolute tragedy*, as George Steiner suggests when he argues that it is better never to have been born, echoing Job: “Here lies a wretched corpse, of wretched soul bereft.”<sup>26</sup> But Timon, unlike Job, never returns from this despair, just as Oedipus does not. This despair, specific to tragedy, is where the family is lost forever, where the family is the center of this loss. Consider Sophocles: Oedipus kills his father, Antigone loses her brothers, Deianeira kills her husband, Electra drives Orestes to kill their mother, and so on. The despair of not being able to reclaim one’s life, the insignificance of the individual before a higher will, and the impossibility of resolving conflict—this is *tragedy*. The rest, as most philosophies of tragic form suggest, is *drama*. Yet vampires, in a way, have already “lost” everything by gaining eternal life. They are figures of after *anagnorisis*, figures of after tragedy. This difference is crucial between tragedy and horror, and it also illuminates the tragic elements within horror:

“While Harker is tempted to lose his social identity to preserve his physical and emotional and passionate existence (for the ‘death’ of the horror story is a transformation rather than an annihilation of the self), Antigone chooses annihilation of the experiencing self, to preserve the social residue, redounding on her lineage, of fame. She, choosing family duty, is destroyed but gains fame. Creon, choosing civic duty, is also destroyed. What he gains is more mysterious: it is the possibility of wisdom, some kind of understanding transcending the terrible logic of the moral paradox. Creon’s choice, to ignore family ties for what he takes to be the good of the city, causes him to lose his son and his wife. Broken at the end he leaves the city to wander (note this movement ends the drama, in *Dracula* it initiated it).”<sup>27</sup>

22. Anne Rice, *Interview with the Vampire* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010), 38.

23. See the political metaphors of this specters in Mihai Iovănel, “Hamlet at the End of History: the specter of capitalism haunting communism,” *Transilvania*, no. 5 (2024).

24. Dani Cavallaro, *Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002), 162.

25. Rice, *Interview*, 40.

26. William Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, ed. John Jowett (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5.

27. Levy, “Horror,” 183.



Just like vampires, Job and Timon of Athens are presented as already being “vampires”—that is, already wealthy and possessing accumulated wealth. However, unlike vampires, they still have something crucial to lose: their life. They are in deep grief, in tragic grief, since everything is lost, yet they don’t have to live forever with their grief. Vampires do, so grief is pacified by eternal life: it becomes static, non tragic, lifeless. Lifeless grief is no grief at all. If the modern myth of vampires implies accumulation, then the modern perspective on pre-modern tragedy could place characters like Oedipus, Lear, and Timon of Athens in the realm of “accumulators.” They appear on the scene in their full splendor and then experience their downfall. They have accumulated much because they are rulers, kings, or heroes. The Greek principle of tragedy—as codified by Aristotle, who defined tragedy for centuries, both directly and indirectly—established that the hero should be noble or aristocratic. This model influenced Shakespeare, Racine, Voltaire, Byron, and others. Job and Timon follow this pattern. The essence of *absolute tragedy* lies in the stark contrast between their initial status and their subsequent fall. If one has everything, their fall is more devastating. If one has nothing, the fall is less significant. An important exception to this pattern is Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* (1592/3), and later Goethe’s *Faust*., which emerges during the era of the birth of modern vampire myths: Doctor Faustus is bored to death and needs life again—his tragedy is that he rediscovers life.

### **Tragedy, Melodrama, and Horror**

Despite its modern developments, tragedy outlines a self-contained world that is quintessentially human. When the protagonist commits an error of judgment leading to their downfall or succumbs to a tragic flaw, it is a consequence of their human nature. In other words, by its very definition, tragedy draws a clear line of demarcation between the flawless non-human and the flawed human. In this context, monsters—both human and non-human, embodying the anxieties and flaws that define humanity while existing in a state that is neither alive nor dead—are an anomaly. This explains their limited presence in the world of tragedy. However, time and again, the monstrous, particularly vampires, are described as tragic figures. Dracula, the most recognizable of bloodsuckers, was, in life, a defender of his homeland and, in death, a shadow of his former self, helpless in the face of the technology wielded by his opponents. Yet, just like Faust, the vampire also must become a tyrant, a mass killer, in the setting of absolute power. Three-quarters of a century later, Anne Rice constructed entire universes around tragic vampires who struggle with immortality—whether because they cannot adapt to changing times, as with Armand, or due to the guilt associated with relying on human suffering for sustenance, as seen in Louis de Pointe du Lac. Yet neither Bram Stoker’s nor Anne Rice’s works have translated into tragedies, despite their plots conveying the two primary emotions traditionally associated with tragedy: pity and fear—for and/or because of their vampires. In fact, their monster narratives evolved from the very beginning away from tragic form into melodramas and, more recently, into musicals. While tragedies tell the story of an individual’s undoing due to a fatal internal flaw, vampire melodramas and musicals, in most cases, speak of collective trauma inflicted by external forces.

The altering of tragic form through vampire stories is also visible in the general desire of Polidori and Stoker to create vampires for drama—not for prose. Long before the commodification of violence through infamous figures such as Peter “The Vampire of Düsseldorf” Kürten, who inspired cinema masterpieces the likes of Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931) and reformulated the Gothic bloodthirsty vampire as Gothicized “real/reel serial killer,”<sup>28</sup> there had existed the “commodification of personality,” Lord Byron’s to be precise, whereby “[t]he Byronic had come to take precedence over Byron, the creation over the creator.”<sup>29</sup> As the irony would have it, however, the “creation” was not Byron’s, or at least not entirely, as it was John Polidori’s “The Vampyre” (1819), a novella authored by his physician, that set into motion

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28. In their 2003 article on “gothic criminology,” which “connects reel worlds with the look of the ‘real’ world, while still mythologizing the serial killer as a gothic construction,” Caroline Joan Picart and Cecil Greek suggest that “[t]here appear to be two monstrous figures in contemporary popular culture whose constructions blur into each other, and who most powerfully evoke not only our deepest fears and taboos, but also our most repressed fantasies and desires: the serial killer and the vampire as creatures compelled to kill.” According to the authors, one of the earliest confluences of the two came in Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931). Caroline Joan Picart and Cecil Greek, “The Compulsion of Real/Reel Serial Killers and Vampires: Toward a Gothic Criminology,” *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 10, no. 1 (2003): 45; 39.

29. Ghislaine McDayter, “Conjuring Byron: Byromania, Literary Commodification and the Birth of Celebrity,” in *Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Culture*, ed. Frances Wilson (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1999), 56.

the mass consumption of Byron's persona. Based in part on the unfinished short story "Fragment of a Novel," which Byron penned in 1816, Polidori's work, initially attributed to Byron as well, takes Augustus Darvell of the "Fragment," reminiscent still of the folk creature Byron read about in Joseph Pitton de Tournefort's account of the Greek *Vroucolacas*, and refashions him in Byron's image as Lord Ruthven.<sup>30</sup> The story was an instant success; "[t]wo London book editions appeared very swiftly, followed by a French and a German translation, all in 1819 and all attributing authorship to Byron."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, "Goethe pronounced it the finest thing Byron had ever written,"<sup>32</sup> and "Amédée Pichot in 1824 declared that the story did more to popularize Byron in France than all his other works put together."<sup>33</sup>

Polidori's efforts to correct this false attribution—a day after the story was published, he wrote to Henry Colburn, the owner of the magazine which had printed it, that "The Vampyre is not Lord Byron's, but was written entirely by [him]"<sup>34</sup>—and Byron's denial of authorship—in a letter he sent to Colburn some two weeks later, he labelled the story a "bookselling imposture"<sup>35</sup>—"were of little consequence where money was to be made: Byron's name was infinitely more profitable."<sup>36</sup> Thus, the rise of the cult of Byron, or Byromania as the phenomenon is also known, occurs, as Ghislaine McDayter aptly notes, along with the development of capitalism,<sup>37</sup> giving rise—directly or indirectly, in English, French, and German—to at least twenty adaptations for paper, stage, and opera, which spanned over half a century, from Uriah Derick D'Arcy's 1819 parody *The Black Vampyre: A Legend of St. Domingo* to Jules Dornay's 1865 *Douglas Le Vampire [Lord Ruthven Begins]*.<sup>38</sup>

For reasons of space, we will focus here only on *Le Vampire [Lord Ruthven the Vampire]*, Charles Nodier, Adolphe Carmouche, and Achille, Marquis de Jouffrey d'Abbans' dramatic adaptation, which premiered in Paris in 1820. The reason for choosing this reworking lies not only with the fact that it inspired, two months after its opening on Boulevard du Temple, James Robinson Planché's *The Vampire, or the Bride of the Isles*, the English dramatization of Polidori's story staged at the Lyceum in London,<sup>39</sup> or that it achieved tremendous success—it "[inspired] no less than six parodies within a few weeks" and was "revived [...] with the same cast in 1823"<sup>40</sup>—, "making vampires the rage of Paris for the next several years."<sup>41</sup> Rather, the most important contribution of *Le Vampire* is that this adaptation established a tradition of portraying the modern—read: the "urban" rather than "rural"—vampire as an antihero of melodrama, "one of the first forms of mass entertainment."<sup>42</sup> And the connection to tragedy is there, in plain sight, when taking into account Robert I. Levy's take on "Horror and Tragedy."

30. Byron's note to *The Giaour*, a poem published three years before he wrote "Fragment of a Novel," contains a reference to this creature, the exhumation of which also appears in what Conrad Aquilina considers to be a source of inspiration for both Byron and Polidori: Robert Southey's 1801 poem *Thalaba the Destroyer*. Conrad Aquilina, "The Deformed Transformed; Or, from Bloodsucker to Byronic Hero – Polidori and the Literary Vampire," in *Open Graves, Open Minds: Representations of Vampires and the Undead from the Enlightenment to the Present Day*, ed. Sam George and William Hughes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 25. However, if Darvell's "body [is] rapidly altering," Ruthven's is left conveniently vague, with Polidori thus "encourag[ing] readers to see Byron between the lines." Erik Butler, *The Rise of the Vampire* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 28.

31. Ronald E. McFarland, "The Vampire on Stage: A Study in Adaptations," *Comparative Drama* 21, no. 1 (1987): 20.

32. Roxana Stuart, *Stage Blood: Vampires of the 19th-Century Stage* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994), 38.

33. Stuart, *Stage Blood*, 38.

34. Quoted in Nick Groom, "Polidori's 'The Vampyre': Composition, Publication, Deception," *Romanticism* 28, no. 1 (2022): 47.

35. Quoted in Groom, "Polidori's 'The Vampyre,'" 48.

36. Stuart, *Stage Blood*, 38.

37. "[T]he many and competing publishing houses, recognising a massive market for this new commodity, were anxious to keep a steady stream of the Byronic flowing onto that market [...] – no matter whether the text was Byron's, was about Byron, or was merely *thought* to be by or about him." Original emphasis. McDayter, "Conjuring Byron," 53.

38. The figure represents the twenty adaptations by Kevin Dodd in the two-part article "Plot Variations in the Nineteenth-Century Story of Lord Ruthven" and it does not take into account the comedies inspired from Polidori's work. See Kevin Dodd, "Plot Variations in the Nineteenth-Century Story of Lord Ruthven, Pt. 1," *Journal of Vampire Studies* 1 no. 1 (2020): 19; 22.

39. Stuart, *Stage Blood*, 65.

40. Stuart, *Stage Blood*, 57.

41. Stuart, *Stage Blood*, 41.

42. Stuart, *Stage Blood*, 253.





Taking as a starting point two of the most important characteristics of the genre, as defined by Guilbert de Pixérécourt in the early nineteenth century, it is easy to understand why the plot of “The Vampyre” was best suited for melodrama. According to the French playwright, productions of this genre propose “[a] powerful and fascinating villain who is the moving force of the plot,”<sup>43</sup> which, in the context of Polidori’s story, is Lord Ruthven, “a nobleman, more remarkable for his singularities, than for his rank,”<sup>44</sup> with a “winning tongue”<sup>45</sup> and “irresistible powers of seduction,” [which] rendered his licentious habits more dangerous to society.<sup>46</sup> Then there is Aubrey, “[a] virtuous [hero] persecuted by the villain,” who is “an orphan left with an only sister,” “handsome, frank,” and endowed with the “high romantic feeling of honour and candour.”<sup>47</sup> Another factor is the historical context in which the adaptations of Polidori’s work were staged, which mirrors the one in “The Vampyre,” characterized by a fragile socio-political balance. Greece, where Aubrey travels alone after his first falling-out with Ruthven and where he discovers the nobleman’s true vampire nature, is under Turkish control and far removed from the classical period. Let us remark that Voltaire’s earlier takes on vampire stories in his *Philosophical Dictionary* of 1764 connect well with this geography:

“It was in Poland, Hungary, Silesia, Moravia, Austria, and Lorraine, that the dead made this good cheer. We never heard a word of vampires in London, nor even at Paris. I confess that in both these cities there were stock-jobbers, brokers, and men of business, who sucked the blood of the people in broad daylight; but they were not dead, though corrupted. These true suckers lived not in cemeteries, but in very agreeable palaces. [...] The Greeks are persuaded that these dead are sorcerers; they call them ‘*broucolacas*’, or ‘*vroucolacas*’, according as they pronounce the second letter of the alphabet. The Greek corpses go into houses to suck the blood of little children, to eat the supper of the fathers and mothers, drink their wine, and break all the furniture. They can only be put to rights by burning them when they are caught.”

Unlike Byron, who, like many Romantics, believed in the liberation of Greece, “Polidori [understood] that the modern Greek peasant culture,” embodied by lanthe, Ruthven’s victim and Aubrey’s paramour, “is perfectly adequate and sufficient to itself under Ottoman rule, and that the philhellene is the potential ruiner of [the] calm,”<sup>48</sup> which, in fact, ended with the 1821–32 War of Greek Independence. Similarly, Nodier, Carmouche, and d’Abbans’ *Le Vampyre* premiered during the Royalist Reaction of 1820, “a watershed” between the assassination of Charles-Ferdinand de Bourbon by a Bonapartist, “and a subsequent phase wherein ultra (extreme) royalists pursued policies that ultimately would trigger [the] revolution” of 1830.<sup>49</sup> In Christopher Prendergast’s words, “in melodrama we simultaneously pay homage to the idea of moral order and yet secretly enjoy the violence which threatens it.”<sup>50</sup> Enjoying *the violence which threatens the order* is no longer *the violence of the order itself* that tragedy entailed. The modern myth of the vampire takes its drive from tragedy (political conflict and fear) and dissolves it in melodrama. In such a context, melodrama, with its “thrilling stage action” and “[e]mphasis on ocular,” distracts from the unknown lurking around the corner and simplifies the complex forces at play in the political arena, envisioning “a world of black and white.”<sup>51</sup>

However, in vampire melodramas, this violence is, by and large, abstract, and this is also true for Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), which resurrected the vampire myth back home, in *fin-de-siècle* London. Intended for stage—“the original scenario is laid out in four acts of seven scenes each”<sup>52</sup>—and read at the

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43. Quoted in Stuart, *Stage Blood*, 42.

44. John William Polidori, *The Vampyre: A Tale and Ernestus Berchtold; Or, The Modern Œdipus* (Claremont: Broadview Editions, 2008), 39.

45. Polidori, *The Vampyre*, 40.

46. Polidori, *The Vampyre*, 43.

47. Polidori, *The Vampyre*, 40.

48. Matthew Gibson, *Dracula and the Eastern Question: British and French Vampire Narratives of the Nineteenth-Century Near East* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 25.. For tragedy & war see also Franco Moretti’s article on “The Moment of Truth” in *Signs Taken for Wonders*. Also see Radu Vancu, “Tragic Poetry and the Cultural Foundation of Power: A Re-examination of Franco Moretti’s Theory of Tragic,” *Transilvania*, no. 5 (2024): 55–63

49. R.S. Alexander, “Assassination, Politics and Miracles: France and the Royalist Reaction of 1820 (review),” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 74 no. 1 (2004), 429.

50. Christopher Prendergast, *Balzac, Fiction and Melodrama* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), 11.

51. Quoted in Stuart, *Stage Blood*, 42.

52. Stuart, *Stage Blood*, 190.

Lyceum, which had hosted Planché's adaptation of "The Vampyre," "Stoker's story has all the hallmarks of Victorian melodrama: simple characters in adverse circumstances; the trials of temptation; the triumph of good over evil; emotional tumult, sacrifice, reconciliation and finally redemption."<sup>53</sup> By then, "Lord Ruthven had at last exhausted himself, and was now a figure of fun," in the sense that Polidori's satire of the Byronic hero no longer resonated with late nineteenth-century anxieties and fears. A new fall had to be represented. Released a little over a month before Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, *Dracula* "enacts the period's most important and pervasive narrative of decline" in relocating the origin of the vampire to Europe's "feudal" periphery and with it, the fear that "the 'civilized' world is on the point of being colonized by [the] 'primitive' forces."<sup>54</sup> Paradoxically, however, this context proved auspicious for Stoker's Gothic vampire, who gained depth from the "guilt characteristic of reverse colonization narratives."<sup>55</sup> Here, the "wings" become central. If in the melodramas inspired by "The Vampyre," Ruthven is overall a conscienceless monster,<sup>56</sup> resembling in this respect the reanimated bloodthirsty corpse of East European folk tales, Stoker's Count was, in life, "the bravest of the sons of the 'land beyond the forest',"<sup>57</sup> and, in death, an almost equal opponent to the Western posse determined to destroy him. This duality, the mark of the Byronic hero, did not carry over into the novel's stage productions; neither Stoker's own 1897 dramatic version nor Hamilton Deane's 1924 adaptation or its 1927 reworking, which Deane co-authored with John Balderston, move past the "typical black villain out of melodrama,"<sup>58</sup> who meets his end before the curtain falls. The socio-political context may, once again, be responsible for this: the year 1897, which saw *Dracula*'s birth as both a dramatic and literary character, and the interwar period, when it was brought on the English and American stages, reflect the liminal historical context of Stoker's novel, in which, at least at surface level, "[t]he warlike days are over."<sup>59</sup>

### From the Tragedy of Vampires to the Sociology of the Vampire World

*Dracula*'s first (unauthorized) cinema adaptation,<sup>60</sup> which spurred the emergence of Deane's initial stage version, "contains a hint of the sympathetic vampires to come as Orlok," *Dracula*'s counterpart in F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), "seems at times to be a victim of his own bloodlust, trapped by a desire that figures in his own demise"<sup>61</sup>—Orlok (*Dracula*), lured by the beautiful, self-sacrificing Ellen/Mina in her bedchamber, falls prey to the deadly powers of sunlight. However, it would take half a century for the postmodern Byronic vampire to properly incarnate, and for this metamorphosis to occur, "Dr [John] Seward's phonograph in *Dracula* [had to be superseded] as the medium of transcription by the tape recorder, [...] with the vampire's own voice dictating" the story.<sup>62</sup> This focal inversion was fully realized in Anne Rice's "Vampire Chronicles" series, which debuted with *Interview with the Vampire* (1976). Here, the journey that the vampires undertake is also one of self-discovery, the milestones of which coincide with important stages in the evolution of the trope. For instance, "[i]n the *Vampire Lestat* [1985], partly set in the late 18th century, the protagonist Lestat, while still mortal, becomes an actor [...] on the Boulevard due [sic] Temple,"<sup>63</sup> where, in real life, *Le Vampire* by Nodier, Carmouche, and d'Abbas premiered in 1820. In *Interview with the Vampire*, vampires Louis and Claudia's travels in search of others like them carries them to Transylvania, where they encounter "a kind of Neanderthal offshoot of the vampire race," "mindless animals" reminiscent of the bloodsuckers in folk tales—they go to the tragic world from which vampires came.<sup>64</sup> This is a complex vampire world, where the vampire tropes across history form a sociology of tragic developments.

53. Catherine Wynne, *Bram Stoker, Dracula and the Victorian Gothic Stage* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.

54. Stephen D. Arata, "The Occidental Tourist: *Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization," *Victorian Studies* 33, no. 4 (1990): 623.

55. Arata, "The Occidental Tourist," 626.

56. Kevin Dodd, "Plot Variations in the Nineteenth-Century Story of Lord Ruthven, Pt. 2," *Journal of Vampire Studies* 1 no. 2 (2021): 207.

57. Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 212.

58. Stuart, *Stage Blood*, 205.

59. Stoker, *Dracula*, 35.

60. The first one to render on screen a relatively faithful recreation of Stoker's plot.

61. "Nosferatu," *Irish Film Institute*, accessed July 28, 2024, <https://ifi.ie/film/nosferatu/>.

62. Aquilina, "The Deformed Transformed," 33.

63. Stuart, *Stage Blood*, 354.

64. Stuart, *Stage Blood*, 354.



Both Neil Jordan's cinema adaptation of *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), whose screenplay was written by Rice, and AMC's 2022 TV series of the same title give a nod to Murnau's *Nosferatu*, yet to different effects: if in the former, it symbolizes "humane" vampire Louis' nostalgia for mortality, in the latter's Episode 4, it becomes the subject of an inside joke among Lestat, Louis, and their vampire-child, Claudia. On stage, however, "Rice's world is brittle in the commercial hands of [...] adaptation."<sup>65</sup> This "humane" vampire represents a shift in horror. Through Anne Rice, the worlds of vampires transition from tragic form to the epic—from tragedy as melodrama to the vampire novel proper. While both Polidori and Stoker wrote in prose, their works were tributary to tragedy, or, more specific, to the specters of after *anagnorisis*. It is only with Anne Rice that the vampire enters the realm of the epic: featuring numerous characters, a high number of variables, and multiple ups and downs. A sociology of the vampire world becomes possible only after vampires have moved beyond the domain of drama—the network of Anne Rice becomes the network of Hugo and Balzac. This transition marks a broader transformation of the vampire.

Three years after Jordan's movie version of *Interview with the Vampire*, Roman Polanski was reported to have been offered the chance to direct a musical adaptation of the novel by Vienna's Theater an der Wien.<sup>66</sup> What resulted was *Dance of the Vampires* (1997), "a camp musical loosely based on Roman Polanski's 1967 motion picture *The Fearless Vampire Killers*,"<sup>67</sup> a horror comedy movie taglined "Who says vampires are no laughing matter?," which, in its composer's words, translated into a reworking with "[a] lot of [...] pure Mel Brooks, and a lot of [...] Anne Rice."<sup>68</sup> Laughter is, here, read as desublimation. Sociology as well. The vampire needed to rebecome human-like in order to survive postmodern times. When it opened on December 2022 in New York, it "was reviled by most critics, [...] [losing] its entire investment of \$12 million."<sup>69</sup> This, however, did not discourage Warner Brothers Entertainment to invest, just two years later, in a Broadway musical based on Rice's "The Vampire Chronicles" and composed by Elton John. That Warner was willing to make this best is all the more surprising as it was its first foray into the theater and Michael Rymer's *Queen of the Damned* (2002), the sequel to Jordan's movie, bombed at the box office a little over a year earlier, despite being "[g] host-voiced' with distinction by Korn's lead-singer Jonathan Davis."<sup>70</sup> According to Elton John, *Lestat* (2006) was intended as "a classically-based show that is stripped of gothic clichés and that shows the vampire dealing with his damnation on a more realistic and human level."<sup>71</sup> Like Polanski's *Dance of the Vampires*, it flopped, "clos[ing] within two months after a string of negative reviews,"<sup>72</sup> but unlike its predecessor, it failed to be successfully resurrected outside of the United States.<sup>73</sup>

In her study on stage adaptations of vampire literature, Roxana Stuart notes in relation to Polidori's "The Vampyre" and Stoker's *Dracula* that "musical adaptations [...] followed the original melodrama."<sup>74</sup> In both England and France, this genre served as a means of expressing distrust in Enlightenment reason, as seen in the case of Ruthven, or of sublimating the anxieties and cultural guilt associated with imperialist expansion, as is evident from *Dracula*'s dramatization. That Rice's work jumped on the evolutionary scale of dramatic form directly to musical may be attributed to a historical context that diverges from the pattern described by the stage productions of Polidori's and Stoker's prose. As Nina Auerbach aptly remarks,

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65. Sorcha Ní Fhlainn, *Postmodern Vampires: Film, Fiction, and Popular Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 199.

66. Cathy Meils, "Rice Novel Getting Musical Treatment," last modified January 28, 1997, <https://variety.com/1997/legit/news/rice-novel-getting-musical-treatment-1117432956/>.

67. Amnon Kabatchnik, *Horror on the Stage: Monsters, Murders and Terrifying Moments in Theater* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2023), 88.

68. Quoted in Michael Riedel, "'Vampires': New Musical Blood," last modified May 23, 2001, <https://nypost.com/2001/05/23/vampires-new-musical-blood/>.

69. Kabatchnik, *Horror on the Stage*, 88.

70. Ní Fhlainn, *Postmodern Vampires*, 200.

71. Ernio Hernandez, "Elton John and Bernie Taupin Will Bring *The Vampire Lestat* to Life as a Musical," last modified May 6, 2003, <https://playbill.com/article/elton-john-and-bernie-taupin-will-bring-the-vampire-lestat-to-life-as-a-musical-com-113037>.

72. Ní Fhlainn, *Postmodern Vampires*, 199.

73. Kabatchnik, *Horror on the Stage*, 88.

74. Stuart, *Stage Blood*, 2005.

“[t]he AIDS epidemic, widely publicized by the early 1980s, infected the decade’s [...] vampires. The blood that had gushed out of Hammer<sup>75</sup> movies was no longer a token of forbidden vitality, but a blight. Once the etiology of AIDS became clear, blood could no longer be the life; vampirism mutated from hideous appetite to nausea. AIDS bestowed nostalgic intensity on Anne Rice’s eternally young, beautiful, self-healing men, whose boredom with immortality looked like a heavenly dream to young men turned suddenly mortal.”<sup>76</sup>

However, the musical *Lestat* (2006) did not engage with the AIDS-aware world which shaped Anne Rice’s perspective on vampires, and perhaps this was what the audience expected of its composer, Elton John, who had been involved in the fight against AIDS ever since 1992, or of a stage adaptation which debuted in San Francisco, one of the first cities to host a Pride celebration. “[T]he literature of terror is born precisely out of a terror of a split society, and out of the desire to heal it,”<sup>77</sup> and in removing Rice’s “complicated healing message,”<sup>78</sup> the hallmark of her vampire literature, the musical vampire, “no longer uncanny or whose uncanniness has become a commodity, represents the normalization (or delusive remetaphorization) of a simulation commodity culture whose substitution of nothing for something reverses metaphorical law’s substitution of something for nothing.”<sup>79</sup> The more “human” vampires become, the less capable they are of enacting a tragedy of immortality. This is the world of the epic at last.

In postmodern times, vampires have evolved to a point where they do all the things that mortals do to acquire “living” capital: they “drink, buy books, go to the theatre, go dancing, go drinking, think, love, theorize, sing, [and] paint.”<sup>80</sup> In other words, mortals no longer provide “value-creating power”<sup>81</sup> to vampire narratives, which, in Rice’s work, materializes in the figure of Louis, who avoids consuming human blood. This, in turn, explains why the trope’s dramatic development has moved away from tragedy, which resides in the very quality of “possessing a human sensuous nature.”<sup>82</sup> Vampires such as Louis, “who [have] the clearest perception of human sensuous nature as a whole [do not see] tragedy in it, but cautionary myth.”<sup>83</sup> The postmodern myth of the vampire takes its drive from the horror and dissolves it in the domain of the human.

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75. Auerbach refers here to Hammer Film Productions, a British studio whose 1960s vampire movies explored “a version of “vampirism [that] amounted to a coded counterculture of sexual liberation and female empowerment.” David J. Skal, *Hollywood Gothic: The Tangled Web of Dracula from Novel to Stage to Screen* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2004), 250.

76. Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 148–9.

77. Moretti, *Signs*, 83. Original emphasis.

78. David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 346.

79. Judith Roof, *Reproductions of Reproduction: Imaging Symbolic Change* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 147.

80. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 112.

81. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 716.

82. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 454.

83. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 454.



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# Tragic Poetry and the Cultural Foundation of Power: A Re-examination of Franco Moretti's Theory of Tragic

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**Abstract:** Franco Moretti posited in his 1983 book, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, that we live in a post-tragic and anti-tragic age in which tragic has been replaced by compromise both in fiction and in the modern lyric. The present article tries to re-examine Moretti's conjecture in a historic period which has given up compromise and revived the tragic. In Moretti's terms, tragic's condition of existence involves "a civilization irreparably divided between hostile entries and values". Whenever history allows this radical division between two irreconcilable systems of values, tragic finds a literary form of expression. In this article, tragic's main contemporary elective form in Ukraine is poetry, while fiction seems somewhat slower in keeping pace with the rapid tragic of history. Moreover, the diary as a confessional genre closer to poetry is also a medium more suitable for the contemporary tragic than fiction. Read by tens of thousands, maybe even more, Ukrainian poetry and diaries are the direct proof of a return to a tragic era, confirming Moretti's 1983 diagnosis: tragic works within and against the absolutist ideologies. Tragedy may indeed be "an unrepeatable 'exception' in the history of literary forms"; but the substance of tragic finds its contemporary expressions in this age of anti-compromise in confessional poetry and, to a lesser extent, in other confessional genres (diaries and memoirs). Tragic poetry is a response to the reappearance of the cultural foundation of absolutist power; its confessional nature is an attempt to rehumanize a history unleashed against the human.

**Keywords:** Franco Moretti, poetry and tragic, post-tragic culture, contemporary poetry in Ukraine, Volodymyr Vakulenko, Andrei Kurkov, Serhii Zhadan

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## 1.

In his 1983 book, *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms*, Moretti issues one of his most seductive ideas (in a work teeming with such propositions and conjectures): our age is simultaneously post-tragic and anti-tragic<sup>1</sup>. Ours is an age of compromise, and compromise is in its nature anti-tragic. Tragedy was possible within and against absolute monarchy (which evidently

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1. "Modern literature and aesthetics are born not only 'after' tragedy but also 'against' it. A metamorphosis takes place which goes beyond the realm of aesthetics and extends right across the bourgeois cultural system. Precisely because this system sees conflict as a given fact of existence in society it no longer sets itself the task of depicting it with 'pity and terror' but of showing that mutually opposing values and interests can always reach, if not a genuine conciliation, at least some kind of coexistence and compromise. In the realm of aesthetics this anti-tragic impulse of our culture appears with particular clarity. Indeed, it appears as the real foundation the secret *raison d'être* of the aesthetic sphere itself. This is attested by the two works which have contributed like few others to the formation of modern aesthetic thought: the *Critique of Judgment* and *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*". Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 29.

refuses any political and social compromise), whose values it discredited “more radically than any other cultural phenomenon of the same period”, “thereby paving the way, with wholly destructive means, for the English revolution of the seventeenth century” (27). When the organicist ideology disappears, so does its tragic negation—which makes tragedy “an unrepeatable ‘exception’ in the history of literary forms” (29). The post-1789 bourgeois period does not mean anymore “the drastic and acknowledged triumph of one system of values over all the others”; it introduces *compromise* (italicized by Moretti) as “the great theme of ‘realist’ narrative fiction and perhaps, even more significantly, the main rhetorical criterion of that still more enigmatic phenomenon, the ‘modern lyric’”(34). Thus, the real political dimension of tragedy consists in “posing the question of whether a *cultural foundation* of power is still possible, and in answering it in the negative” (64).

Written towards the end of the Cold War, Moretti’s superb and already classic study on the nature of tragedy is imbued with the optimistic *Zeitgeist* in which originate some other contemporary major documents of humanities, not only in literary studies—but also in humanistic fields usually more accustomed with human atrocity and therefore more pessimistic, such as history, political science, or ethics. I am thinking first of course to Fukuyama’s landmark 1989 essay on the end of history as “the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (Fukuyama, “The End of History?”, 1). And also to Isaiah Berlin’s 1990 creed regarding the irreversibility of value pluralism as our species’ most effective intellectual tool against mass murder; arguably even more optimistic than Fukuyama, Berlin thought that Fukuyama’s last men not only universalize a political form of organization (namely democracy), but are even able to create and share a communal illumination: pluralism is thus “the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other” (Berlin, 11).

Moretti’s axiom that modernity is a post-tragic age of compromise shares with Fukuyama and Berlin the conviction that monist ideologies (absolute monarchy, for Moretti; fascism, for Berlin; communism, for Fukuyama) have irreversibly collapsed and thereby all cultural foundations of an absolute or totalitarian power are impossible to rebuild from now on. Subsequently, tragic as a direct reaction against this monist forms of political power is also impossible from now on, either in fiction or in poetry—and has been replaced by various forms of compromise between political power and humanistic (*y compris* literary) ideologies.

11 September 2001 and, even more radically, 24 February 2022 have revealed the cultural foundations of two forms of political power which refuse Moretti’s compromise, Fukuyama’s universalization of Western liberal democracy and Berlin’s pluralism. The version of history proposed by this events refuses therefore to abandon tragic—to universalize democracy—and to profess pluralism. Moretti’s 1983 study indelibly convinced me about the direct causality between socio-politics and rhetoric: tragedy as a literary form is a direct consequence of absolute monarchy’s irrepressible drive to achieve a “drastic and acknowledged triumph of [its] system of values over all the others.” Moreover, this is a conviction Moretti still shares today, 41 years after his 1983 seminal book: in his article in the present issue of *Transilvania*, Moretti sees his current pioneering work in network semantics as a proof of “a plot-style continuum” in which I see a direct continuation of his theory regarding the conjunction of socio-politics and rhetoric:

“the conjunction of edges and speech operated in network semantics points to a possible conjunction of plot and style, or narratology and stylistics – a synthesis literary theory has so far never achieved (and in fact almost never attempted). Beyond plot and style, an even more ambitious project can be glimpsed: treating drama as a small-scale model to study two fundamental features of human societies: plot, to understand how individual exchanges evolve into complex systems made of thousands of interactions; and style, to study how human beings make sense of such actions. What we do, and how we think about it: this is what a plot-style continuum may illuminate.”

Thus, the question this article tries to answer regards what happens with the tragic when its conditions of existence seem to have been revived: we witness once again an attempt of a political power to impose a drastic triumph against all other values. Whereas tragedy as a literary expression of the tragic seems to be specifically historicized and therefore impossible to revive, one can expect this age of non-compromise to revive other forms of literary tragic—either in lyric or in prose. If this happens, Moretti’s conjecture on the tragic as a radical negation of an anti-pluralistic political power will be once again reconfirmed. One could argue that Moretti’s optimist belief in the solidity of that age of





compromise was (just like Berlin's or Fukuyama's) somewhat exaggerated, which would mean that Moretti was wrong to believe we live in a post-tragic era. But his exactness in the definition of tragic's nature and function will nevertheless be reinforced by the contemporary reignition of our tragic history.

## 2.

After 24 February 2022, history has become horror again. As it has always been—except for these 8 decades of peace in the European Union after World War II. And even this peace was relative, as one should not forget the atrocity of the war in Yugoslavia. Whenever we tend to have a too high opinion on our human species, we should moderate it with the thought that this is the longest period of relative peace we have ever been able to build in our entire history: 8 decades. While the oldest rock art depicting a war is dated about 10,000 years BCE.

12,000 years of war. 80 years of peace. For every year of peace, 150 years of war. This simple arithmetic should have sufficed in making us believe unconditionally in Judith Shklar's "liberalism of fear," which tried to educate us to be afraid of the collapse of liberal institutions and of their replacement with institutions of horror. Shklar was right: we should have been more afraid of our destructive nature. "Liberalism's deepest grounding," she wrote, "is in the conviction of the earliest defenders of toleration, born in horror, that cruelty is an absolute evil, an offense against God and humanity" (Shklar, 23). As such, "to account for the necessity of freedom in general [...] one must put cruelty first and understand the fear of fear and and recognize them everywhere" (Shklar, 37). Sloterdijk was also right to notice, in *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation*, that, unlike the usual contemporary perception, war has been our natural state as a species, while peace was the exception; rage, which Sloterdijk labels as a "thymotic emotion", has been the dominant elementary force within our emotional ecosystem—therefore, our human species must invent a "code of conduct" against multi-civilizing complexes in a multi-megalomaniac and inter-paranoid world (Sloterdijk, 227–231). (As a parenthetical aside, it is useful to note here that the over-optimistic Fukuyama seems to confirm the over-pessimistic Sloterdijk when the former accepted that "megalothymia" is a necessary pre-condition of all political societies—see Fukuyama, 315). As Amos Oz bitterly noticed in an interview given to Magda Grădinaru in December 2016, we have ceased to be terrified by the legacy of Hitler and Stalin; thence the impulse to retest again their totalitarian anti-democratic ideologies:

"I'm going to give you an answer that may shock you. 70–80 years ago, the world received a very nice gift from Hitler and Stalin. It was not their intention to give us this gift, but they gave it to us anyway: they left such a strong shock in the world's consciousness that for more than half a century many people were very ashamed to be called racists, to openly manifest their chauvinism, to be bloodthirsty revolutionaries. And that only because of that shock caused by Hitler and Stalin. But it seems that the validity period of the gift has passed. It is no longer relevant for the new generations which do not have the memory of that shock. And people again become vulnerable to hitherto repressed instincts: nationalist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic instincts, even those against women. We are simply witnessing the return of those things. So far we have only had a break, a respite interval caused by that shock that Stalin and Hitler gave us."

The barbaric war launched by Russia in Ukraine is exactly this: an attempt to deny everything liberal democracies have managed to build after World War 2—and to revert to the anti-democratic order where states are run not by civilians we elect to protect us from war, but by militarists destroying any institution and any human opposing their ideology of war. In Freudian terms, Russia's barbaric war is a return of our repressed militaristic anti-democratic ego. The ego responsible for our 12,000 years of uninterrupted war. While Vladimir Putin is the perfect image of this militaristic ego, as Hitler and Stalin have also been in their time, Ukraine stands as a metonymy for our other ego: the one who has managed to build, using the fragile institutions of liberal democracy, the most solid and continuous period of peace and prosperity known in our human history.

In barbaric times, perhaps the only advantage we have is that narratives simplify: we know exactly where barbarity stands—just as we know exactly where humanity stands. In the latest version of this narrative, to side with Russia means to be on the side of our barbaric militaristic ego, which represents indeed the dominant political past of our species; to be with Ukraine is to hope that our pacifistic, pro-democratic, and pro-human ego still represents the future of our species.

To stand with Ukraine is literally to believe our human species has a future. Not only as a species—but as a humane one.

3.

"The horror, the horror." Joseph Conrad's words from *Heart of Darkness* come into my mind every time I read the news, therefore daily. And in those days when I first read about the horrors of Bucha, the shattering story of Miklós Radnóti came into my mind: as he was of Jewish descent, the great Hungarian poet was murdered in November 1944 and thrown into a common grave. In June 1946, his wife Fanni Gyarmati found him there, exhumed him and found in his pocket a notebook with poems: half of them love letters for her, the other half poems describing everyday life in that inferno. Fanni's love has made literature return from the grave; it has made literature literally stronger than death.

Radnóti's literature was proof that barbarity will never have the final word. Given enough love, our words will always return from the grave in order to stand witness that our pro-human ego is stronger than the anti-human one. And thus, to give meaning to all art's attempts to stand witness that this luminous ego exists. That we are not only the species which creates common graves—but also the species which creates beauty and kindness.

Radnóti's story also came into my mind when I found out about the assassination of the Ukrainian writer Volodimir Vakulenko by the Russian troops sometime between March and May 2022, in a village near Izium. Vakulenko told his father he was keeping a diary of those infernal times—which he will bury in the garden if he feels his life is in danger. After Vakulenko was murdered and the village was recaptured by the Ukrainian forces, Vakulenko's father and the writer Victoria Amelina, a recipient of the Joseph Conrad Literary Award and finalist of the European Prize for Literature, dug the garden, found the diary and published it. It is exactly the same story: literature returning from the grave—and not allowing barbarity to have the final word. Beauty standing witness that, given enough love, our species still stands a chance.

As Michael Naydan shows in an article for *World Literature Today*, "at the time of his arrest by Russian forces in September 2022, Vakulenko was not serving as a volunteer and was unarmed. He was a civilian just taking care of his autistic son, whom he had been home-schooling because of the boy's disability. He was killed execution-style with two shots from a Russian Makarov pistol."

One year afterwards, in July 2023, Victoria Amelina was killed by a Russian bomb while she was in a pizza house in Kramatorsk with fellow writers and journalists. She was 37 years old. Her extraordinary work is, again, the proof that barbarity will never have the final word. In an article of hers published by *The Guardian* 5 days after her assassination, Amelina quoted a message published by the director of the Hungarian news agency in November 1956, during the brutal Russian attack against the Hungarian revolt: "We are going to die for Hungary and for Europe." Amelina notices that Kundera started his 1984 essay *The Tragedy of Central Europe* with the Hungarian journalist's message, and then concludes:

"As one of the leading figures of the 1968 Prague Spring, Kundera understood what the brave Hungarian had meant by dying for Europe. As a Ukrainian writer in Kyiv in 2022, I can't stop thinking about Kundera, writing in exile after the Prague Spring failed. We, Central Europeans, are ready to fight for Europe, even if at times our love may be unrequited. / However, when Russia started the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Europe did take in fleeing Ukrainians and accepted us unconditionally. / Europe didn't come to Hungary's rescue. Nor did it come to the Czechs' rescue, or the Ukrainians' in 2014. If being a Central European means being betrayed by Europe, Ukraine is certainly a member of the club."

In January 2024, the Ukrainian poet Maksym Kryvtsov was killed two days after he posted on Facebook his last poem, in which he presciently wrote about his own death. He was 34. His extraordinary poems are, again, the proof that our humanity has a future.

4.

In the early months of 1940, less than half a year after the beginning of World War II, when another fundamental narrative of humanity versus barbarity was taking place, Walter Benjamin wrote: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin, 390). For me, one of the fundamental consequences of Benjamin's *dictum* regards our functions as artists: it is maybe our fundamental task to not allow the documents of barbarism to define us—and to turn them into documents of civilization. To stand witness for our humanity. To show that we and our fellow humans can even be killed—but our humanity cannot be destroyed.

It's a difficult task. And a risky one, for too many reasons. But there are luminous examples in how it can be achieved. I think, for example, of Benjamin Britten using eight of Wilfred Owen's extraordinary



poems about war in his no less extraordinary *War Requiem* (1962); Owen was killed in action at the end of World War I, exactly one week before the armistice. He was 25—and, according to Harold Bloom, one of the greatest poets of English language in the 20th century. Almost half a century afterwards, Benjamin Britten used Owen's art in order to sustain his own, while composing the *War Requiem* for the victims of the two world wars. Jeremy Eichler observes that, "for the composer in 1962, after two world wars and all they had revealed, the traditional Mass for the dead could no longer be authentically rendered in its original form, which is to say, as theology divorced from history. By disrupting and puncturing the Mass, Owen's poems render it as a series of fragments. The blood-soaked history of the twentieth century, this music tells us, has left established religion itself as a kind of ruin" (Eichler 227). Owen's death, as well as the deaths of other tens of millions, were documents of barbarism; Owen's poems, as well as Britten's music, are documents of civilization, proving that barbarity will never have the final word. That it is Owen and Britten, and not Hitler or Stalin or Putin, that define our humanity; even though the latter can create wars and mass murder which kill tens of millions of human beings, they cannot destroy humanity as we know it can and must be. Our art is our proof that the victims are the definition of humanity—and not their suppressors.

Another luminous example is that of Paul Celan. This great poet, whose existence intersects Ukraine, Romania, France, and Germany, used his words in order to transform a document of barbarism (namely the assassination of his parents in the Romanian Holocaust) into one of civilization. As he wrote in a letter from November '47 to the Swiss critic Max Rychner, he chose to write in German (after having written about 18 poems in Romanian) because, while being the language of his mother's assassins, it was also the language he spoke with his mother. He used thus his words in order to recreate a verbal space where his communion with his mother was still possible; it was, in the most literal meaning, poetry written against death. And as witness for those killed by the Nazi ideology of extermination. In his Bremen prize acceptance speech, Celan explicitly wrote that, after passing "through the thousand darkneses of the murderous speeches", language survived when human beings were murdered—and it was enriched ("angereichert") with their humanity. Poetry is the witness of these assassinated human beings, Celan says; it is the proof that they were killed, but they can never be destroyed. One critic once noticed that all Celan's poems are an immediate intertext with the Holocaust; I agree—with the *coda* that, as such, they refuse to give the Holocaust the final word. His poems are what the victims declare after "the thousand darkneses of the murderous speeches" have long ended their effects.

I can also mention here Carolyn Forché's extraordinary anthology from 1993, *Against Forgetting. Twentieth-century Poetry of Witness*; Forché has gathered here, with the wonderful insight and exigence of the great poet she herself is, about 150 poets from the 20th century writing in times of war, genocide, totalitarianisms, extermination camps, etc. Some of them have survived, some other not; their poems are always documents for the survival of humanity even in the most inhuman conditions. "Poetry as witness," as both Celan and Forché label it; first of all, as a witness that our humanity is real—and not a mere utopia.

Or I could mention another extraordinary anthology, *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia, and Beyond*, compiled in 2008 by Tina Chang, Nathalie Handal, Ravi Shankar, and introduced by the same Carolyn Forché; it comprises about 400 poets, some of them sending their poems from prisons or from war zones. Barbarity cannot destroy us: this is what all these poems say, each in their language and tradition. Humanity literally exists—and its art literally has the power to transform all documents of barbarism in documents of civilizations.

This is the world we have to build with our words: a world in which they are used not to design ideologies of extermination. A world in which, quite on the contrary, words are witness against barbarity. Witness that people can be murdered—but not destroyed. Witness in the service of fellow humans, and not of ideologies. Because we now know: where words fail, history fails. And it becomes horror again. We have to build a Europe and a world where words do not fail the human. Not again. Or else everything literature ever stood for, everything arts ever stood for—was simply a lie.

The only humanity which is not a dead civilization is this one: a humanity whose words do not fail the human.

## 5.

In the same essay on history written less than half a year after the beginning of World War 2, Walter Benjamin notices that the amazement that barbarity is still possible in the 20th century works in favor of Fascism. What must be attained, Benjamin writes, is the notion that barbarity is always possible—and therefore we have "*to bring about a real state of emergency*" (Benjamin's italics). We should always act (not only we, artists: we, human beings) as if humanity is in a real state of emergency.

And do everything in our power, disregarding how minuscule the said power is, to preserve whatever humanity is left to us.

Benjamin's plea for this perpetual state of emergency in favor of the human came into my mind when I read Amos Oz's plea for the "Order of the Teaspoon"; it was first written as a proposal in *How to cure a Fanatic*, in 2004. Two years afterwards, in 17 August 2006, in Stockholm, it became a real order. When you read it, you feel that it directly answers Benjamin's thought about the perpetual state of emergency of the human. Almost 70 years after Benjamin wrote his plea, Amos Oz continued it with the creation of the Order of the Teaspoon. I do believe that Camus was right to say that truth is all that continues; there is much truth in this Benjamin-Oz continuity. You can find the founding document of the Order of the Teaspoon below:

"I believe that if one person is watching a huge calamity, let's say a conflagration, a fire, there are always three principal options.

1. Run away, as far away and as fast as you can and let those who cannot run burn.
2. Write a very angry letter to the editor of your paper demanding that the responsible people be removed from office with disgrace. Or, for that matter, launch a demonstration.
3. Bring a bucket of water and throw it on the fire, and if you don't have a bucket, bring a glass, and if you don't have a glass, use a teaspoon, everyone has a teaspoon. And yes, I know a teaspoon is little and the fire is huge but there are millions of us and each one of us has a teaspoon. Now I would like to establish the Order of the Teaspoon. People who share my attitude, not the run-away attitude, or the letter attitude, but the teaspoon attitude—I would like them to walk around wearing a little teaspoon on the lapel of their jackets, so that we know that we are in the same movement, in the same brotherhood, in the same order, *The Order of the Teaspoon*."

I have met people wearing the small teaspoons at their lapels, showing thus that they belonged to a human community which no historic catastrophe could shatter. There is a continuity (and therefore a truth) of human values which no barbarism could destroy. And there is no barbaric fire which our tiny humanistic teaspoons cannot extinguish. Art is a good collection of such used teaspoons; they are already old, but they have served their duty well—and will continue to serve it.

Now, in 2024, Amos Oz's idea is exactly 20 years old; and the actual Order will turn 18 in August. If you happen to not be a part of the Order yet, maybe it is a good idea to join it when it enters its mature age.

## 6.

Before ending this notes on a humanity whose words do not fail the human, let me say a few words about the contemporary rage against Russian culture—which resembles the rage against German culture after World War II.

The file "Russian culture versus Russian barbarism" reproduces the file "German culture versus German barbarism", which dominated in the 1950s European discussions about the function of art. Then and now, the question was the same: since culture does not prevent barbarism, what good is culture? Since German music and German philosophy and a German literature, all superlative, could not make the German people humane enough not to produce Nazism, what good is each of them? What good is a culture which does not make us more human? The revolt contained in this question is what made Adorno bitterly conclude in 1951 that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And it is the same revolt that made George Steiner claim, in an article published as late as 1960, *The Hollow Miracle. Notes on German Language*, that "German language was not innocent of the horrors of Nazism," and Hitler found in it the "latent hysteria" he needed in order to craft his ideology of extermination.

There is a similar contemporary rage against Russian culture. Just as Adorno denied the moral right of poetry after Auschwitz, for any Ukrainian the moral right of Russian literature ceases after the Bucha and Mariupol massacres. Just as for Steiner German language was Hitler's accomplice, Russian literature seems in the eyes of any Ukrainian Putin's accomplice. And one can indeed easily detect diachronically, across the entire history of Russian literature, a strong pan-Russian, anti-European, anti-democratic vein. Coming from Dostoevsky, passing through innumerable writers of all sizes, and reaching contemporaries like Zakhar Prilepin, this anti-European and anti-democratic vein can justifiably be seen (due to its continuity, persistence, massiveness, and intensity) as the very backbone of all Russian literature. It makes immediately understandable the visceral rejection of Russian literature by Ukrainians—just as, in its time, it was immediately understandable the rejection *in corpore* of German



culture after Nazism.

As both Adorno and Steiner were influential and authoritative, their opinion quickly became the general opinion. Those who were hurt by it and felt it was unfair were, not surprisingly, poets themselves. Paul Celan felt hurt; he had already written an impressive body of his Holocaust poems in 1951, when Adorno has issued his statement (*Todesfuge* was written in 1945; its first Romanian version, *Tangoul morții*, was published in 1947; the German original was published in 1948; Felstiner dubs it “the *Guernica* of postwar European literature”, “a historical agent, accumulating its own biography”—Felstiner, 26). As we have seen before, his poetry written in German created a verbal community with his mother—and now he felt that Adorno’s moral interdiction on poetry was depriving him of the last possibility to reconnect with the dear persons Nazism has brutally taken from him. Czesław Miłosz was also hurt; he had written some extraordinary poems about the Polish Holocaust, such as *Campo dei Fiori*, written in the Easter days of 1943.

It took almost two decades for Adorno to admit he was not entirely right. In his last book, *Negative Dialectics* (1966), he acknowledges that, after reading Celan, he understood poetry is our inalienable right to scream under torture: “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems” (Adorno, 362). Therefore, to write poetry witnessing in favor of the victim in the language of assassins is to defeat assassins.

It would be an injustice (and maybe even a barbarism) not to see that Russian literature also displays a pro-European, humanist, freedom-loving tradition. Arguably thinner than the anti-democratic one, it is in no way negligible, as it spans two centuries and some major authors—starting with Chekhov and Turgenev, continuing with Akhmatova and Mandelstam and Pasternak and Tsvetaeva, and reaching today to Lyudmila Ulitskaya and Mikhail Shishkin. They all explicitly felt part of the European culture; some of them even identified more as European than as Russians. Turgenev, for example, in his final quarrel with Dostoevsky, when the author of *The Possessed* accused him of betraying Russia with his philo-Europeanism, replied bluntly: “I consider myself a German, not a Russian, and I’m proud of it!” (The scene is reproduced at length in Orlando Figes’s *The Europeans*, 311-12). Chekhov is one of the major humanist artists worldwide. Mandelstam and Akhmatova are among the most freedom-loving poets of the entire 20th century; they were mercilessly crushed by the communist regime exactly because of that. This is a humanist Russian culture which Europe (*y compris* Ukraine, it goes without saying) will also want to recover, there are in it amounts of truth and beauty not to be found anywhere else—and which will decisively nurture our European hearts and brains.

It took Adorno almost 20 years to understand that he had to tone down his harsh statement. That there is an art which serves and justifies the barbarity of the tyrants—and there is another art which gives the victims their voice. The voice necessary to scream under torture. The voice necessary to bear witness. It is only this last voice which is indeed the voice of art. And it is precisely this voice which stands proof that no barbarism can definitively destroy the human.

## 7.

If Germany re-became one of the major European hearts, this was possible because it admitted his tragic barbaric error and had the political and social will to develop a guilty conscience. It was, and still is, an educational program of unprecedented amplitude. After 1945, Germany had a future because of this moral admission of its guilty past. If Russia wants to have a future after losing the war with Ukraine, it will have to undergo a similar moral process of admitting and repenting its tragic barbaric error. Unfortunately for Russia, I do not see any political and social will on its side to develop this moral reaction. Bluntly said, because of its impotence to deal with its guilty past, Russia will have no future.

As for Ukraine, we all see and admire its extraordinary spirit born from a moral reaction in front of barbarism. President Zelenski’s extraordinary words, “I need ammunition, not a ride,” uttered in front of highly probable death, were the beginning of this massive moral reaction which catalyzed the formidable Ukrainian present and future. Which means that Russian barbarism has not managed to destroy Ukraine. Russian barbarism has destroyed Russia more than anything else. As for Ukrainian writers, they have done exactly what real artists do when history becomes horror: they have given voice to those who needed it in order to scream against barbarism. They have used their words as witness against atrocity. They have not allowed barbarity to have the final word.

So that Vakulenko and Amelina and Kryvtsov will define us as human species—and not Putin and his barbaric acolytes. If we want a future for our art, and for our humanity, we should take their example—

and write from this perpetual state of emergency for the human. And serve literature as members of the Order of the Teaspoon. And build a humanity whose words will not fail the human anymore. If we do so, literature will reach us even if it has to pass through common graves. As it has already done. But hopefully it will never have to do it again.

It all depends on us. And our teaspoons.

## 8.

Moretti was therefore right: whenever compromise ceases, tragic reappears. Tragic's condition of existence involves "a civilization irreparably divided between hostile entries and values" (Moretti, 34). Whenever history allows this radical division between two irreconcilable systems of values, tragic finds a literary form of expression. As we have seen in this article, its main contemporary elective form in Ukraine is poetry—I have mentioned Maksim Kryvtsov, but I could have easily added dozens of other names which are widely read in Ukraine because they are perceived as most relevant both as reaction against and description of the historical evil: among them, Iya Kiva, Yuliya Musakovska, Serhii Zhadan, Yevgeniy Breyger (the latter, writing in German about the war in Ukraine, being the most multi-prized poet of his generation in Germany). Fiction seems somewhat slower in keeping pace with the rapid tragic of history: Andrei Kurkov and Serhii Zhadan, the leaders of their respective generations of novelists, have not produced yet novels about the historical horror, preferring the essay as a reactive tool against it. Volodymyr Rafeyenko did publish an impressive novel in 2023, *The Length of Days. An Urban Ballad*, with an afterword by Marci Shore—but it is a more a reprocessing of a diaristical material than fiction *per se*. Of course, there is also the banal reason that a novel takes longer to write than an essay or a series of poems; and it could also be because, as Baghiu & Martin convincingly assert in their article in Transilvania's current issue, "if tragedy is claustrophobic, the novel is an extroverted celebration of expansion" —and both "celebration" and "expansion" are quite problematic concepts in the context of the war in Ukraine. Moreover, the diary as a confessional genre closer to poetry is also a medium more suitable for the contemporary tragic than fiction: Vakulenko's diary hid under a cherry tree and returned from the grave has functioned, as Finbar O'Reilly has recently shown in *The New York Times*, as "the buried book that helped Ukraine's literary revival". Read by tens of thousands, maybe even more, Ukrainian poetry and diaries are the direct proof of a return to a tragic era, confirming Moretti's 1983 diagnosis: tragic works within and against the absolutist ideologies. Tragedy may indeed be "an unrepeatable 'exception' in the history of literary forms" (Moretti, 29), and Andrei Terian compellingly shows in his article in the current issue how tragic substance subsists in modernity outside tragedy; thus but the substance of tragic finds its contemporary expressions in this age of anti-compromise in confessional poetry and, to a lesser extent, in other confessional genres (diaries and memoirs). Tragic poetry is a response to the reappearance of the cultural foundation of an absolutist power; its confessional nature is an attempt to rehumanize a history unleashed against the human.

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# Hamlet at the End of History: The Specter of Capitalism Haunting Communism

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**Abstract:** In this paper I analyze two versions of Hamlet written and published after the fall of communism in Romania and Russia. Starting from the distinction made by Carl Schmitt in *Hamlet or Hecuba* (1956) between the real Elizabethan temporality that erupts in Hamlet and the atemporal-literary form of tragedy, I explore the mutations of the tragic produced by the adaptation of Shakespeare's play in the post-communist East.

**Keywords:** tragedy, Hamlet, post-communism, capitalism, Romania, Russia

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On December 22, 1989, at 12:50 p.m., the anti-communist Romanian revolution breaks out on television screens. A group of excited people—mostly men—come on the air, waving victory signs and shouting: "We won!" Among them are the poet Mircea Dinescu (one of the most visible dissidents of the last years of communism) and the actor Ion Caramitru, later joined by the popular film director Sergiu Nicolaescu. Those who turn on their television sets at that moment feel as if they are watching a play—a parody or something highly experimental—although the underlying story escapes them. The show has the feel of a theatrical hit. Including the detail that it was broadcast in a time slot when nothing was scheduled. TVR's schedule that Friday was supposed to start at 1 p.m. with *Telejurnal*, followed by "Agriculture—Priority Programs" (from 1:25 p.m.), "Full Unity in the Romanian Homeland: Patriotic, Revolutionary Verses" (from 1:45 p.m.), a program of workers' songs, "One When, One Will" (from 2 p.m.), "We Build Much and Beautifully" (from 2:20 p.m.), then "The Pride of Being a Citizen of Socialist Romania." Thus, the live broadcast of the revolution comes at an empty, unscheduled moment. It is an improvised form that replaces the official program. The sense of artistic improvisation is heightened by the presence of professionals like Caramitru on the set.<sup>1</sup>

But as the "play" goes on, the sense of reality becomes stronger and stronger, even if it will continue for a while in improvised forms—improvised, at least apparently, because the planned nature of these broadcasts will be intensely guessed about. Three days later, on December 25, Nicolae Ceausescu, the communist dictator, is shot in a staged trial along with his wife Elena Ceausescu (the second most powerful person in the state). This marked the end of 42 years of communist rule in Romania. Caramitru had appeared recently at the National Theater in a production of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by director Alexandru Tocilescu. Hamlet had been haunting the communist East. A Bulgarian play staged in 1988, *The Murder of Gonzago* by Nedialko Iordanov, offered a critique of the totalitarian

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1. See more on this event in Victor Morozov, "Într-un oraș mic: Revoluția Română, între Videograme dintr-o revoluție și A fost sau n-a fost?," *Transilvania*, no. 11-12 (2019): 115–120; Victor Morozov, "Cvasi în direct: evenimentul revoluției române în Istoria lui Mihai Iovănel," *Transilvania*, no. 7-8 (2021): 133–138.





system of repression.<sup>2</sup> Heiner Müller's play *Hamletmaschine* played a crucial role in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.<sup>3</sup> It is not difficult to understand why. *Hamlet* is a play about the crisis of sovereignty in a state that Prince Hamlet famously compares to a prison ("Denmark is a prison"). Although critics since Goethe and Hegel have interpreted the Danish prince's reluctance to take immediate revenge as inaction and passivity, Hamlet ultimately triggers the resolution of the sovereignty crisis through violence. The end of the play is a bloodbath in which Hamlet himself meets his end, along with Claudius, his uncle who murdered his father, married his mother, and usurped his throne.

But it is precisely this explicitly anti-communist characterization of many productions of *Hamlet* in the late communist East that became problematic at once after the collapse of communism.<sup>4</sup> The piercing approximations to the dark and oppressive reality in the communist productions no longer find a connection to the material and psychological reality under the new socio-political conditions. Although a part of the old communist bureaucracy manages to reproduce itself in the new regime, the system changes fundamentally, starting with the fact that freedom takes the place of the repressive system. Ion Caramitru talks about this turn of events in a 2016 interview:

"Immediately after 1989, around the beginning of January 1990, I was rehearsing for the show that was about to be performed, and in the evening, in the dressing room, before going on stage, I panicked because I didn't know what I had to act. The show had a strong anti-establishment connotation, it was very anti-system. What could be sadder and more relevant than the fate of a young man living in a closed, militarized world, a world of crime and terror? That was the *Hamlet* we played. In fact, this play, no matter in which country it was performed, no matter if that space was overshadowed by tyranny, always had a great social impact. On the night of the performance, I realized that the world had changed, that we lived in freedom (...). I didn't know what I was going to play that night and what I was going to tell people. I had never experienced that feeling of panic before a performance. What else could this *Hamlet* have to say to the audience? I was terrified, I wanted to run away, because I felt that I had to imitate things that I had acted organically before, that I had lived. The only way out was to let the text take me, which I did. I decided to say the text and see what happened. Slowly, slowly, a different kind of revelation settled in, because I realized that this text was living through itself. If I had to give a definition of what I experienced then, it would be something like this: until 1989 I played Hamlet, after that Hamlet played me."<sup>5</sup>

Caramitru describes from the perspective of an actor—who in 1989 had also transformed himself into a political actor on a stage that was no longer a theater—how the form of the play proves to be more comprehensive than the content/interpretation that is actualized at a given moment in a given historical context. As the context changes, the new context becomes resistant to the old, now stale, interpretation. But the work itself allows its transformation into a version that satisfies the new context. Of course, not every play has this quality—most are discarded in the initial stages of evolution. Plays that are smash hits of one moment are forgotten the next. The centuries-long critical obsession with *Hamlet* stems not only from its famous ambiguity, its resistance to interpretation, but also from the unbroken way in which this remarkable interpretive plasticity has been linked over time to a long series of historical contexts that have found in *Hamlet* the most proper key to interpretation. In a story by Borges from the collection *Ficciones*, "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," the mystery of events in the distant past that took place "in an oppressed and tenacious country: Poland, Ireland, the Republic of

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2. Ileana Alexandra Orlich, "Staging *Hamlet* as Political No Exit in Géza Beremény's *Halmi*," and "Nedyalko Yordanov's *The Murder of Gonzago*: Reading Bulgaria's Communist Political Culture through Shakespeare's *Hamlet*," in *Subversive Stages. Theater in Pre- and Post-Communist Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria* (Budapest-New York: Central European University Press, 2017), 115–154. For the larger context of the history of the tragedy in Romania, see Andrei Terian, "Tragedy in Romanian Literature: Some Conceptual Delimitations," *Transilvania*, no. 5 (2024).

3. Andreas Höfele, *No Hamlets: German Shakespeare from Friedrich Nietzsche to Carl Schmitt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 276–292.

4. For the "obsession" of having an anticommunist narrative in Romanian literature see Mihai Iovănel, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990-2020* (Iași: Polirom, 2021). See also Bogdan Contea, "Romanul comunismului românesc înainte și după istoria lui Mihai Iovănel," *Transilvania*, no. 5–6 (2023): 65–73.

5. "Interviu cu Ion Caramitru," *Adevărul*, April 22, 2016. <https://adevarul.ro/stil-de-viata/cultura/interviu-ion-caramitru-pana-in-1989-eu-il-jucam-1703672.html>.

Venice, a South American or Balkan state...<sup>6</sup> is solved when the historian investigating the facts discovers that they faithfully reproduce the text of Shakespeare's plays. "That history should have copied history was astonishing enough; that history should have copied literature was inconceivable...", comments the character in the story,<sup>[5]</sup><sup>7</sup> but in fact history does end up copying literature. Not only in the sense of those motivational influences in which, as Karl Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), the French revolutionaries of 1789 found inspiration in the writings of the ancients, and in which passages from the literature of people dead for hundreds and thousands of years have, over time, crept into the core of the hottest reality. But also, in the sense that historical events, once reduced to a narrative model, can be illuminated by equivalences with other narrative models, even if the latter were elaborated not by the movement of history but by that of the writing hand.

This mythic function of literature was not even fulfilled by Hamlet, in which Carl Schmitt saw "a hieroglyph of the Western world."<sup>8</sup> The plasticity of Shakespeare's play, "this inexhaustible mutability," as Schmitt also called it,<sup>9</sup> is also verified in the context of post-communism. Writing about Marx's legacy in the 1993 volume *Spectres de Marx* [Specters of Marx], in which he polemicalizes with a 1989 article by Francis Fukuyama that proclaimed the Hegelian end of history that would necessarily follow the collapse of communism,<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida discusses at length the specter of Hamlet's father returning to demand revenge from his son. This is not a mere literary reference to the specter that haunted Europe at the beginning of Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*<sup>11</sup>. Like Hamlet's "time (...) out of joint" (the dislocated reality that needs to be put back in order, recomposed), the death of the Great Father is one of the most important themes of post-communism. The totality of communism must also be symbolically killed in the form of the figure of the father, whose sovereignty is to be redistributed. Thus, even after 1989, the figure of Hamlet continues to mediate the relationship with the specter of communism. In Russia in the first post-communist decade, Hamlet is the most popular play by Shakespeare.<sup>12</sup>

In what follows, I will examine two plays from Romania and Russia that rewrite/ adapt Hamlet after the fall of communism, paying particular attention to those "dark areas"<sup>13</sup> that are configured almost counterintuitively, despite the rational expectations we might have, knowing—with the luxury of hindsight—the historical context and the profile of the authors. These "dark areas" signal problematic distortions caused by the encounter between the atemporal form of the literary source and the concrete temporality of the context in which the latest version is produced. It is precisely the problematic character of this conjunction that interests me here; I see in them indications of a speculative reading of the system in which they are produced. The source of the distinction between the two temporalities is, of course, Carl Schmitt's classic 1956 study, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of Time into the Play*. According to Schmitt, the conflict in Hamlet arises from series of "structurally determining, genuine intrusions" into the present in which Shakespeare lived—the civil war between Catholicism and Protestantism, especially the struggle for succession in the last years of Elizabeth

6. Jorge Luis Borges, "Theme of Traitor and Hero," in *Ficciones*, edited and with an introduction by Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963), 336.

7. Borges, *Ficciones*, 337.

8. Andreas Höfele, "The Tragedies in Germany," in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy*, edited by Michael Neill and David Schalkwyk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 723.

9. Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of the Time into the Play*. Translated by David Pan and Jennifer R. Rust (New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2009), 8.

10. Starting with the collapse of communism, Fukuyama proclaimed that history had come to an end: in other words, that the victory of liberal democracy (whose "ideal (...) could not be improved on"), brought about by the death of its opponents, brought about the cessation of all contradictions, pushing the world system into a state of eternal perfection. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), XI.

11. See Stefan Baghiu, Anca Simina Martin, "Tragedy of Monsters: Vampire Fears, Melodrama, and the Modern Horror," *Transilvania*, no. 5 (2024).

12. "Despite changed economic and political conditions, *Hamlet*—of all of Shakespeare's plays—continued to appeal most to Russian directors wishing to speak to their times. Between 1994 and 1998, there were nine productions of the play in Moscow alone." John Givens, "Shakespearean Tragedy in Russia: In Equal Scale Weighing Delight and Dole," in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy*, eds. Michael Neill and David Schalkwyk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 774-775. See also Marcela Kostihová, "Shakespeare after Shock Therapy: Neoliberalism and Culture in the Postcommunist Czech Republic," in *Postcommunism, Postmodernism, and the Global Imagination*, ed. Christian Moraru (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 117-136.

13. Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, 44.



l's reign—in the tragic, literary, and timeless form of a radical conflict within a family. It is precisely this eruption of real temporality into the timeless form of tragedy, Schmitt argues, that produces the disturbances that make Hamlet's behavior resistant to unambiguous interpretation.

The first play is *Emanciparea prințului Hamlet* [The Emancipation of Prince Hamlet] by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (b. 1964), first published in 1992 in the anthology *Avanscena* and reprinted in 1997 in the anthology *Moartea lui Ariel* [Death of Ariel].<sup>14</sup> It is dedicated to Ernest Jones, the psychoanalyst known, among other things, as the author of *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1910, 1949), one of the most influential interpretations of Shakespeare's play. Jones's thesis is that Hamlet's inability to act is due to the relationship between the moral duty to avenge his uncle's murder and his repressed identification with the murderer.<sup>15</sup> Mungiu-Pippidi is trained as a psychiatrist, although after the fall of communism she specialized in political science and political sociology. The play mediates between these disciplines: on the one hand, it rewrites Hamlet as a psychodrama staged in a psychiatric hospital; on the other hand, it examines the sources of power in a capitalist system in the form of an allegory. There are several hints that the play is in fact an allegorical reference to the situation in Romania, such as when a patient proclaims that "times have changed"<sup>16</sup>—change being one of the key words of post-communist Romania's transition to capitalism. The same goes for the freedom proclaimed by the hospital's patron—himself a psychiatrist, but also the owner of the psychiatric unit: "I decree freedom of speech! (...) Freedom of censorship! (...) Absolute, necessary and universal freedom! Everyone is obliged to take part in it! Those who don't get out of bed, those who sit in the corner, those who bite their nails, those who masturbate or have escape plans, have no place in our society. (Lowering his voice) But they will stay here. We don't let anyone go who hasn't been completely cured."<sup>17</sup> The space in which the action takes place is not accidental. Communist society has often been compared not only to a prison but also to a sanatorium. Several subversive anti-communist novels published in the last years of communism are set in such a space.<sup>18</sup>

In Alina Mungiu-Pippidi's play, the patron buys the hospital and imposes his rules—the rules of the free market, where whoever owns the capital controls the knowledge—on the doctors. Under his command, a psychodrama is staged around a patient who thinks he is Hamlet (whom I will refer to hereafter as "Hamlet"), the son of a recently deceased businessman whose business has been taken over by his brother, who, as in Shakespeare's play, has also married his sister-in-law, in which all the people close to "Hamlet" outside the hospital are involved, as well as the patients and doctors inside the hospital. But behind the patron's seemingly progressive discourse, which in theory aims to cure "Hamlet," there are in fact purely psychotic motives. Alina Mungiu-Pippidi's play is basically a version not only of Shakespeare's play, but also of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether" (1845), in which the patients of an asylum take control of it, lock the doctors in their place, and convincingly perform their new roles by simulating rationality in front of an outside visitor until they are unmasked. Although the Patron also feigns rationality, his psychotic motives are revealed by his extreme libertarian philosophy, which looks to detach the individual from society:

"What society does—or constantly tries to do—to those who make it up [is] to convince them that its needs come before their needs, to minimize and depersonalize them. And what are you doing here? You are convincing them that society is right. You shock them with electric shocks, you give them brutal and blind neuroleptic therapy, and you try to do the same thing: depersonalize them. By diminishing the individual, you also diminish his symptoms, you reduce him to a wretch with no will and no mind of his own, convinced—perversely—that society wants what is good for him, and you send him back out into the world to crawl among his own kind! (...) Let us contribute as much as we can to the true becoming, to the realization of each human being as a true personality! The hospice is full of people who never had the chance to realize their dreams! If they can't fulfill them in the world, at least let them do it here: let each one of them be and become what he has wished for. And when they have fulfilled their ideals, send them back whence they came, and

14. Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *The Emancipation of Prince Hamlet*, in *The Death of Ariel* (Bucharest: Unitext, 1997), 5–52.

15. Ernest Jones, "The Oedipus Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery: A Study in Motive," *The American Journal of Psychology*, no. 1 (1910): 72–113.

16. Mungiu-Pippidi, *The Emancipation of Prince Hamlet*, 7.

17. Mungiu-Pippidi, *The Emancipation of Prince Hamlet*, 18.

18. E.g. Petre Sălcudeanu, *Biblioteca din Alexandria* (1980).

we shall have normal behavior from them, not because we have killed in them their deepest aspirations and hopes, but because they have fulfilled them with true satisfaction!"<sup>19</sup>

When the Patron's experiment—which, in fact, aims not so much to cure "Hamlet" as to punish society by turning into psychotic patients the representatives of society whom he manages to co-opt into the psychodrama—finally fails, it is programmed into a bloodbath. And the Patron, also murdered, returns as a ghost to deliver a speech legitimizing the absolute freedom of the individual in relation to the rest (other people, nature): "I am your father, Hamlet, and I return to tell you: Nature is our work. Nothing is more legitimate than your impulse. If you want to kill, kill! We all want to be murdered for revenge. Do not waver!"<sup>20</sup>

The second play I will be discussing is *Hamlet. Version* by Boris Akunin (b. 1956), published in Russia in 2000.<sup>21</sup> The author's name is actually a pseudonym under which the Nipponologist Grigori Chkhartishvili hides; under this pseudonym he became famous in post-communist Russia as the author of detective novels set in the second half of the 19th century.<sup>22</sup> Akunin rewrites Hamlet, retaining the verse structure but drastically reducing the number of scenes, although the narrative development remains close to Shakespeare's text until the end. The most important change concerns Horatio's role: at the end of the play, after almost everyone else has died and Hamlet has ended with the famous words "The rest is silence," Horatio reveals himself as the puppet master of all events. It was he who disguised himself as the ghost of Hamlet's father to urge the bereaved prince to avenge his father; it was he who conceived of the theatrical performance—the play within the play—that unmasks Claudius; it was he who engineered the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and orchestrated Hamlet's capture by the pirates; it was he who proposed the duel between Hamlet and Laertes, taking care to poison the swords; it was he who caused Gertrude to commit suicide under the burden of remorse for having caused the suicide of Hamlet's father through her association with Claudius. Horatio's purpose in weaving this kingdom is to place Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, on the throne of Denmark—Fortinbras was his close accomplice in the plot. The fulfillment of Horatio and Fortinbras' plan leads to the resolution of the civil war between Hamlet and Claudius or between Claudius and Polonius—the latter, in monologues or dialogues with his son Laertes, in turn raises claims to the throne, dreaming of becoming Polonius the First. In Akunin's play, it is important to note that not only is Fortinbras a foreigner, but Horatio is also a native of Swabia; the other characters notice his accent—marked in the text by the detail that Horatio is the only one who speaks in prose, not iambic verse.

What unites the solutions of both plays is that they seem to validate the fears—which often take the irrational form of conspiracy theories<sup>23</sup>—of those who have emerged from communism and, having entered a cognitive labyrinth (i.e., structural difficulties of understanding that arose during the prolonged transition from communism to post-communism, a process without historical precedent and therefore experimental<sup>24</sup>), evaluate the solutions coming from the West at the end of the Cold War and the "end of history." In both plays, the conflict is subordinated to forces outside the agency of individuals, to master puppeteers or "master-signifiers" (the Patron in Mungiu-Pippidi, Horatio-Fortinbras in Akunin)

19. Mungiu-Pippidi, *The Emancipation of Prince Hamlet*, 20-21.

20. Mungiu-Pippidi, *The Emancipation of Prince Hamlet*, 52.

21. Boris Akunin, *Hamlet. Version*, translation by Mihaela Lovin and Ileana Alexandra Orlich, foreword by Ileana Alexandra Orlich (Bucharest: EuroPress, 2014).

22. Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant After Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 202-207.

23. Anastasiya Astapova, Onoriu Colăcel, Corneliu Pintilescu, and Tamás Scheibner (eds.), *Conspiracy Theories in Eastern Europe. Tropes and Trends* (London-New York: Routledge, 2021). For a more abstract perspective on conspiracy theories, see Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic. Cinema and Space in the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). See also Liviu Chelcea, and Oana Druță, "Zombie Socialism and the Rise of Neoliberalism in Post-Socialist Central and Eastern Europe," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 4-5 (2016): 521-44.

24. "During the endless transition from communism to neoliberal capitalism, the East entered a cognitive labyrinth that defied understanding as a result of its complex economical and political articulations." See Mihai Iovănel, "Inside the Labyrinth. The Post-Communist Novel Between Anti-Communism and Nostalgia." *Central Europe*, no. 1 (2024): 50. See also Andrei Terian, "Representing Romanian Communism: Evolutionary Models and Metanarrative Scenario," in *Beyond the Iron Curtain: Revisiting the Literary System of Communist Romania*, eds. Stefan Baghiu, Ovio Olaru, and Andrei Terian (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021), 23-42. For the Cold War and "the end of history" see Cosmin Borza, Claudiu Turcuș, "Tragicomedia Occidentului: emigrația economică în romanele și filmele românești din anii '90," *Transilvania*, no. 5 (2024).



who manipulate and control the plan of individual actions. In both plays, Hamlet loses his original agency (however undermined by his “passivity” and regardless of the latter’s motivation) because he is caught between two socio-political systems, or rather in transition from one system to the other. For Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, the Western model confronting the post-communist East offers the scene of a struggle for survival configured as Social Darwinism, in which the power provided by the possession of capital dictates the laws of human configuration. And Akunin’s play presents a version of the “knife in the back” theory that brought Nazism to power in Germany after World War I: in this scenario, Horatio plays the role of the quintessential foreigner, the caricatured Jew who led to Germany’s downfall. Akunin’s fall of the Danish throne into the hands of the Norwegian prince allegorizes the fall of the countries of the former USSR, especially Russia, into the system of Western domination. This is also the reason “‘The Turn’ of 1989 replaced Hamlet with Fortinbras as the iconic representative of the West” in postcommunist Russia.<sup>25</sup>

This reactionary turn is even more interesting because both Mungiu-Pippidi and Akunin played progressive roles in their respective countries. Mungiu-Pippidi combined her academic work—as one of the most internationally visible scholars in post-1989 Romania—with forms of political activism aimed at monitoring and reducing corruption and making the political choice and decision-making process more transparent. Akunin was among the critics of Vladimir Putin after the invasion of Georgia and Ukraine and chose to emigrate to the United Kingdom, with the result that he was denounced by the Putin regime as a “foreign agent” and his writings were banned in Russia. But this information only reinforces the tragic core of the two versions of *Hamlet* they wrote. If Hamlet was originally a tragedy about the religious schism between Catholicism and Protestantism,<sup>26</sup> a conflictual rupture still relevant today from the perspective of reactionary but still practically unresolved concepts such as Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” (based on a clash of religions), the two versions of Hamlet analyzed in this essay show how the schism is reconfigured into a clash of socio-political systems—communism and capitalism. This fact is even more relevant because both plays were written after the official “death” of communism and the “final” victory of capitalism by authors who cannot be considered apologists for communism. The two plays suggest that Hamlet remains relevant as a tragic myth not because its form is sufficiently ambiguous and “out of joint” to allow for endless updates, but because it allows for a re-actualization of the historical conflict that “irrupted” its original Elizabethan version and marks modernity to this day.

As Derrida has shown, even after the “end of history,” the specter of communism returns to the space of capitalism, apparently triumphant on the ruins of communism, to muddy the waters and show that this conflict remains irresolvable in modernity, whatever the balance of power may be at any given moment. The two plays analyzed suggest that it is not only a temporary psychological conflict—now historicized—produced by the transition from a political system that offers security in the data of an equalizing poverty (communism) to a promising but threatening system (capitalism). It is also an allegorical representation of the cognitive labyrinth that the communist states entered after the collapse of communism, from which there is no satisfactory exit in sight. In the anti-communist adaptations of *Hamlet*, the communist adaptations of communism focused on the prison present, which was denounced with all the energy that censorship allowed. In the post-communist versions of *Hamlet*, the future is examined under conditions of freedom, but this freedom brings no reassuring promises,<sup>27</sup> a reversal of the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto*, in which the specter of communism haunted the capitalist forms of 1848.

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25. “Fortinbras’s entrance in a business suit and a golden mask—a star warrior of capitalism—marked the end of Heiner Müller’s seven-and-a-half-hour production of *Hamlet* (including, as a kind of interlude, Müller’s own *Hamletmachine*), which opened at the Deutsches Theater in East Berlin in March 1990.” Andreas Höfele, “The Tragedies in Germany,” in Michael Neill, David Schalkwyk (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy*, 723.

26. “Mary Stuart is still for us something different and more than Hecuba. Even the fate of the Atrides does not touch us as deeply as that of the unfortunate Stuarts. This royal line was shattered by the fate of the European religious schism. From its history grew the seed of the tragic myth of Hamlet.” Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, 52.

27. “The political dimension of tragedy does not consist in illuminating the shifts of power, as happens in the long procession of sovereigns in the histories and even in Julius Caesar; it consists rather in posing the question of whether a cultural foundation of power is still possible, and in answering it in the negative. In the histories, sovereign power is a given that no one questions, and so the dramatic interest is concentrated on the development and the question of the conflict that occurs over it. In tragedy, on the other hand, sovereign power has become an insoluble problem: forced to face this fact, the hero can no longer believe in his struggle for power and abandons it as a meaningless enterprise.” Franco Moretti, “The Great Darkness. Tragic Form as the Deconsecration of Sovereignty,” in *Signs Taken for Wonders. On the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London-New York: Verso, 2005), 64.

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# Malaria ca tragedie națională: Semnele lui Dănuț (1922) de Gib I. Mihăescu

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## Malaria as National Tragedy: Semnele lui Dănuț (1922) by Gib. I. Mihăescu

**Abstract:** Some of Franco Moretti's earliest works investigated the tragic form qua allegory of the desacralization of sovereignty and/or as an allegory of civil war. Inspired by this type of conceptualization, in the present essay I turn the mirror on an endemic malady which I instrumentalize as an allegory of a national tragedy or as an allegory of the contemporary way of life (concerning especially the 19th-20th century way of life). In this vein, I assert that, just as a literary species can do that, a particular type of illness – an endemic one, such is malaria – can capture a symbolic function in literature. It is the function of expressing a collective drift, a bunch of socio-anthropological symptoms, specters of state policies or rather of their absence.

**Keywords:** malaria, hallucination, railways anxiety, technology anxiety, Bolschevism, Naturalism, tragedy, Ion Luca Caragiale, Gib I. Mihăescu, Émile Zola, Frank Norris, Franco Moretti

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Unele dintre cele mai timpurii teorii ale lui Franco Moretti au investigat forma tragică *qua* alegorie a desacralizării suveranității/ monarhiei și/ sau a războiului civil<sup>1</sup>; șantierul lui nu e terminat, procesul este în curs. Inspirată de acest tip de conceptualizare, în eseu de față întorc oglinda spre maladia endemică *qua* alegorie a tragediei naționale sau ca (specie de) tragedie a contemporaneității (îndeosebi a „contemporaneității” de secol XIX-XX, dar cu potențial generalizant). Dacă o specie literară poate funcționa în acest fel, există date și despre modul cum un anume tip de maladie poate fi explorată, invocată, utilizată în literatură ca metaforă sau chiar ca document cât se poate de realist al unei derive colective, al unor simptome și reflexe socio-antropologice, al unor politici de stat sau mai curând al absenței acestora.

Maladia pe care o am în vedere în cercetarea literară pe care o propun aici este nu doar una care, alături de tuberculoză sau „oftică”, a făcut ravagii în România secolului al XIX-lea și a începutului de

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1. „Tragedy disentitled the absolute monarch to all ethical and rational legitimation. Having deconsecrated the king, it thus made it possible to decapitate him”. Franco Moretti, „A Huge Eclipse»: Tragic Form and the Deconsecration of Sovereignty”, *Genre*, nr. 15 (1982): 7-8; vezi și mai departe: „[I]n tragedy, dictatorship (which, we recall from Benjamin, «demands the completion of the image of the sovereign, as tyrant») is not the means to end a state of exception, but rather, on the contrary, what provokes it, what initiates civil war. In other words, the force that the king manifests in his decision proclaims him not only a tyrant, but incapable of governing as well. As a consequence, the exercise of sovereignty leads to complete anarchy, as though the two were one and the same. With effects that we will later need to register, tragedy represents absolutism as an irresolvable paradox.” Ibid., 11. Vezi și „Shakespeare's major tragedies are reflections on the nature of sovereignty, in which an initial figure of legitimacy is ousted by a usurper, who is in his turn defeated by a second figure of legitimacy”. În Franco Moretti, „Network Theory. Plot Analysis”, *New Left Review*, nr. 68 (2011): 88.

secol XX, după cum și în unele zone ale Europei, și care continuă incluziv astăzi să afecteze continente întregi, modelând culturi și civilizații până la nivel de detaliu<sup>2</sup>, dar este și un personaj frontal sau de fundal recurent în literatura română modernă, de la I.L. Caragiale la postbelicul Marin Preda. Este malaria sau paludismul ori, în vocabular popular, „frigurile”, a căror cauză, parazitul din genul *Plasmodium* cu subgenurile sale, a fost descoperită abia spre finele secolului al XIX-lea, în deceniile 1880-90. Faptul că malaria este o boală halucinogenă, că agentul său patogen afectează sistemul nervos și poate produce halucinații (nu știu dacă există o legătură, etimologic vorbind, între *Plasmodium* și „plăsmuire”, dacă rădăcina lor e greceștile *πλάττω* sau *plasma* = „crea(ție)”, „modela(re)”, „forma(re)” etc., dar nu mă pot abține să nu invoc măcar formal această apropiere), explică de ce prezența ei într-un scenariu narativ îi induce acestuia un subiacent mesaj social și politic: politicul are legătură cu capacitatea de fantazare a indivizilor și a colectivelor, cu apetența lor de a intra într-o iluzie, de a deveni teren însămânțabil cu iluzie, dar uneori și cu forța de a i se sustrage acesteia. „Frigurile” sunt supa organică care generează intriga și rezolvarea din *O făclie de Paște* (1889) de Caragiale, dar și rama ce cuprinde o proză mult mai puțin notorie, slab și superficial comentată, aproape ignorată, ca *Semnele lui Dănuț* (1922) de Gib I. Mihăescu, autor el însuși mai prețuit ca romancier decât ca nuvelist.

Scopul eseului meu nu este doar să defoliez persistența și evoluția unui topos din bioștiințe devenit topos literar – o literatură a „frigurilor” și, mai general, a „fandacșiei”, a apetenței pentru iluzie, fabulație, irealitate – în literatura română, ci și acela de a descoperi cum se perpetuează acest topos pe linie ficțional-estetică, prin ce tehnici compoziționale, prin ce tipologii umane, prin ce referenți din realitatea obiectivă, prin ce medii, prin ce tipuri de intrigă și deznodăminte. În acest ultim sens, sunt de părere că *Semnele lui Dănuț* este simetrica nuvelei *O făclie de Paște* de Caragiale: o *făclie de Crăciun*, unde un anumit tip de anxietate difuză legată tot de conservare și de autoconservare (a protagonistului față de viața sa/ a preocupării față de viața fiicei sale) e agravată de prezența unui rău cunoscut, a malariei, boală a paroxismului prin excelență, dar și de o cultură a anxietății feroviare, derivate dintr-o anxietate colonială. *Făclia de Crăciun* a lui Mihăescu este, anticipez, potențiala ciocnire și explozie a două trenuri de mersul cărora protagonistul Grigore Dănuț, șeful gării din localitatea vâlceană Bobeni (azi Băbeni), era responsabil, dar pe care nu l-ar fi gestionat corect inclusiv din pricina acceselor bolii, care-i împinge fireasca grijă paternă pe culmile unei alerte paroxist-halucinatorii.

Nu am descoperit informații care să ateste o intenție explicită, asumată a lui Mihăescu de a se raporta în acest text la amintita proză a lui Caragiale – de a se raporta atât de *strâns*, de metodic, la Caragiale, pe cât urmează să arăt –, dar nu e mai puțin important de investigat realitatea că, dincolo de *frame*-ul naturalist-expresionist în vogă absolută între secole, aceste două proze comunică într-un mod cu totul particular, prin similitudinile lor frapante, dar și prin abordările diferite ale unor problematici comune. Fluidul care le străbate – malaria – a făcut, pesemne, ca acțiuni și caractere separate de circa trei decenii să-și regăsească dezvoltări și „soluții” similare, dar similare mai curând în plan simbolic, nu neapărat în planul tehnologiei sau al instrumentelor obiective puse în serviciul lor. Soluția similară de rezolvare a anxietății este, de pildă, arderea, dar realizarea ei se face diferit la Caragiale (prin combustia mâinii răufăcătorului, urmată de uciderea lui) și la Mihăescu (prin eventuala ciocnire urmată de o explozie a trenurilor). La Caragiale este o soluție căutată, fabricată voluntar de erou, la Mihăescu este o soluție potențială, nedorită de protagonist, dar făcută posibilă cu concursul lui direct, involuntar însă.

Nuvela lui Mihăescu se situează pe o linie a explorării paroxismului<sup>3</sup> de la Émile Zola (*La Bête humaine*, 1890), I.L. Caragiale („simt enorm și văz monstruos” – *O făclie de Paște, Grand-Hôtel Victoria Română*, 1890) până la expresionism, îndeosebi din zona teatrală, a scenografiilor (vezi rețeta regizorului german Karl Heinz Martin, care a montat și la București în deceniul 1920 și pentru care scenografia diform-detracată trebuia să reflecte patologia personajelor, modul unui delirant de a vedea lumea).

2. Bibliografia impactului acestei maladii asupra evoluției în genere și a evoluției omului în particular este uriașă. Printre titlurile de primă informație vezi: Sonia Shah, *The Fever – How Malaria Has Ruled Humankind for 500,000 Years* [2011] (Penguin, 2018), epub; despre consecințele malariei în Europa Centrală, Sud-Estică și din estul bazinului mediteranean – regiuni apropiate de spațiul românesc – au scris Frank M. Snowden, *The Conquest of Malaria: Italy, 1900-1962* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2006), Sandra M. Sufian, *Healing the Land and the Nation: Malaria and the Zionist Project in Palestine, 1920-1947* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), Katerina Gardikas, *Landscapes of Disease: Malaria in Modern Greece* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2018). Modul în care malaria este explorată în literatura occidentală de expresie anglosaxonă a fost recent studiat din perspectivă postcolonială/ postimperială de Jessica Howell, *Malaria and Victorian Fictions of Empire* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

3. Simptom de intensitate senzorială asociat curent cu paludismul, paroxismul este o trăire paludică prin excelență.





Protagonistul nuvelei nu este, de fapt, Grigore Dănuț, șeful gării din Bobeni, care-și așteaptă unicul copil, tânăra Frosica, să vină acasă de Crăciun cu acceleratul de Craiova, unde fusese trimisă pentru a fi ferită de „frigurile” ce dădeau stigma regiunii natale, ci imaginarul halucinatoriu semănat în creierul tatălui de Plasmodiul malariei, care sapă în realitate până o ulcerează iremediabil. Preocuparea tatălui pentru sănătatea fetei, atinsă și ea de „friguri”, se transformă în panică și delir. Consumat de halucinație, acesta devine neatent la sarcinile solicitate de lumea reală și pune bazele unei eventuale catastrofe feroviare. Protagonistul autentic al nuvelei – păpușarul care mișcă oamenii și acțiunile lor – se poate spune că este chiar genul parazitic *Plasmodium*, cu unul dintre subtipurile sale care vor fi circulat în România începutului de secol XX: *Plasmodium falciparum*, *Plasmodium vivax*, *Plasmodium malariae*.

Aparent însă și așa cum par să indice primele fraze ale textului, *monstrul* nuvelei este un mastodont, nu un microorganism: e vorba de tren, mai precis vagonul care înghite marfa ca un „uriaș decapitat”: „Pe rampă, candizi, parcă niște ouă de furnici monstruoase, câțiva saci dolofani așteptau îngrămădiți dinaintea singurului vagon din toată gara, căscat la mijloc ca o gură de uriaș decapitat, caraghios încremenită într-o supremă convulsie de lăcomie.”<sup>4</sup> Rețeta bestiară a reprezentării trenului este, cel puțin la prima vedere, apropiată de a prozatorilor occidentali dintre secole, de pildă de a naturalistului nedesprins cu totul de romantism Frank Norris. În romanul acestuia *The Octopus. A story of California* (1901), trenul și sistemul feroviar în sine, *Calea Ferată*, sunt desemnate prin figuri ca „ciclopul”, „leviatanul”, „caracatița” – metonimii pentru rapacitatea absolută a capitalului reprezentat de servicii, capitalismul însuși fiind descris aici ca un agregat de „forțe” similare forțelor naturii sau chiar ca forță a naturii în raport cu care omul ar fi un simplu instrument<sup>5</sup>. Un anumit tip de anxietate colonială traductibilă ca anxietate feroviară era, mai trebuie adăugat, curent încă de pe la mijlocul secolului XIX în Europa și în Americi<sup>6</sup>, acutizată de toate știrile zilei relatând despre ciocniri de trenuri, despre deraieri, răpiri, jafuri, hold-up-uri și altele. Imaginarul personajului lui Mihăescu nu face excepție, cel puțin în parte, de la acest cadru de largă popularitate al anxietății feroviare: în reprezentarea protagonistului din *Semnele lui Dănuț*, călătorii stau, de pildă, în vagon „înghemuiți ca scrumbiile într-un butoi de băcănie” – imagine care amintește de una similară și din aceeași epocă a lui Ion Minulescu: „pachetele” umane în care se transformă călătorii urcați în tren, comprimați de spațiul redus în care sunt nevoiți să reziste până la destinație<sup>7</sup>. (De altfel, încă din epoca romantică sau de la mijlocul secolului XIX s-a spus despre călătoria cu trenul, despre statul în vagon, foarte aproape de alți oameni/ străini, pentru o perioadă lungă de timp, că declanșează ori acutizează claustrofobii și alte patologii nervoase, la rândul lor generatoare de trăiri paroxistice ori similare<sup>8</sup>.)

Progresând cu lectura nuvelei lui Mihăescu, se constată însă că, de fapt, nu trenul (tehnologia) este adevăratul monstru, chiar dacă eventuala catastrofă îl implică, ci omul și multiplele sale tare și condiționări – iar aici prozatorul român pare că migrează mai aproape de *La Bête humaine* (1890) a lui Émile Zola. Dar nici în această zonă de influență nu adastă Mihăescu mult, fiindcă în nuvela lui vinovat

4. Gib I. Mihăescu, *Semnele lui Dănuț*, „Gândirea”, nr. 3, 16 mai, 1922; reluat în volumul *Vedenia* (1929); reprodus în Gib I. Mihăescu, *Opere. I. Nuvele și povestiri*, ediție îngrijită, studiu introductiv, cronologie, note, comentarii și variante de Alexandru Andriescu (București: Academia Română, Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă, 2008), 411.

5. Nu trebuie omis însă nici faptul că această reprezentare evoluționistă a capitalismului aparține unui capitalist pursânge, președintelui Căilor Ferate californiene, a fictivei Pacific & Southwestern Railroad, care astfel își legitimează și justifică orice acțiune, declinându-și liberul arbitru și declarându-se în slujba unor „forțe” superioare imposibil de combătut sau de deviat de la cursul lor.

6. Vezi apocalipsa feroviară imaginată de socialistul Victor Considerant în prima parte a secolului XIX în Franța (*Déraison et dangers de l'engouement pour les chemins en fer: Avis à l'opinion et aux capitaux* (1838); vezi și monstrificarea trenului și a sistemului feroviar în genere, chiar dacă de pe principii uneori diferite, la Émile Zola (*La Bête humaine*, 1890) și Frank Norris (*The Octopus: A Story of California*, 1901).

7. „Doar trenul singur se-nfioară/ De-atâta veșnică povară./ El singur poartă mai departe/ Pachete-omenești, culcate/ Ca-ntr-un muzeu de statui sparte./ Pe bănci de pluș capitonate”, *Prin gările cu firme albastre* (1913), inclusă în vol. *De vorbă cu mine însumi* [1924], reprodus în Ion Minulescu, *Opere. Versuri*, text ales și stabilit, note, comentarii, variante și indici de Ștefan Firică și Alexandru Farcaș; cronologie de Ștefan Firică, „Introducere” de Eugen Simion (București: Academia Română, Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă, 2019), 131.

8. Pentru detalii despre angoasele provocate romanticilor polonezi de transportul feroviar, asociat cu condiții – fie și pe termen scurt, de câteva ore – improprii supraviețuirii omului sau a supraviețuirii cu prețul unor traume mai mult sau mai puțin reparabile (claustrofobia etc.), vezi Patryk Zakrzewski, „Chroniclers of Iron Roads: How the Romantics Saw the Development of the Railway”, accesat pe 20 iunie 2024 la adresa: <https://culture.pl/en/article/chroniclers-of-iron-roads-how-the-romantics-saw-the-development-of-the-railway>.

nu e atât omul în sine – bestie prin naștere, prin ereditate, prin abuz de substanțe etc. –, cât omul strivit de un mediu, de bălțile care aduc „frigurile”, de „frigurile” care aduc halucinația, decolarea din realitate. *Monstrul* se revelează a fi, cum am anunțat deja, un microorganism. Totuși, etic și filozofic vorbind, agențialitatea propagării răului nu aparține nici acestuia, ci statului, politicului care nu dă șanse vieții individului în măsura în care îl obligă totuși să performeze un serviciu într-o zonă care îi amenință sănătatea lui și familiei sale, nemaivorbind de sănătatea comunității mai largi în sine, a locuitorilor din zona maleficelor „bălți”.

Relația ambiguă cu tehnologia (de la tren la telegraf) nu lipsește în *Semnele lui Dănuț*, din contră, dar este speculată fin, milimetric. Căci tehnologia – afirmă morala nuvelei – nu mai poate strica acolo unde natura deja și-a instalat morbul, unde s-a instaurat parazitul. Așa se face că tehnologia acompaniază delirul protagonistului, dar nu îl declanșează și nici nu îl determină în mod esențial. Însă modul în care răul natural (iar în spatele lui, răul politic) și potențialul malefic al tehnologiei se împletesc, se confundă ori se scurtcircuitează face arta acestei nuvele pe nedrept ignorate. Îi voi acorda eu interesul cuvenit mai departe, printr-un *close reading* urmat de un mic dosar de receptare și o comparație de detaliu cu *O făclie de Paște*.

## I.

Detaliile spațio-temporare aduc, pe lângă menționatele informații despre localizare (zona mlăștuoasă a Bobenilor; la Caragiale acțiunea se petrece la hanul din Podeni–Moldova: cvasi-omofonie întâmpătoare?), și situarea precisă în calendar, ba chiar pe ceas. Acțiunea se petrece în Ajunul Crăciunului, în miezul zilei: Frosica, fiica șefului de gară, „trebuia să vină de sărbători din Craiova, de la pension, cu trenul de amiază”; „[Dănuț] își aminti că în noaptea ceea e Nașterea Domnului”. Justifică în bună măsură modul agitat de a exista al protagonistului și detaliul că Frosica era singurul său copil rămas în viață, dintre cei șapte avuți, toți ceilalți murind de „friguri”. E un detaliu important, fiindcă are potențialul de a arăta cum o tragedie de familie compensată prin concentrarea grijii părintești asupra singurului copil rămas în viață poate/ ar putea provoca o tragedie regională, a comunității, a națiunii.

i. Articulațiile intrigii sunt următoarele: Dănuț, șeful gării din mica localitate oltenească, are drept sarcină de serviciu, printre altele, aceea de a lucra cu telegraful, de a primi și de a transmite mesaje *pe fir*. Însă tot el este convins că receptează și *semne* de altă natură: indici premonitorii despre viitoare drame și tragedii pe care i le-ar transmite divinitatea, cosmosul etc. prin baterea ochiului, a pleoapei stângi. Între slujbă/ profesie și ireductibilul persoanei și al biologiei acesteia, între natură și tehnologie se produc transferuri nebănuite sau poate previzibile; destinul, cosmosul, transcendența care îi trimit „semne” șefului de gară, sunt, la rândul lor, *ceferizate*, reduse la familiarul și la rutinele slujbei<sup>9</sup>: „...el învățase să ghicească bine, când aceste înfricoșătoare semnale, pe care destinul i le trimetea dintr-o depărtată stație pierdută în veșnicie, aveau urmări negre și când erau simple glume de prost gust, pe care vreun impiegat de-al lui Dumnezeu i le făcea, petrecând pe socoteala ușoarei lui credulități.”<sup>10</sup> Într-un fel de *self fulfilling prophecy*, semnalele *tehno* și simptomele *psy* se întrepătrund, se confundă, par că se alimentează una din alta în mintea personajului: „Căldura moale îl primi prietenoasă. Șovăi câtva, privind, fără să înțeleagă, spre masiva tăblie a mesei de stejar, de sub fereastră, pe care aparatele de telegraf săltau domol în bizarul lor joc de gnomi. Dar țăcănitul stăruitor i se vârî în timpane, inervându-l cu aceeași încăpățânată perseverență ca și repede clipeală a ochiului stâng.”<sup>11</sup> Telegraful, cu „tictacul micilor cilindre de alamă” scoate „cuvinte [...] de metal” la aceeași scală hipertrofiată și cu aceeași rapiditate a diviziunii cu care malaria stimulează proliferarea unor scenarii fictive impregnate de detalii uluitoare de verosimile: „Șeful rămase cu privirile încremenite la găngăniile de alamă, care parcă se dedeau de-a hupa pe-o scândurică nevăzută. Își trase șapca pe ochi, fixându-le cu și mai mare luare aminte pe dedesuptul cozorocului. I se păru atunci că numărul lor se îndoiește; pe urmă se triplă. Masa deveni întinsă cât o câmpie acoperită toată de aparate telegrafice care săreau în sus, apoi se ascundeau ca niște copii drăcoși. Dănuț se frecă la ochii ce-i ardeau.”<sup>12</sup>

Cu acest viciu de contaminare a tehnologicului de psihologic rulând în fundalul proceselor sale cerebrale, Dănuț își însoțește imaginar fiica pe traseul ei ferat dinspre Craiova spre Bobeni. Motivată de semne premonitorii (pleoapa care se zbate etc.), de trigger anxiogene din realitatea imediată (dinamica

9. Compania națională de transport Căile Ferate Române a fost înființată în 1880.

10. Ibid., 412.

11. Ibid., 414.

12. Ibid., 415-416.



aparent atipică a aparatului de telegraf – cel mai rapid aparat aducător de vești de la distanță), personajul ajunge să-și imagineze că *fiica lui moare de „friguri” în trenul care o aduce spre casă*. Trăvialul imaginației e întrerupt de fleșele realității: impiegatul stației al cărui șef este Dănuț îi răspunde și îi pune întrebări specifice profesiei. Dar șeful stației nu mai răspunde la comenzile/ stimulii realității: nu colaborează cu subalternul, dă răspunsuri vagi și nu înțelege ce i se comunică (să anunțe cum trebuie plecarea și venirea trenurilor în stație), iar toate acestea, cumulate, compun rețeta perfectă pentru a provoca o catastrofă feroviară din culpă. Privindu-l *din afară*, naratorul îl descrie pe Dănuț sau acțiunile lui prin termeni ca „halucinație”, și „complet imbecilizat”, evaluări care, teoretic, sunt de luat ca atare.

Mersul trenului din propria imaginație<sup>13</sup> – trenul de Craiova *via* Prundești care ar aduce-o pe Frosica, acum presupus moartă, acasă, la Bobeni – e relatat, în orice caz, mai detaliat decât dinamica feroviară din realitate. Trebuie înțeles de aici că ceea ce se petrece *la nivel pur fictiv, speculativ*, în acest tren îl absoarbe mai mult pe șeful gării decât cele ce trec efectiv pe la fereastra gării care teoretic îi era dată în grijă. Trenul real (de Călugărești) e văzut de protagonist (sau prezentat de narator, care îi mimează trăirile) doar ca prin ceață, în schimb, trenul imaginat (acceleratul de Prundeni) acaparează prim-planul: „Un moment, nici un gând nu mai trecu prin creierul lui golit deodată. Nici ochiul stâng nu i se mai clăti în orbită, și el privi complet imbecilizat prin geamul translucid, înflorit de gheață, ferestrele din față ale trenului de Călugărești. Pentru el nu era [nu mai exista, *nota mea, Teodora Dumitru*] decât acceleratul de Prundeni, oprit în plin câmp./ Acolo era Frosica lui”.<sup>14</sup> Dinamica trenului din imaginație și a trenurilor din realitate se suprapun, se amestecă (apare în acest proces și conceptul de „film”: derularea imaginilor e tradusă ca „depănarea filmului”; în alt context, ca „succedarea tablourilor”). Nu știm, de pildă, pentru care tren se emit „fluierături de țignal”, pentru cel în legătură cu care face proiecții Dănuț, în care se află Frosica ipotetic sucombată din pricina frigurilor, cu „căpșorul ei blond [...] rezemat de canapea”, și care nu ajunsese încă la Bobeni, sau pentru trenul real, care tocmai pleacă din stația Bobeni; moleculele imaginației se preling în ale realității într-un compus incert, dar nu mai puțin producător de consecințe:

„Acolo [în acceleratul de Craiova–Prundeni] era Frosica lui./ Acolo, căpșorul ei blond, de ceară, de păpușică, sta rezemat de canapea./ Și domnul șef nu îndrăznește să se miște. Alții au pentru el această grijă. Iar în mintea lui succedarea tablourilor, curmată de venirea impiegatului, își reia de la sine firul./ «O dăm jos la stația următoare. Nu e caz de amendă, dar nu trebuia tras semnalul!»/ Fluierături de țignal, șuier lung de locomotivă, trenul se urnește păcănind sacadat, mai întâi încet, apoi din ce în ce mai repede, ca și toanele ochiului acestuia stâng, care au început iar. Paca, paca; paca, paca, și domnul șef privește paralizat ferestrele vagoanelor din față, care se perindează ușor, ocupând lent și fără încetare, una câte una, locul celei dinainte./ [...] Și acum trenul închipuirii lui Dănuț zboară înainte și duce spre stația următoare, spre Bobeni domnului șef, un cadavru mic de copilă. / Corpul lui tresare zgâlțâit de un tremur convulsiv. [...] / Domnul șef plânge de-a binelea. Cel din urmă copil, din șapte câți a avut, secerăți rând pe rând de miazmele bălților din dosul gării! Și doar de aceea o îndepărtase la școală, ca s-o scape de grozava otravă care plutea în văzduhul Bobenilor!”<sup>15</sup>.

Eroul are scurte momente de revenire la realitate, când boala și rezistența la boală și-l dispută cu forțe relativ echivalente: uneori îl trag spre realitate o serie de stimuli auditivi și olfactivi (discuțiile impiegatului cu soția lui, a șefului de gară, mirosul de varză acră care anunță pregătirea mesei de Crăciun etc.), precum și unele momente de autoscopie critică, când Dănuț își comentează lucid starea: „– Halucinații... Frigurile ăștia păcătoase...”. Dar alteori imaginația/ fandacția e mai puternică, mai convingătoare, iar asta se întâmplă pentru că imaginația excitată de această boală oferă *multe detalii*, pentru că tricotatele ei sunt mai palpabile, sunt „*în carne și oase*”; bref, în turnurul dintre realitate și delir câștigă fenomenul care produce mai multe *detalii*, căci detaliile asigură de verosimilitate, de ceva-ce-există sau ar-putea-exista: „Doar viziunea aceea a opririi trenului în câmp fusese atât de limpede, atât de vie! Parcă a fost un tren adevărat cel care s-a oprit dinaintea ochilor lui, năzărindu-i-se printre florile de gheață ale geamului./ – Hm! Ciudat, murmură Dănuț. Parcă a fost un tren... *în carne și oase*. Pasageri, zgomot, țignal, șuier... Hm, ciudat!”<sup>16</sup>

13. Nu voi spune totuși „tren *imaginar*”, pentru că și acesta are o existență reală, doar că pentru moment el nu se află în raza percepției protagonistului, motiv pentru care toate asumpțiile proferate în legătură cu el au ca banc de lucru imaginația subiectului. Un obiect cu existență reală poate fi oricând introdus în scenarii fabulatorii în absența existenței lui în orizontul percepției al subiectului.

14. Ibid., 16.

15. Ibid., 419-420.

16. Ibid., 421-422.

Dintr-o întrebare aruncată în treacăt de soția sa, șeful de gară e lovit brusc de revelația că nu și-a făcut bine meseria și că – din cauza deambulărilor lui între realitate și fantezie – e posibil să fi provocat o iminentă catastrofă feroviară, ciocnirea acceleratului în care se afla fiica lui (imaginată însă, brusc, ca fiind în viață, în acest nou context!) cu alt tren, al cărui traseu nu fusese bine gestionat chiar din vina lui, a halucinației care-i confiscase toată atenția, abătându-l de la sarcinile de serviciu din realitatea imediată. Nu știm însă, nici de data aceasta, dacă Dănuț a pus efectiv piciorul în realitate sau dacă nu cumva doar înlocuiește o fantasmagorie cu alta, o tragedie închipuită cu altă tragedie închipuită: „În închipuirea lui Dănuț începuse să se aprindă imaginea catastrofei. Din ce în ce mai clară, mai amănunțită. Văzu pe Frosica în vâlmășagul de călători, zguduită cu putere de cutremurarea grozavă a ciocnirii. O văzu izbită cu capul de fiarele vagonului, o văzu călcată în picioare, strivită sub greutatea sfărâmurilor, târâtă sub osiile enorme. Văzu corpul ei plâpând în bucăți amestecate cu alte bucăți de corpuri străine. Văzu foc, sânge, auzi urlete de jale și izbucniri de explozii.”<sup>17</sup> Ciocnirea trenurilor ar fi produs o explozie puternică, lumină, fum și sânge. – Iată *făclia de Crăciun* a lui Dănuț sau poate pomul de Crăciun împodobit cu mii de luminițe pe care îl oferă, fără să vrea, familiei, universului, sieși: ciocnirea și explodarea a două trenuri într-o imaginație febrilă sau într-o proximă realitate!<sup>18</sup>

ii. Din momentul în care i se conturează convingerea sau măcar ipoteza că nu și-a îndeplinit sarcinile de serviciu și *nu a anunțat* un tren așa cum îi solicitase impiegatul (trenul de Călugărești), Dănuț începe – conștient sau nu, dar la fel de susținut – să joace pe două fronturi, ambele derivate din această nouă ipotetică realitate, a unui scenariu considerat acum mai realist decât cel al morții Frosicăi de „friguri”, în vagon: scenariul morții ei *din cauza neglijenței lui, a propriului său tată*, prin ciocnirea trenului în care se afla ea cu un alt tren. Unul este frontul escamotării culpei și al autoconservării, situație în care trebuia să facă față iminentei catastrofe feroviare întâmplare din culpa lui și să-și apere pielea în fața justiției și, mai întâi, a apropiaților (subaltern, soție etc.); celălalt este frontul autoculpabilizării. Când operează pe primul front, Dănuț îl minte – dar nu e conștient că minte (o face „fără să-și dea seama”) – pe impiegat asigurându-l că a acționat cum trebuie, anunțând la vreme trenul: „Ați anunțat că a plecat Călugăreștii, domnule șef? să nu cumva.../ –Am anunțat, miști Dănuț, fără să-și dea seama. Am anunțat, repetă el, dumneata *n-ai văzut*<sup>19</sup> c-am anunțat?...”<sup>20</sup>. Când se mută pe al doilea front, șeful de gară se acuză (probabil de această dată conștient de ceea ce face) că este asasinul propriului copil. Și, încă o dată, în balansul dintre fronturi, imaginarul, halucinația subiectului se dovedesc mai puternice decât realitatea certificată prin mărturiile ale terților (nu venise, de fapt, nicio știre despre vreo ciocnire):

„– Omorătorule, își șoptea el scrâșnind din dinți amenințător, ca-n fața unui dușman surprins în plină nelegiuire. *Călăule*, ți-ai omorât fata.../ Și de acolo, din depărtarea câmpului înzăpezit, i se păru că aude bubuitura fără de seamăn a catastrofei, îi veni deodată s-o ia în goană nebună de-a lungul liniei, spre dezastrul care, cine știe, poate în clipa aceasta se petrece în necuprinsul zarei...”<sup>21</sup>.

17. Ibid., 423.

18. Accidentul feroviar ca ciocnire de trenuri este, de altfel, un *topos* care interesează mai mulți scriitori interbelici români: vezi, de exemplu, în *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război* (1930) de Camil Petrescu, comparația exploziei de obuz cu ciocnirea de trenuri. Este o comparație atipică, netradițională, fiindcă comparatul – obiectul care se cere dezambiguitat – nu este apropiat de un comparant familiar publicului, care să ajute la reprezentarea lui, ci de unul în egală măsură de nefamiliar: ciocnirea de trenuri. Dar, se pune întrebarea, câți cititori își vor putea reprezenta realist o explozie de obuz printr-o ciocnire de trenuri câtă vreme ambele fenomene/ evenimente sunt la fel de dificil de reprezentat pentru cineva care nu a avut experiența lor directă? Câți oameni au asistat la ciocniri de trenuri? Probabil mult mai puțini decât milioanele de participanți la Primul Război Mondial – din România și de aiurea.

19. În ediția *La „Grandiflora: nuvele I*, Editura pentru Literatură, 1967, secvența „n-ai văzut” este tipărită în italice. Neavând acces la manuscris, nu pot infera decât că această formă este mai plauzibilă decât cea fără italice, fiindcă subliniază atitudinea spontan-organizată a șefului de gară, care caută să-și dubleze răspunsul cu o mărturie vizuală solicitat celui alt: impiegatul e sugestionat să vadă ce n-a văzut, să-și construiască, invenții sau orienteze amintirile (și o eventuală mărturie în instanță) în funcție de necesitățile de moment ale șefului. Ar mai putea indica acest apăsător „n-ai văzut c-am anunțat?” și o dorință subliminală a lui Dănuț de a suscita – prin văzul celui alt – o realitate alternativă, în care el, șeful, și-a făcut cum trebuie datoria, iar celălalt, martorul, a fost de față la acest fapt și i-l poate oricând certifica, scoțându-l din ghearele rumațiilor.

20. Mihăescu, *Semnele lui Dănuț*, în Mihăescu, *Opere. I. Nuvele și povestiri*, 424.

21. Ibid., 424-425.



Switch-ul de fronturi se petrece uimitor de rapid, fulgerător, Dănuț schimbă identitățile instantaneu: surprins de subaltern în conversație cu sine însuși, în puseul autoculpabilizării (acesta îl auzise doar vorbind, dar nu înțelesese și ce spusese), protagonistul trece iarăși pe modulul autoconservării, pretextând că a vorbit cu un terț. Acesta ar fi fost un „individ” pe care l-ar fi „surprins” în biroul său: cineva care, trebuie dedus, ar fi acționat împotriva șefului de stație, sabotându-i munca și dând indicații greșite spre/ despre trenuri. Acest țap ispășitor este, fără îndoială, un alt produs al imaginației: însă nu al imaginației halucinatoriu-paroxistice alimentate de „friguri”, ci al imaginației pragmatic-raționale, alimentate de febra egoistă a autoconservării<sup>22</sup>. După expresia frontului autoconservator, frontul autoculpabilizator reacționează și el imediat, ca o manetă care se mișcă automat la acțiunile primului front: „Cum poate să vorbească cu atâta siguranță, când, acolo, Frosica lui moare, strivită sub sfărâmăturile vagoanelor?.../ [...] Cum poate să se gândească la mânia oamenilor și la pielea lui, când Frosica își dă duhul pe câmpul de zăpadă...”<sup>23</sup>.

iii. Soluția țapului ispășitor – relatată cu suficiente *detalii* și în ritm alert și coerent, adică controlat și energetic – pare să-l fi convins și pe impiegat<sup>24</sup>. Finalmente, acest *al treilea om* implicat în scenariul ciocnirii (alături de impiegat și de șeful de gară, care ar fi fost martorii deambulării „individului” prin biroul unde se afla telegraful), e identificat drept „bolșevic” – tipologia atentatorului prin excelență în imaginarul românesc interbelic:

„– L-am găsit aici: trăgea cu urechea la aparat [telegraf]. Mi-a spus că vrea să mă întrebe când vine trenul de Prundeni.../ Dănuț turuia înainte, parcă o lecție învățată. Despre individul suspect pe care l-a găsit în birou i se părea că i-e legată toată soarta./ Mentea lui se anina cu disperare de această invenție subită, care parcă-l ușura. I se părea că de aci va porni scăparea lui.../ – De dimineață l-am văzut dând târcoale.../ – Mi se pare că l-am văzut și eu... complectă impiegatul./ – Ce? Țăla e? se repezi Dănuț, și ochii îi străluciră./ – Nu era unul cu haine de oraș și cizme? [Impiegatul pune și el paie-detalii pe focul imaginației oportuniste a lui Dănuț, *nota mea, Teodora Dumitru*]/ – Ah, da, da... acela era... [fandacii care se confirmă reciproc, din interese distincte, dar convergente, al șefului și al subalternului, *n.m., T.D.*]/ – L-am văzut.../ – Da, da, da... acela... o mutră de... de... de bolșevic...”<sup>25</sup>.

Participarea impiegatului la ficțiunea șefului – de această dată una conștient fabricată și abil condusă, adică din exteriorul ei, ca de un păpușar – îl încurajează pe Dănuț să dea curs unui nou scenariu fabulatoriu, segment în care însă pierde iarăși controlul propriei imaginații: ipoteza că *ciocnirea nu va avea, totuși, loc*; sau că, orice s-ar întâmpla, Frosica, *va scăpa*.

22. Așa cum bine s-a observat, personajul suferă de un blocaj aparent inexplicabil, care, abia acesta, nu neapărat încurcarea manevrelor, ar alimenta catastrofa: „[c]ând, într-un moment de luciditate, își dă seama de greșeală, [Dănuț] *nu face nimic pentru a îndrepta lucrurile și a salva viețile amenințate*, printre care și aceea a fiicei sale, nu mărturisește nimic [s.m., T.D.]” (Alexandru Andriescu, studiu introductiv la Gib I. Mihăescu, *Opere. I. Nuvele și povestiri*, XVI-XVII). Exegetul așază acest comportament „orbesc” al lui Dănuț în descendența tragediei antice, a relației omului antic cu destinul/ fatalitatea/ *Moira* etc.: „Deasupra realității atârână un cer greu, încărcat de fatalitate, căreia nu i se poate nimeni sustrage, oricâte încercări, desperate, tragice, ar face.” (ibid., XVI). Personajului i s-ar refuza, de fapt, liberul arbitru, el ar fi *a priori* imobilizat, conținut de propriul destin. Această perspectivă, care caută să înobileze personajul, să îl degrezeze de culpe, să îi suspende responsabilitatea asupra propriilor acte, nu comunică, în opinia mea, cu intenția nuvelei, care dă indicii și despre existența unei ipostaze cerebrale, raționale a protagonistului. Și, câtă vreme cerebralitatea există, ipoteza reducerii la destin se fragilizează, mai ales constatând că rațiunea e folosită de personaj strict în scopuri meschine, pentru a-și confecționa alibiuri și apărări – fapt care pledează pentru o conștiință vinovată, care internalizează culpa, dar care nu vrea totuși să plătească pentru ea, să o asume public. Dănuț nu este un erou de tragedie antică, ci un potențial *inculpat*, un actor al sistemului juridic modern care caută să-și scape pielea (căci, și dacă tragedia/ catastrofa feroviară nu se întâmplă, tot ar fi trebuit să aibă loc o anchetă în care șeful gării să-și recunoască culpa, să recunoască, altfel spus, că n-a fost în stare să-și îndeplinească sarcinile, urmând, cine știe, poate o destituire sau o degradare). Nu trebuie uitat nici că profesia de bază a autorului Gib I. Mihăescu era aceea de avocat.

23. Mihăescu, *Semnele lui Dănuț*, în Mihăescu, *Opere. I. Nuvele și povestiri*, 425-426. În ediția 1967, fraza se încheie cu „?...”.

24. Făcută poate și doar din servilism, din dorința de a participa la toate scenariile sau ipotezele șefului, de a fi *aproape de el* ca o slugă bună, ca un subaltern sânguincios.

25. Ibid., 426. Dacă în cercetările lui Călin Cotoi holera are link direct cu „comunismul” – vezi *Holera și „duhul comunismului”*. *Inventarea socialului în România, 1831-1914* (Cluj-Napoca: Idea Design & Print, 2023) –, la Mihăescu bolșevismul e mediat/ inventat de malarie: paludismul îi determină pe actorii atinși de plasmodiu și pe proximitățile lor să vadă bolșevici acolo unde nu sunt, să le instrumentalizeze în folos propriu și imediat existența fictivă.

Se poate deduce din toate cele de mai sus că profețiile *self-fulfilling* ar funcționa atât în sens negativ, producând tragedii reale, cât în sens pozitiv, euforizant, suspendând concluzia tragică. Sau că se confundă cu gândirea magică, sub convingerea că e suficient să schițezi mental un scenariu pentru ca acesta să fie – prin chiar acest fapt – chemat în realitate; sau să nu aibă loc tocmai pentru că având, deja o existență imaginară, un fel de spațiu locativ fie și virtual, n-ar mai avea nevoie și de una în plan real. În orice caz, nuvela nu conține informații care să alimenteze concluzia că ciocnirea trenurilor a avut efectiv loc; până la finalul ei, regimul catastrofei feroviare rămâne strict potențial, iar acest lucru, această menținere strânsă a ambiguității, acest refuz de a ceda certitudinii, a scăpat, culmea, celor mai favorabili dintre comentatorii săi, convinși că Mihăescu relatează despre o catastrofă feroviară deja *întâmplată*, conținută ca atare în informația nuvelei<sup>26</sup>.

Spirale de fantasma generează spirale de fantasma în mintea protagonistului lui Mihăescu, ca șinele de cale ferată ce se împletesc în zona gării într-o imagine de liră, instrumentul prin excelență asociat cu începuturile muzicii și poeziei, respectiv ale fabulației: „Privind pieziș, nu putea să vadă decât cele patru perechi de șine, împreunându-se ca opt coarde pe un gât de liră. Sub sticlirea tremurătoare a gerului, părea că o mână nevăzută le ciupe ușor, neuzit de ușor.”<sup>27</sup> Metafora căii ferate ca liră – instrument aedic – este imaginea de exterior cu care se încheie nuvela, o închidere simetrică debutului care oferise la un moment dat tot o imagine retro-muzicofilă, stârnită tot de o tehnologie nouă, de telegraf: „Firele de telegraf, despletite dintr-un stâlp înalt și zgribulit, se înmănușeau ca pe un gât de cobză pe ceștile înfieruite în triunghi, deasupra ferestrei celei mari, drept în mijlocul stației”<sup>28</sup>.

Trenul și telegraful – angrenaje filante, care se servesc de fire sau de continuități kilometrice (șine) – se transformă în debutul și la finele nuvelei lui Mihăescu în instrumente cu coarde, printre cele mai vechi, sursele primei poezii a lumii.

## II.

În secvența care urmează fac o scurtă trecere în revistă a receptării nuvelisticii lui Mihăescu și îndeosebi a nuvelei de care mă ocup în eseul de față. Mă interesează atât perspectiva estetic-axiologică asupra acesteia (cât, în ce măsură și cu ce rezultate a atras atenția criticii, ce grilă de interpretare i-a fost aplicată), cât și cantitatea și calitatea punerii ei în relație cu *O făclie de Paște* a lui Caragiale. Cum era de așteptat, nu am reușit să investighez toată literatura critică scrisă în ultima sută de ani despre Mihăescu, trecerea mea în revistă limitându-se la anumite nume și filiații.

*i. Semnele lui Dănuț* a fost în genere ignorată sau, când nu, modic survolată. Tonul opiniei defavorabile despre nuvelistul Mihăescu l-a dat E. Lovinescu, în volumul al patrulea din *Istoria literaturii române contemporane, Evoluția „prozei literare”* (1928), unde volumului *La „Grandiflora”* i se impută doza de „vulgaritate”, „trivial” și „bombastic” și se lansează rezerve masive asupra capacității autorului de a se extrage din impasul debutului (o „masă de trivalitate” s-ar pune de-a curmezișul scriitorului în drumul spre literatură<sup>29</sup>). Locurile comune prin care va fi descrisă ulterior opera lui Mihăescu în genere (obsesia, monoideismul, patologicul, morbidul, balansul între real și halucinație cu debușeuri violente sau criminale, trimiterea la Dostoievski etc.) se regăsesc la același Lovinescu, în *Istoria* din 1928 și în compendiul din 1937. (Ca detaliu al abordării critice lovinesciene, proza lui Mihăescu e filtrată prin aceleași concepte prin care era analizată tot de el poezia lui G. Bacovia la începutul deceniului 1920: „destoinicia de a crea obsesii, stări sufletești morbide”, impresia unei „omeniri dominate de subconștient”<sup>30</sup>.) De la Lovinescu, părerea proastă despre nuvelistica lui Mihăescu se transmite la G. Călinescu, căruia, de asemenea, îi displace intens și cu aceleași argumente („vulgaritatea” în primul rând): „Nuvelele lui Gib I. Mihăescu aduc o atmosferă adesea dezgustătoare, de vulgaritate, priapism și halucinație și par opera

26. „Halucinațiile lui Dănuț provoacă efectiv în cele din urmă moartea Frosicăi”, Mihail Diaconescu, *Gib I. Mihăescu* (București: Editura Minerva, 1973), 161.

27. Mihăescu, *Semnele lui Dănuț*, în *Mihăescu, Opere. I. Nuvele și povestiri*, 427.

28. *Ibid.*, 411.

29. E. Lovinescu, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane*, vol. IV, *Evoluția „prozei literare”* [1928]; în E. Lovinescu, *Opere. II. Istoria literaturii române contemporane [1926-1929] (Evoluția „prozei literare”. Mutația valorilor estetice). Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1900-1937*, ediție coordonată de Nicolae Mecu, text îngrijit, note și comentarii de Alexandra Ciocârlie, Alexandru Farcaș, Nicolae Mecu și Daciana Vlădoiu, Introducere de Eugen Simion (București: Academia Română, Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă, 2015), 247.

30. E. Lovinescu, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1900-1937* [1937], în *Opere. II.*, 860.



unui febricitant. Înșelat de soție, Manaru devine un agresor sexual, cinic, provoacă sinuciderea unei femei și omoară tardiv pe amantul soției sale. Un șef de gară bolnav de malarie, cu teroarea că fata lui ar fi putut muri în tren, încurcă ordinele.”<sup>31</sup>

De la Lovinescu și Călinescu, respingerea nuvelistului Mihăescu se perpetuează la Nicolae Manolescu. Însă nu atât la primul Manolescu, care în anii 1960 găsește resurse pentru o receptare moderată a primelor proze ale autorului, cât la autorul *Istoriei critice a literaturii române* și a derivatelor ei. Obligat și prin natura posturii de prefațator al volumului *La „Grandiflora”* (1967), editat pentru mase ca parte a procesului de recuperare a interbelicului în epoca de deschidere de după 1965, tânărul Manolescu este, cel puțin aparent, mai permeabil la calitățile de nuvelist ale scriitorului discutat. Totuși, mai mult decât un succint rezumat al acțiunii nu are de spus în respectiva prefață despre *Semnele lui Dănuț* (unde, practic, extinde preț de câteva rânduri fraza unică dedicată acestei proze de Călinescu în *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*, 1941, din care tocmai am citat): „Șeful gării din *Semnele lui Dănuț* așteaptă cu acceleratul pe Frosica, fata lui. Cum i se bate ochiul stâng – el e obsedat de ideea unei catastrofe, imaginația i se aprinde și o vede pe Frosica murind în tren, trenul oprit în câmp, pasagerii îngroziți. În plină halucinație, el dă liber altui tren și probabil catastrofa va deveni reală. Curios este că personajul nu se poate sustrage obsesiei lui; el se abandonează obsesiei, mai puternică decât realitatea.”<sup>32</sup> (Este totuși un progres față de o opinie mai veche, din 1963, când *Semnele lui Dănuț* i se păruse inacceptabilă: „Voind cu orice chip să trateze reacțiuni elementare, larvare, obsesii sau halucinații, scriitorul ne dă, ca în *Sfârșitul, Squarul, Semnele lui Dănuț, Tabloul* etc., narațiuni care nu se pot primi”<sup>33</sup>; sau când, tot acolo, această nuvelă era considerată nu mai mult decât „mediocră”<sup>34</sup>.) În *Istoria critică a literaturii române* (2008; 2019), Manolescu abandonează concesiile tinereții și reia aproape *ad litteram* diagnosticele lui Lovinescu și Călinescu, recuzându-și privirea mai pozitivantă din prefața volumului din 1967: „Scriitorul rămâne prin romanul *Rusoaica* (1933) și prin *Donna Alba* (1935). Nuvelele (*La „Grandiflora”, 1928, Vedenia, 1929*), ca și celelalte romane, sunt triviale și rău scrise. În toate este o singură obsesie, aceea erotică, cu un mascul fanfaron care seduce toate femeile, recurgând uneori la farse încheiate tragic și mereu foarte mândru de virilitatea lui.”<sup>35</sup> Reducerea nuvelistului Mihăescu la „trivial” se perpetuează și în *Istoria literaturii române pe înțelesul celor care citesc* (2014): „Nuvelele [...] sunt triviale și rău scrise. Gustul literar este călcâiul vulnerabil al prozatorului”<sup>36</sup>.

Mai nuanțați decât linia Lovinescu–Călinescu–Manolescu, dar nu neapărat și integral judicioși în diagnostice și descrieri, sunt istoricii care s-au ocupat mai temeinic de opera lui Mihăescu, monografi ca Mihail Diaconescu și editori ca Alexandru Andriescu. Iar dintre criticii și istoricii cu mai mare vizibilitate, Nicolae Balotă. Pentru Diaconescu nuvela are „calități artistice excepționale”, Andriescu găsește și el cuvinte de laudă pentru ea, Balotă îi rezervă o analiză comparabilă cu a unui monograf. În toate aceste exegeze domină însă pe linie modelul lovinescian al interesului pentru psihologic *per se*, pentru modul („obiectiv” sau de altă natură) prin care este urmărită evoluția halucinației/ obsesiei/ imaginației. Biologicul – *qua* corp atins de boală și anume de o boală endemică – e ținut în plan secund sau evaluat ca simplu punct de pornire, fără interes major în tramă. Biologicul ar fi relevant în nuvelă doar prin ce transmite sau produce în plan psihologic; importantă ar fi „investigarea spaimei ca atare”, decolarea fiziologicului în psihologic<sup>37</sup> sau relația cu destinul, implacabil ca în tragediile antice<sup>38</sup> ori cu

31. G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* (București: Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, 1941), 765.

32. Nicolae Manolescu, „Existența imaginată a lui Gib I. Mihăescu”, prefață la Gib I. Mihăescu, *La „Grandiflora”: nuvele I* (București: Editura pentru literatură, 1967), viii.

33. Nicolae Manolescu, „Gib I. Mihăescu”, *Viața românească*, nr. 6-7, 1963, 291.

34. „Simple fișe psihologice, transcripții de stări aproape patologice, de obsesii, sunt câteva nuvele (*Vedenia, Squarul, Tabloul, Semnele lui Dănuț, Frigul* etc.), dar acestea sunt mai degrabă mediocre”, *ibid.* 301.

35. Nicolae Manolescu, *Istoria critică a literaturii române: 5 secole de literatură* (Pitești: Editura Paralela 45, 2008), 771.

36. Nicolae Manolescu, *Istoria literaturii române pe înțelesul celor care citesc* (Pitești: Editura Paralela 45, 2014), 166.

37. „În *Semnele lui Dănuț* boala este însă numai un punct de pornire sau de referință. Ceea ce-l preocupă pe autor este investigarea spaimei ca atare, dimensiunea psihologică a faptelor și trăirilor personajului. Concentrarea, tensiunea, motivarea logică, pregnanța imaginilor care-i apar lui Dănuț dau nuvelei calități artistice excepționale”, Mihail Diaconescu, *Gib I. Mihăescu* (București: Editura Minerva, 1973), 140.

38. Alexandru Andriescu, studiu introductiv la Gib I. Mihăescu, *Opere. I. Nuvele și povestiri*, loc. cit.

imaginația posesiv-imperialistă, tratată naturalist și expresionist<sup>39</sup>. Or, această separare a biologicului de psihologic, care derivă din dualismul *mente vs. corp*, este, din punctul meu de vedere, intenabilă și era astfel încă din epoca formulărilor unor asemenea opțiuni critice despre proza lui Mihăescu.

Perspectiva pe care caut să o imprim eu interpretării acestei nuvele nu trimite în plan secund boala (care, o maladie endemică neeradată fiind, devine, în plus, și o extensie a sociopoliticului) și, de asemenea, degonflează argumentul imaginației suverane – fiindcă fiecare în felul său, atât imaginația suverană, cât și așezarea bolii în plan secund sau periferic (ori doar în punctul originar al acțiunii) îl acuză pe protagonist și îl scuză, îi acordă și îi retrace liberul arbitru, factorul responsabilității. Dănuț nu este, în opinia mea, un erou de tragedie greacă, prin definiție iresponsabil pentru acțiunile sale, după cum nu este nici captivul integral al halucinațiilor; totuși, nu-i mai puțin adevărat, el nici nu poate fi făcut vinovat că s-a îmbolnăvit și că a ajuns pradă acestei imaginații hiperactive și hipertrofe, potențial malefice: în acest caz, culpa cade mai curând asupra societății și a politicului sau a naturii în sens general. Dar o culpă are Dănuț: este aceea de a nu fi acționat cum trebuie în momentele de luciditate, când alege, conștient fiind, să se îndrepte în direcția salvării pielii proprii, nu a opririi unui carnagiu: fie și simbolic sau tardiv, gestul opririi catastrofei trebuia făcut!

Boala nu e de trecut în plan secund mai ales pentru că fiecare frison al personajului e însoțit de o decizie sau de amânarea luării unei decizii, de (ne)efectuarea unui gest. *Nystagmus*-ul sau bătaia pleoapei este, de fapt, efectul fizic real care ce îi declanșează anxietatea și tot cursul evenimentelor – iar acest fenomen oftalmic, de care personajul suferă recurent, care devine o parte din viața sa, o rutină, este direct asociat cu malarie, este unul dintre simptomele ei. Nici argumentul imaginației imperiale, care-și subordonează totul în nuvelă și în mintea personajului nu e solid, câtă vreme contactul personajului cu realitatea nu dispăre, chiar dacă se exercită într-un mod atipic, la distanță de logica non-malaricilor: în ultimă instanță, nu ceea ce face personajul în momentele în care nu e lucid contează, ci ceea ce (nu) face atunci când e lucid, când alege să ia o decizie în detrimentul alteia (să nu spună apropiaților că a încurcat comenzile, să nu folosească telegraful pentru a contracara ciocnirea trenurilor etc.).

Țin să păstrez relația personajului/ personajelor cu boala în prim-planul analizei mele și pentru că, dacă se poate spune că malariei îi revine aici rolul determinist al destinului individual, e de observat și că acest destin nu mai e totuși unul implacabil, ci unul care, în anumite condiții, poate fi deviat – *editat*, ca în genetica modernă –, în măsura în care însăși malarie putea fi, la nivelul anilor 1920, combătută, îngădită, evitată până la un punct. Este, așadar, un destin în bună măsură ales: îl alege societatea, care adoptă sau nu măsuri contra ei, îl alege individul, care poate sta sau poate pleca din zona „bălților” (Dănuț nu pleacă împreună cu familia din Bobeni, din postul de șef de gară, dar alege, în ultimă instanță, să-și trimită al șaptelea copil departe de „miasmele” de acolo). Iar alegerea este, se poate presupune, condiționată în primul rând economic: de ce nu pleacă Dănuț din Bobeni, de ce nu renunță la postul cu pricina? Este un post bine plătit – și atunci argumentul economic primează în detrimentul celui biologic (cum se întâmplă și în cazul lui Leiba Zibal, care acceptă să rămână hangiu la Podeni cu riscurile malariei asumate)? Sau nu este nici măcar bine plătit, caz în care protagonistul se dovedește victima unor alegeri proaste de la un capăt la altul? De ce, în fine, soția – care trebuie să fi suferit cel puțin la fel de mult ca el pentru pierderea celor șase copii – e *ținută tot timpul la margine*, prezentă în text doar prin vocea care i se prelinge din bucătărie, ca mirosul de varză, pe sub ușă, în conversații rutiniere cu impiegatul? Este și ea atinsă de malarie? Nu cumva Dănuț a ales și pentru ea un tip de viață în dauna altuia? Cât de largă va fi fost plaja lui de responsabilitate și de libertate? Dar posibilitatea de dispunere asupra unor terți? Cât a contat boala în acest lucru și cât a contat temperamentul și moralitatea lui? Cât de important este că i-a rămas, în pofida bolii, un quantum de rațiune pe care el însă îl folosește ca și cum nu l-ar deține sau pe care îl exploatează doar în scopuri egoiste? Iată cum, păstrând argumentul bolii în prim-plan, fără a-l fetișiza, se pot formula totuși o serie de interogații pe care trimiterea ei în plan secund le ratează sau le ignoră.

ii. Deși nuvelistica lui Mihăescu a fost deseori comparată cu proza naturalistă a lui Caragiale și chiar cu proza satirică a acestuia, Caragiale fiind numărat printre posibilele modele ale scriitorului, alături de Dostoievski și Cehov, o paralelă între *Semnele lui Dănuț* și *O făclie de Paște* nu s-a făcut, așa cum

39. „[M]otivarea [prin boală/ malarie a] delirului halucinatoriu nu este esențială. În paludismul șefului de gară, Gib I. Mihăescu găsește un pretext pentru a dezvolta tema sa predilectă: formarea unui univers obsesiv prin proiecțiile imaginației”, Nicolae Balotă, *De la Ion la Ioanide: Prozatori români ai secolului XX* (București: Editura Eminescu, 1974), 193.





indică metaliteratura pe care am străbătut-o până acum. Nuvelistica lui Mihăescu a fost pusă în legătură cu proza lui Caragiale numai în termeni generali; chiar când s-au tentat analogii particulare, ele n-au fost aprofundate dincolo de simpla enunțare asemănării. Au fost considerate caragialiene nuvele ca *La „Grandiflora”*, *Troița*, *Retragerea*, *Soarele*, *În goană*, iar dintre acestea, primele două au fost apropiate de *O făclie de Paște*, respectiv de *În vreme de război* (1898).

Al. Dima este cel care, în 1928, comentând primul volum de nuvele al lui Mihăescu, *La „Grandiflora”*, apărut în același an, afirmă că nuvela care dă titlul acestuia poate sta lângă *O făclie de Paște*: „Metoda de tratare este cea științifică, am putea spune de laborator. Se izolează faptul sufletesc deformat până la patologie și se «studiază» în el însuși cum se dezvoltă și crește devenind mobilul unei acțiuni neașteptate”; prozatorul ar excela, așadar, prin „justețea analizei psihologice” și prin scrisul „obiectiv” în siaj caragialian: „În literatura noastră, în care realizările obiective sunt rare, Gib I. Mihăescu a izbutit să dăruiască nuvela cu adevărat obiectivă [...]. *La „Grandiflora”* ocupă prin aceasta un loc bine meritat lângă cealaltă mare nuvelă psihologică a literaturii noastre care e *O făclie de Paște* a lui I.L. Caragiale, de care se deosebește însă prin cerebralitate”<sup>40</sup>. Analogiile sunt păstrate în cadre generale, pista nu e detaliată. (De la Dima vine și asocierea cu tragicul, pe care, dintre exegeții mai recentți, o continuă Alexandru Andriescu: „eroii lui Gib I. Mihăescu sunt slabe instrumente în mâna întâmplării capricioase, ilogice, surprinzătoare, coincidând câte o dată cu vreo împrejurare închipuită ca absurdă, dar care se realizează, dintr-o dată, cinică și disprețuitoare pentru neputința omenească. E un fatalism peste care însă nu se așterne fatalismul resemnării, ci o durere mistuitoare crescută până la tragic prin biciuirea crudă a voinței omenești de către hazardul stupid de atotstăpânitor.”<sup>41</sup>)

Pentru tânărul Manolescu, argumentele raportării lui Mihăescu la Caragiale au fost preferința pentru mediul (peri)urban, îndeosebi de provincie (fapt care l-ar fi îndepărtat de ideologii filorurale ca tradiționalismul și sămănătorismul, în pofida colaborării lui la *Gândirea*), și tipul de comic practicat de Mihăescu. Referindu-se la nuvelele din *La „Grandiflora”* și *Vedenia*, Manolescu găsește că

„[a]stfel de narațiuni de atmosferă psihologică, cu intuirea foarte materială a spaimelor și a trăirilor tulburi, aveau în literatura noastră un precursor strălucit în Caragiale. *Troița* e înrudită cu *În vreme de război*. Revendicarea din Caragiale a unor motive ale nuvelisticii lui Gib I. Mihăescu e o observare importantă: în câteva compuneri despre burghezia citadină sau despre viața târgului provincial, Gib I. Mihăescu e mai aproape de Caragiale decât de Brătescu-Voinești sau Cezar Petrescu. Lucrul trebuie neapărat reținut, pentru că explică absența infiltrațiilor sămănătoriste la Gib I. Mihăescu. [...] *În goană* e povestea defecțiunii domnișoarei Letiția, fiica lui Take, birjarul. [...] Același umor caragialesc reapare în *La «Grandiflora»*, amplă povestire a târgului provincial animat de drame scandaloase și de mare lipsă de aer moral.”<sup>42</sup>

Despre *Semnele lui Dănuț* nu se formulează vreo relație cu proza caragialiană: „*Troița* e, prin atmosfera de fantastic psihologic, înrudită cu nuvelele lui Caragiale, dar fără aspectele zoliste ale acestora. *La „Grandiflora”*, *În goană* sunt tot caragialești, dar pe direcția umorului și a satirei. Ele sunt narațiunile cele mai «obiective» ale lui Gib I. Mihăescu. Ultima poate veni și din Delavrancea. Simple fișe psihologice, transcripții de stări aproape patologice, de obsesii, sunt câteva nuvele (*Vedenia*, *Squarul*, *Tabloul*, *Semnele lui Dănuț*, *Frigul* etc.)”<sup>43</sup>. Astfel, poate și din pricina nesituării în urban și a asocierii caragialității cu (peri)urbanul, *Semnele lui Dănuț* nu a intrat, nici la Manolescu, pe radarul apropierii de Caragiale. Dar *O făclie de Paște*, ar fi trebuit observat, nu este o nuvelă a urbanului, după cum nici *La hanul lui Mânjoală* (1898) sau *În vreme de război*. Este, deci, o eroare limitarea ariei de interes a lui Caragiale la (peri)urban; cert e că influența lui Caragiale asupra lui Mihăescu a fost sesizată mai puțin în acțiunile petrecute în localități minuscule, în halte, la încrucișarea drumurilor, în zone de tranzit (deși, pe de altă parte, tot Manolescu a așezat *Troița* în descendența caragialienei *În vreme de război*, niciuna desfășurată în mediul urban, ci în zone de tranzit sau extravilane).

Și în opinia lui Diaconescu există o filiație între Caragiale și Mihăescu, dar autorul volumului *Vedenia* e așezat în proximitatea lui Caragiale prin caracteristici de ansamblu ale prozei (interesul pentru psihologii/ imaginații inflamate etc.), așa cum făcuseră și exegeții anteriori, fără selectarea unor diferențe specifice și mai ales fără a pune în relație *Semnele lui Dănuț* cu proza caragialiană în genere sau, și

40. Al. Dima, „Note despre *La „Grandiflora”* de Gib I. Mihăescu”, *Datina*, No 3-4, martie-aprilie 1928.

41. Ibid.

42. Manolescu, „Gib I. Mihăescu”, 288.

43. Ibid., 301.

mai precis, cu *O făclie de Paște*, așa cum fac eu în eseul de față: „Mai mult decât în *La „Grandiflora”* narațiunile selectate pentru noul volum [*Vedenia*] impresionează prin evocarea acelor personaje devenite victime ale propriei înclinări de a fantaza fără răgaz. Imaginația lor quasi-maladivă sau direct anormală pare specializată în crearea unor sinteze noi, monstruoase adesea, ale reprezentărilor curente ale realității obiective. Gama atât de variată a acestor sinteze ne apare adesea brusc întreruptă de invazia unor construcții torturante, cu forme, înțelesuri și dimensiuni denaturate, combinate în tonuri violente, contrastante, plasate în contexte pe cât de coerente, pe atât de arbitrare totuși. În acest sens, nuvelistica lui Gib I. Mihăescu amintește în parte de cea a lui Caragiale. *O făclie de Paște* și *În vreme de război* pot fi evocate aici.”<sup>44</sup> – Și aici se oprește comparația cu Caragiale.

Apropierea de Caragiale este, așadar, relativ frecvent adusă în discuție în metaliteratura consacrată lui Mihăescu, dar comparația rămâne generică, în zona aserțiunilor care n-ar avea nevoie de demonstrație: Mihăescu ar scrie un tip de proză psihologică amintind de a lui Caragiale, de gen proxim caragialian, dar mai departe similitudinile sunt precar explorate. Cele mai precise sunt paralela dintre *La „Grandiflora”* și *O făclie de Paște*, enunțată de Dima, și cea dintre *Troița* și *În vreme de război*, propusă de Manolescu, fără aprofundarea apropierii în niciunul dintre aceste cazuri, chiar dacă *Troița*, cel puțin, conține o cât se poate de explicită făclie fizică, luminând cerul Ajunului de Crăciun. În ce mă privește, sunt însă de părere că proza prin care se apropie cel mai mult Mihăescu de Caragiale este *Semnele lui Dănuț* și, mai mult, că această proză e printre cele mai bune ale autorului.

*Semnele lui Dănuț* este o făclie de Crăciun a lui Mihăescu – cea mai realizată artistic și cea mai apropiată de nuvela lui Caragiale –, dar nu este prima sa făclie de Crăciun. Se poate spune chiar că Mihăescu are o colecție de făclii de Crăciun, din care mai face parte cel puțin *Troița*, mai timpuriea nuvelă din 1926, unde acțiunea are loc tot în Ajunul Crăciunului și culminează cu incendierea unui Cristos de lemn – a unei troițe –, soluția ultimă la care trei călători ajung pentru a nu cădea pradă gerului nocturn<sup>45</sup>. Dar din *Troița* lipsesc două elemente-cheie care să facă plauzibilă apropierea acestei nuvele de *O făclie de Paște* și care se regăsesc, în schimb, în *Semnele lui Dănuț*: malaria și așteptarea anxioasă, terorizantă, a unei tragedii anunțate sau presupus anunțate.

La Caragiale, febra mentală a lui Leiba Zibal, alt suferind de „friguri”, este în primul rând justițiară. Nu are doar o valență autoconservatoare, ci și una eroică, de corectare *sui generis* a relațiilor din lumea obiectivă, de *revenge* anti-antisemit. La Mihăescu, peste aproape trei decenii, „fandacsia” paludo-centrată rămâne protagonistă nuvelei, dar ea nu mai are niciun impact pozitiv/ etic asupra realului. Din contră, pe măsură ce-i devine captiv, Dănuț transformă într-un imoral patent, devine suspect de prevenitor cu posibile acuzații de malpraxis și de ucidere din culpă și caută să se sustragă eventualei judecăți pe măsură ce estimează gravitatea deznodământului pe care el l-ar fi declanșat. Nu mai poate stăvili iminentul catastrofal (ciocnirea trenurilor provocată de neatenția lui la real e aici mai mult o metaforă a oricărei drame/ ciocniri/ încleștări ucigașe, de orice natură și de pe orice plan), dar crede că poate stăvili câteva capete de acuzare lansabile ulterior, din chiar această cauză, în direcția sa. Rațiunea lui rămâne, astfel, impecabil *la post* pe acest front al autoconservării egoiste, halucinația nu o atinge, așa cum o atinge în orice altă privință. Iar pe măsură ce halucinația progresa, progresa și calmul trucat prin care eroul se adresează ori le răspunde altora, mințind și fiind conștient că minte, confecționând țapi ispășitori (imaginarul „bolșevic”-sabotor al CFR care-i pătrunsese în birou afectând bunul mers al lucrurilor) cu o celeritate a conexiunilor cerebrale care îi lipsise în momentele când, dus de torentul delirului, abandonase postul și nu-și mai făcuse treaba de șef de gară, creând condițiile potențialei catastrofe feroviare în care ar fi murit și fiica sa.

Doar *self fulfilling prophecy* la Dănuț; cu totul altfel stăteau lucrurile în nuvela lui Caragiale, unde angoasa paroxist-proiectivă a Leiba Zibal chiar are cauze obiective: discriminarea și persecuția reală a evreului în România *fin de siècle* (care continuă în secolul următor la cote despre care Caragiale nu mai avea să afle). La Caragiale, triggerul dramei e tot paludismul dobândit de protagonist odată mutat la hanul din Podeni, în zonă mlăștinoasă. Iar paludismul e pus explicit în relație cu darwiniana „luptă [grea] pentru viață”: aceasta îl aduce pe protagonist și pe familia lui în situația de a se îmbolnăvi de „friguri”; siguranța economică vine la pachet cu debilizarea sănătății, dar și cu invidia celorlalți, a non-evreilor:

44. Diaconescu, *Gib I. Mihăescu*, 140.

45. Vezi *Troița*, *Universul literar*, No 3, 17 ianuarie 1926; inclusă în volumul *Vedenia* (1929) și reluată în Gib I. Mihăescu, *Opere. I. Nuvele și povestiri*.



„Atunci începu lupta grea pentru viață, care se îngreună și mai tare prin căsătoria lui cu Sura... Răbdarea însă ostenește soarta rea. Fratele Surei, hangiu la Podeni, muri, și hanul rămase lui Zibal, care urmă negoțul pe seama lui.// Aci se află el acuma de cinci ani./ Are strânsă o avere bunicică în bani și vinațuri bine îngrijite, o marfă care totdeauna face parale. De sărăcie a scăpat Leiba, dar sunt toți bolnavi, și el și femeia și copilul – frigurile de baltă.”<sup>46</sup>

La Mihăescu finalul e însă ambiguu, nu aduce katharsisul brusc, eliberator de la Caragiale: nu știm dacă realitatea confirmă anticipările lui, dacă trenurile realmente se vor ciocni sau nu, dacă vreo făclie atipică va lumina cerurile de Crăciun. Până la finalul nuvelei, suntem cu totul absorbiți, abstrași în mintea paludicului. Realitatea nu mai contează, nu mai participă la discurs, naratorul se dizolvă și el în tema personajului, în ce aude, simte, imaginează acesta.

Dintre simptomele paludismului, protagonistul lui Mihăescu experimentează în mod evident: *paroxismul*<sup>47</sup>, *nystagmus* (bătaia ochiului sau a pleoapei – tradusă popular ca semn prevestind necazuri) și *conjugate gaze palsy* – patologie exprimată prin incapacitatea coordonării ochilor pentru a privi simultan în aceeași direcție (tip de oftalmoplegie). Nuvela lui Mihăescu – prin chiar tensiunea celor două planuri, imaginar și real, a incapacității protagonistului de a rămâne deplin ancorat în planul realității – pare o metaforă sau o încercare de punere în termeni dramatici, de înfruntare a planurilor și caracterelor/ ipostazelor, a acestui simptom particular al malariei numit *conjugate gaze palsy*: lui Dănuț îi fuge un ochi în maelströmul unei halucinații care se autoalimentează de la stadiu la stadiu, dar celălalt ochi rămâne să gestioneze daunele produse în plan real de deriva primului. Niciodată coordonarea oculară (*i.e.*, neurologică/ cerebrală) nu este deplină: nici în plan real, dar nici în cel imaginar, căci nu avem indicii despre completul abandon al realului, câtă vreme personajul rămâne apt de minciună și de confecționare de probe (țapi ispășitori), acțiuni care indică totuși o agențialitate, o gândire rațională, combativă, autoconservatoare și, nu în ultimul rând, conștiința culpei. La Caragiale, în schimb, coordonarea „oculară” – a privirii filozofice și practice asupra lumii – pare perfectă: ca dovadă, gestionarea impecabilă a prevenirii în plan real a crimei de către protagonistul atins de malarie și amenințat cu moartea de un fost colaborator malefic și răzbunător<sup>48</sup>. Mai mult, boala lui Leiba Zibal, cu toate „accesele” lui paludice, pare un bastion al responsabilității și al fricii active, constructive, în comparație cu „nebulia religioasă” sau cu acțiunile „sectarilor iluminați” invocați sporadic în aceeași nuvelă – adevăratele patologii neurologice având pe rol „executări de așa absurdă sălbăticie”. Însă ruptura – privitul cruciș, în sensuri opuse – nu ezită totuși să apară la finalul nuvelei caragialiene, ca disjungere de planuri ontologice, ca *schismă* pur și simplu: este noua condiție paradoxală a lui Leiba Zibal, de evreu și totodată de „goi” care cinstește pe Cristos, aprinzând o „făclie” în noaptea de Paște, și care pleacă apoi spre Iași pentru a aduce – ironic – la cunoștința rabinului această nouă stare de fapt. Dar finalul nuvelei caragialiene îl arată pe protagonist în aceeași stare de admirabilă stăpânire

46. Ion Luca Caragiale, *O făclie de Paște, Convorbiri literare*, No 5, 1 aug. 1889; reluat în *Trei novele* (1892); reprodus în I.L. Caragiale, *Opere. I. Proză literară*, ediție îngrijită și cronologie de Stancu Ilin, Nicolae Bârna, Constantin Hârlav; prefață de Eugen Simion (București: Univers Enciclopedic, 2000), 36-37.

47. Paroxismul, ca facultate *sui generis* a simțului „enorm” și „monstruos”, a hipertrofiei detaliilor sau a unei prize senzoriale atipice la realitate, este experimentat și de eroul lui Caragiale: „Deși asta se petrecuse de mult, totuși, în mintea omului prins de friguri, se repeta bine impresia figurii lui Gheorghe, a mișcării lui vrând să scoată ceva din sân și a cuvintelor lui amenințătoare. Cum se deștepta așa de limpede acea amintire?/ Era Sâmbăta Paștelui./ Sus pe deal, în satul depărtat ca la doi kilometri printre bălți, se auzeau clopotele bisericii... Și se aude așa de ciudat când ai friguri: aci foarte tare, aci aproape deloc... [sublinierile mele, Teodora Dumitru]”, *ibid.*, 38.

48. Cu cât evaluarea stării de sănătate a lui Zibal de către terți e mai defavorabilă (Leiba are „idei la cap” – respectiv halucinații sau, cu un alt termen caragialian, „fandacșii” –, crede Sura, soția sa; creierul lui Zibal „ardea” relatează și naratorul) – cu atât sângele lui e mai rece și mintea e mai clară, mai *ingenioasă*, mai aptă să dea soluția sau măsura *potrivită*, mai *savantă* și mai rapidă („într-o clipă operația fusese gata...”) în prepararea contraatacului, a dejucării acțiunii revanșardului Gheorghe și totodată a pedepsirii/ anihilării lui exemplare: „Lațul era *ingenios* combinat: o frânghie lungă legată cu un căpătâi de un butuc: la o lungime *potrivită*, pe locul unde era să dispară pătratul scobit, un ochi, pe care Leiba îl ținea deschis cu mâna stângă, în timp ce cu mâna dreaptă ținea strâns celălalt căpătâi. La momentul cerut, Zibal dete drumul ochiului și apucând repede cu amândouă mâinile căpătâiul liber, cu o smucitură supremă trase înăuntru brațul întreg./ ...Într-o clipă operația fusese gata... Două răcnete o însoțiră, unul de pierzare, altul de *triumf*: mâna era «țintuită pe loc». [...] Ca un *savant* care, în amestecul unor elemente, ar căuta să prinză un secret subtil al naturii ce de mult îi scapă și-l necăjește, Zibal ține ochii ațintiți asupra unui lucru spânzurat, negru și inform, sub care, pe un alt scaun, la o *potrivită* înălțime, arde o făclie mare. Zibal privește fără să clipească procesul de descompunere a mâinii ce desigur nu l-ar fi cruțat pe dânsul [s.m, T.D.]”, *ibid.*, 49-51.

de sine – „Și omul plecă încetinel spre răsărit la deal, ca un călător cuminte, care știe că la un drum lung nu se pornește cu pasul pripit”<sup>49</sup> – aparent contrară statusului perpetuu febricitat, spasmodic al paludicilor, invocat de mai multe ori, chiar demonstrativ, și în nuvela caragialiană. Cert e că „frigurile” – condiția biologică precară – sunt neutralizate la Zibal de rațiune, de calcul, de control, adică de condiția intelo-morală. Va fi contribuit la fortificarea acesteia din urmă și ecourile pe care le-a avut în mintea personajului ocazionala discuție a doi studenți în științe – un medicinist și un filozof – despre cauzele criminalității, câtă vreme detaliile furnizate<sup>50</sup> de cei doi ignorantului în temă hangiu evreu îl ajută pe acesta să proiecteze/ anticipeze în adversarul său, românul Gheorghe, toate simptomele criminalității corelate cu degenerescența evidențiate de Cesare Lombroso și captate din dialogul celor doi studenți. Succesul lui Zibal în conservarea propriei vieți și în prevenirea unei crime, a propriei ucideri, nu înseamnă însă că Lombroso avea dreptate – că predispoziția spre crimă e codificată frenologic, fizionomic, anatomic etc. –, ci că teoria lui Lombroso a acționat asupra angoasei lui Zibal ca un *placebo* sau ca un vaccin, activându-i acestuia anticorpi capabili să contracareze morbul. Convingerea că Gheorghe are toate datele unui criminal – certificată prin știința modernă ale cărei portavoci sunt cei doi studenți științști la dialogul cărora hangiu asistă – l-a determinat pe Zibal să-și consolideze pozițiile, să nu cadă pradă delăsării, defetismului, blazării sau, din contră, unei autoliniștiri pasive, unei cedări în fața ipotezei – la fel de raționale, de altfel, câtă vreme nimic nu se întâmplase în termeni obiectivi – că poate temerile lui sunt nefondate. Pe scurt: contactul cu teoriile „științei moderne” nu a permis febrei paludice să surclaseze răceala rațiunii și urgența acțiunii. De aceea, nu se poate spune că „frigurile” ar fi o patologie mai curând decorativă sau benignă în *O făclie de Paște* în comparație cu *Semnele lui Dănuț*, ci că în nuvela lui Caragiale „frigurile” sunt ținute în frâu de un argument/ medicament care lipsește în scenariul lui Mihăescu: contactul pacientului cu un tip de discurs raționalist (știința) care, chiar dacă ulterior se dovedește fragil sau invalidat (cum sunt astăzi unele teorii ale lui Ernst Haeckel și teoria lui Lombroso), la momentul în care pacientul este expus la el, acesta acționează fericit, pragmatic, în sensul scăderii febrei autodistructive și a augmentării activismului autoconservator al protagonistului. N-o fi lipsit de relevanță nici amănuntul că în nuvela lui Caragiale calea ferată ocolește ținutul mlăștinios al Podenilor (fapt care îl face și neatractiv economic, căci nu devine vad comercial, nu justifică traiul pe termen lung acolo al unui negustor, deci hangiu Leiba Zibal poate oricând decide să plece de acolo și să se mute într-o zonă mai circulată), pe când în nuvela lui Mihăescu gara e plasată chiar în zona bălților – iar profesia lui, de șef de gară, funcționar public, nu-i îngăduie mobilitatea pe care ar avea-o, de pildă, un comerciant. Astfel, Dănuț nu are de ales – după ce „frigurile” îiucid șase copii – decât să îl îndeapărteze pe al șaptelea spre ținuturi mai uscate și mai igienice, cum va fi fost Craiova epocii în comparație cu mai nordicul Bobeni (Băbeni). Dincolo de aceste diferențe, temele și metoda lui Mihăescu rămân puternic caragialiene (chiar intens dramatice și dramatizabile, se poate spune, câtă vreme halucinația e inseparabilă la acest nuvelist de verbalizare, câtă vreme uneori halucinația apare sau se acutizează la contactul cu cuvântul altuia sau cu propriul imaginar verbalizat instantaneu<sup>51</sup>), aggiornate prin câteva găselnițe generos furnizate de expresionism.

### III.

Dar *făclia de Crăciun* a lui Mihăescu nu este doar o replică intenționată ori subliminală la *făclia de Paște* a lui Caragiale. Este și evoluția unor motive literare – ciocnirea, deflagrația, arderea, pe de o parte, frigul/ „frigurile”/ tremurul pe de altă parte, a extremelor termice cald vs. rece – cu tot ce agață acestea într-o distanță de trei decenii de ani, în care tehnologia progresa, dar paludismul rămâne, ca un revelator/ catalizator al derivei și al ticăloșiei individuale, ireductibile la cauze extra-subiective, sau ca o plagă socială, morală, civilizațională, politică etc. Căci, prin caracterul ei persistent și endemic, despre

49. Ibid., 51.

50. „Atavismul... Alcoolismul cu urmările-i patologice... Vițiu de concepție... Deformarea... Paludismul... Apoi neuroza! Atâtea și atâtea cuceriri ale științei moderne... Dar cazul de reversie!/ Darwin... Haeckel... Lombroso.../ [...] – Este evident, adaogă medicinistul. De aceea, criminalul propriu-zis, luat ca tip, are brațele peste măsură lungi și picioarele prea scurte, fruntea îngustă și turtită, occiputul tare dezvoltat; chipul lui e de o caracteristică asprime și bestialitate, bătătoare la ochii deprinși; e un rudiment de om; e, cum am zice, fiara, care de-abia de curând a reușit să stea numai pe labele dinapoi și să-și ridice capul în sus, spre cer, cătră lumină!”, *ibid.*, 42.

51. Dramaticismul nuvelisticii lui Mihăescu a mai fost observat, de pildă de Manolescu („Gib I. Mihăescu”, 291).



care depun mărturie nuvele ca a lui Caragiale și Mihăescu<sup>52</sup>, dar și romane postbelice ca *Moromeții* (vol. I, 1955) de Preda, paludismul – boala provocată și întreținută de un mediu insuficient controlat, fără politici publice de asanare și de medicalizare – se revelează drept o tragedie națională: decenii în șir am fost un popor de halucinați, de agenți și victime ale „fandacsiilor” și tragediilor colective și individuale cauzate de microscopicul agent patogen al malariei. Iar halucinația este un pandant al iluziei – al capacității fabulatorii și totodată al credulității, al suspendării spiritului critic –, liantul colectivităților tarate, al mulțimilor înșelate, ușor de manipulat, inclusiv sau în primul rând politic. Microbul „frigurilor” ne-a făcut mai predispuși spre fantasmă și mai puțin spre realitate, în aceeași măsură în care a fost generat de sărăcie și a generat, mai departe, debilitate economică. Apoi, boala în sine – îndeosebi cea contagioasă și/ sau cu potențial de endemizare – s-a dovedit, în istorie, un excelent sculptor și manager al artelor: tuberculoza, holera, malaria, sifilisul au alimentat curente, școli, metode, filozofii, estetici – maniere de a asuma și de a interoga o existență pe cât de previzibilă (toate aceste boli, devenite pentru secole întregi parte a comunității, au o evoluție aproape familiară: orice țăran ajunge să știe, nu neapărat pe propria piele, dar din experiența altora, ce este „oftica” sau holera, ce simptome manifestă etc.), pe atât de spontan epuizabilă, așezată congenital sub spectrul exitului prematur.

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52. În literatura română, realitatea medicală a malariei endemice inclusiv în prima parte a secolului XX a avut posibilitatea să se intersecteze cu mitul vampirului/ strigoiului (vezi Mircea Eliade, *Domnișoara Christina*, 1936).

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# Tragicomedia Occidentului: emigrația economică în romanele și filmele românești din anii '90

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## The Tragicomedy of the Occident: Depictions of Economic Migration in the Romanian Novel and Film of the 1990s

**Abstract:** Our article examines the narrative registers and forms adopted in the 1990s by the Romanian novelists, screenwriters and film directors in order to portray the phenomenon of economic migration to the West. Our focus is on the intriguing and paradoxical employment of tragicomic, melodramatic, burlesque-grotesque and sensational narrative techniques as the Romanian collective imaginary during the 1990s witnessed the peak idealization of emigration in Western Europe and in The United States of America. This process of idealization is also fueled by the fact that, despite the political ban has been lifted after 1989, legislative and economic constraints continued to limit the actual experience of the so-called “free world.” The corpus of our article comprises two cult films of the period, *Asfalt tango* (1996, Nae Caranfil) and Cristian Mungiu's *Occident* (2002), as well as two novels authored Grid Modorcea and S. Dinger, all of which share the struggle to depict the tensions between the uncritical embrace of Western story-world and the bleak, if not dramatic, reality of migration.

**Keywords:** economic migration, Westcentrism, tragicomic, Romanian novel and film, the 1990s.

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„Occidentul mi-a deschis ochii și m-a dat cu capul de pragul de sus. / Ias altora ce a fost viața mea până azi. / să creadă alții în ce am crezut eu. / să iubească alții ce am iubit eu. / eu nu mai pot. / nu mai pot, nu mai pot”<sup>1</sup> – acestea sunt versurile care încheie poemul *Occidentul*, scris de Mircea Cărtărescu în 1990.<sup>2</sup> Ele sugerează un punct culminant al procesului descris de Mihai Iovănel drept impresia „de strivire pe care un scriitor est-european o poate simți în fața unor culturi centrale.”<sup>3</sup> De altfel, în *The Columbia Literary History of Eastern Europe since 1945*, Harold B. Segel consideră că imaginarea impactului Vestului („enorm – mai mare decât cel anticipat” de poetul însuși) conferă poemului cărtărescian calitatea de a fi definitoriu pentru condiția scriitorului (postcomunist) din întreaga regiune.<sup>4</sup> Cu toate acestea, șarjele

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1. Mircea Cărtărescu, *Occidentul*, în *Nimic* (București: Humanitas, 2010), 111.

2. Poemul *Occidentul* este publicat pentru prima dată în 2008, într-o variantă prescurtată, în limba engleză, în volumul lui Harold B. Segel, *The Columbia Literary History of Eastern Europe since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 291.

3. Mihai Iovănel, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990–2020* (Iași: Polirom, 2021), 652.

4. Segel, *The Columbia Literary History*, 290: „The impact on Cărtărescu of the West, and of the United States in particular, was huge – greater than what he expected it to be – and what he writes about it in his typically long narrative poem (which has been slightly shortened here) could be extrapolated to any number of other Eastern European writers as well.”

și travestiurile<sup>5</sup> înscenate în poemul lui Cărtărescu ambiguizează (auto)ironic mizele atât identitare, cât și ideologice ale textului. „Strivirea” resimțită de esticul confruntat cu lumina „orbitoare” a Vestului conține o doză vădită de performativitate și burlesc. În fond, chiar dacă materializarea Occidentului este realizată pentru a-i reconfirma plenar mitul, spectacolul său se desfășoară în mod deliberat patetic, melodramatic și în registru preponderent comic. Elogiului culturii înalte sau populare și al avansului tehnologic din Occident nu i se asociază, în acest poem, idealul mobilității cosmopolite pentru care pledează, de pildă, Rebecca Walkowitz în „The Location of Literature.”<sup>6</sup> Dimpotrivă, în loc să-și asume entuziast o identitate hibridă și fluidă transnațional, conform tuturor proiecțiilor cosmopolitismului contemporan, călătorul cărtărescian în Paris, în Frankfurt, în New York și în alte orașe iconice americane experimentează deznădăjduit doar „moartea [...] fermecată” a vechii sale condiții de est-european. O condiție care se sustrage instantaneu oricărei forme de cunoaștere și devine exclusiv sursă a (tragi)comicului sau subiect al sarcasmului.<sup>7</sup> Totuși, aceeași ecuație de înțelegere dihotomică poate fi interpretată și prin reversul său: mitul Occidentului tinde să fie proiectat și reconfirmat doar de pe poziții burlești de subalternitate.

Acest articol pornește de la ipoteza că ecuația reprezentatională din poemul cărtărescian – care caricaturizează figura est-europeanului ca mobil al reconfirmării idealului occidental – are valoare exponențială pentru strategia de discurs cultural și mediatic cu privire la Occident, din România anilor '90.<sup>8</sup> Cu atât mai intrigantă interpretativ rămâne această manieră de imaginare a raportului Est-Vest, cu cât ea domină inclusiv reprezentările ficționale ale emigrației economice postcomuniste din perioada amintită. Adică acea emigrație care, măcar aparent, se produce pe cu totul alte coordonate decât cele ale exilului intelectual, celebrat și chiar „eroizat” de literatura politică anticomunistă sau de studiile postcoloniale,<sup>9</sup> în saiaj cărora se plasează *Occidentul* lui Cărtărescu. Prin urmare, ne referim, în mod particular, la romanele și la filmele realizate în (și focalizate pe) anii '90, însă asumăm și faptul că, din punctul de vedere al emigrației economice, primul deceniu postcomunist e mai „lung” decât borna anului 2000, întrucât schimbările politico-legislative de impact pentru România se petrec în 2002 (eliminarea vizelor de călătorie în țările din spațiul Schengen), respectiv în 2007 (aderarea la Uniunea Europeană). Astfel, corpusul nostru cuprinde filme-cult ale perioadei, precum *Asfalt Tango* (1996), regizat de Nae Caranfil, și *Occident* (2002), regizat de Cristian Mungiu, dar și romane aparținând unor autori minori, dintre care cele mai reprezentative sunt: S. [Șerban] Dinger, *Emigrantă în America*, I. *Săracă în America*, II. *Bogată în America* (1994–1995), respectiv Grid Modorcea, *Șobolanii în Italia. Biblia transfugului* (1995).<sup>10</sup>

5. Vezi, de exemplu, secvențe din *Occidentul* precum „am văzut jocuri pe computer și librării și mi s-au părut la fel amândouă / am înțeles că filosofia e entertainment / și că mistica e show-biz / că sunt doar suprafețe aici / dar mai complexe decât orice profunzime. [...] am văzut oameni pentru care legea avorturilor / e mai importantă decât sfărâmarea Sovietelor” (p. 107); „am făcut literatură mare, și acum înțelegem / că ea nu poate trece de prag, tocmai fiindcă e mare, / prea mare, sufocată de grăsimea ei.” (p. 110).

6. Rebecca Walkowitz, „The Location of Literature: The Transnational Book and the Migrant Writer,” *Contemporary Literature* 47, nr. 4 (2006): 527–545.

7. „am privit vitrinele cu motociclete Suzuki / și m-am văzut în ele jegos, anonim”; „eram omul alb-negru dintr-o poză color / Kafka între arcadieni”; „mă simt ca ultimul mohican / ridicol asemeni dinozaurului Denver”.

8. După Revoluția din 1989, Occidentul stă la baza unui amplu și influent mecanism discursiv mediatic și intelectual, însă nu încă și productiv ficțional. Capacitatea redusă de reprezentativitate ficțională se poate explica prin faptul că, în anii '90, imaginarea Vestului era apanajul memorialisticii din/de exil, cea care, de altfel, și ocupa prim-planul pieței literare.

9. Despre inadecvarea aplicării conceptelor „canonice” ale postcolonialismului la receptarea migrației economice postcomuniste scrie pe larg Adriana Stan în „Motherlands in Europe. Economic Subalternity and Fantasies of Family in Contemporary Romanian Literature of Migration,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 2024 (first view), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00111619.2024.2382461?src>, precum și în Adriana Stan, „On Your Own in a One-and-Unequal World: Forms and Worldviews in Contemporary Romanian Narratives of Emigration,” *Transilvania*, nr. 4 (2024): 1–7. Vezi, de asemenea, Snejana Ung, „Should I Stay or Should I Move Back? Literary Representations of Emigration to the US in Postcommunist Romanian Literature,” *Transilvania*, nr. 9 (2023): 1–10.

10. Pentru delimitarea corpusului de romane am folosit caracterizările din ediția revizuită și adăugită a DCRR – *Dicționarul cronologic al romanului românesc de la origini până în 2000*, vol. I–II (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2023). În DCRR, subgenul „roman al emigrației” include și Silvia Cinca, *Himera* (1995), Ion Deaconescu, *Ademenirea* (1995), George Mișin Variesescu, *Undeva în Occident* (1996), Radu Jörgensen, *Clovnul din lemn de gutui* (1998), Nicholas Catanoy, *Indian Summer* (1999) și Jean Celeste Dimitrescu, *Ca Sfântul Lazăr târâș-grăpiș. Aventurile unui român în Occident* (2000).





### Context: occidentalismul anticomunist

În perioada în care apar reprezentările ficționale anterior menționate, discursul politic și intelectual din România stabilizează două direcții hegemonice în imaginarul colectiv, prin care anticomunismul se asociază firesc cu idealizarea Occidentului și a modelului societal capitalist.

Direcția anticomunistă a fost amplu și convingător informată teoretic și analitic, după criza economică din 2007-2008 și mai ales după 2010,<sup>11</sup> conturând o bibliografie pe care am încercat să o sintetizăm în câteva studii recente.<sup>12</sup> Reținem aici doar paradoxul argumentat pe larg de Diana Georgescu conform căruia amânarea sau eludarea de către formațiunile politice aflate la guvernare a instituționalizării/legiferării procesului de criminalizare a comunismului a stimulat amplificarea hiperbolică a discursului intelectual anticomunist, care a ajuns să instaureze o grilă „hegemonică” de percepere a trecutului recent. Chiar dacă sau, în fapt, tocmai fiindcă ocupau poziții politice marginale, elitele intelectuale și-au sporit prestigiul social și „capitalul moral” prin promovarea retoricii anticomuniste revanșarde și intransigente.<sup>13</sup> Până să fie instituționalizat (după anii 2000) prin intermediul mai multor centre de cercetare, al comisiilor de investigare a totalitarismului și al unor proiecte educaționale, anticomunismul devenise discursul normativ sub autoritatea căruia se plasează cvasi-unanim elita culturală locală și, cu atât mai mult, aspiranții la respectivul statut.

La fel de influent și de imposibil de contestat se dovedește și fenomenul idealizării Occidentului, bine stabilit încă din anii comunismului datorită acțiunii exercitate de Radio Europa Liberă, o instituție care proiecta cu obstinație utopia unei lumi vestice „libere și democratice”, lipsite de granițe ori de tensiuni etnice, sociale și ideologice.<sup>14</sup> Ulterior, un rol propagandistic similar îl joacă, la nivelul societății civile, o serie de organizații și platforme non-guvernamentale, de trusturi media, de proiecte audio-vizuale precum Grupul pentru Dialog Social, revista 22, Pro Democrația, Fundația pentru o Societate Deschisă, ziarul *Cotidianul*, Media Pro, Centrul pentru Jurnalism independent etc.<sup>15</sup>

În ciuda precarității cvasi-generalizate din primul deceniu postcomunist („în cartier, lumea a început să înțeleagă că democrația și capitalismul sunt despre sărăcie”<sup>16</sup>), idealul Occidentului nu este cu adevărat știrbit, nici în discursul public, nici în imaginarul colectiv, vina ratărilor tranziției fiind delegată mai degrabă capitalismului „de cumetrie” local, iar salvarea – așteptată de la un capitalism „ca afară”. Or, acest „afară” își putea păstra aura fantasmatică intactă mai ales în măsura în care rămânea cunoscut într-o măsură foarte redusă. Studiile sociologice probează, într-adevăr, că, în anii '90, românii se apropiau de Occident mai cu seamă la nivel de fantasmă. Așa cum informează o cercetare din 2006, coordonată de Dumitru Sandu, emigrația economică temporară („plecarea pentru muncă în străinătate”) nu depășește, în prima jumătate a anilor '90, procentul anual de 0,35% (din populația cu

11. O sinteză lămuritoare a „hegemoniei ideologice cvasi-totale a drepte” și a imposibilității alternativelor de stânga în primele două decenii postcomuniste este dezvoltată de Vladimir Borțun în capitolul „Un electorat în căutarea unui partid: stânga românească de azi și de mâine,” în *Ce urmează după neoliberalism? Pentru un imaginar politic alternativ*, ed. Sorin Gog și Victoria Stoiciu (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2024), 297–321.

12. Vezi Adriana Stan, Cosmin Borza, „Deetatization of Culture, Privatization of Politics: The Case of the Publishing Houses in Postcommunist Romania,” *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review* 20, nr. 3 (2020): 382–397; Adriana Stan, Cosmin Borza, „From Ostalgic To Ostadium. The Anti-Communist Novel in Post-1989 East-Central Europe,” *Central Europe* 22, nr. 1 (2024): 76–87; Cosmin Borza, Claudiu Turcuș, „Westalgia as the Infantilization of the East: Narrating Communist Childhood in post-1989 Romania and the Administration of the Recent Past” (în curs de publicare).

13. Vezi Diana Georgescu, „Between Trauma and Nostalgia. The Intellectual Ethos and Generational Dynamics of Memory in Postsocialist Romania,” *Südosteuropa* 64, nr. 3 (2016), 289: „The dominant discourse about the socialist past was not the result of a top-bottom imposition by a politically powerful intellectual elite as the term “hegemony” might suggest. On the contrary, the hegemony of representation was the outcome of struggles for symbolic power and institutional resources waged by intellectual elites occupying the political margins of an increasingly divided Romanian society. Although they enjoyed moral capital and social prestige, these forces faced an uphill battle against a politically victorious party composed chiefly of former communist bureaucrats.”

14. Vezi Constantin Pârvulescu și Claudiu Turcuș, „Specters of Europe and Anticommunist Visual Rhetoric in Romanian Film of the Early 1990s,” *The Oxford Handbook of Communist Visual Cultures*, ed. Aga Skrodzka, Xiaoning Lu, Katarzyna Marciniak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 693–712.

15. Anemarie-Helen Necșulescu, „Geneza apariției ONG-urilor din România,” *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review* 11, nr. 3 (2011): 525–556.

16. Dana Domșodi, „No Country for Poor Men,” *CriticAtac*, 21 noiembrie 2014. <https://www.criticatac.ro/country-poor-men/>. Accesat în 10 iunie 2024.

vârsta cuprinsă între 15 și 64 de ani), abia în 2002 apropiindu-se de 1%, respectiv de 3% în 2005.<sup>17</sup> În ceea ce privește emigrația permanentă, în 1990 peste 95000 de cetățeni români se stabilesc definitiv în străinătate, apoi numărul scade la aproximativ 44000 în 1991 și la 25000 în 1995.<sup>18</sup> În procente mai generale, estimate pe baza datelor ONU, „migranții internaționali” proveniți din România reprezintă în 1990 3,5% din populația totală a României, în 1995 – 4,3%, în 2000 – 5,1%, iar în 2010 depășesc 16%, ajungând chiar la 20% în 2020.<sup>19</sup> Mai mult, emigrația din primul deceniu postcomunist manifestă un caracter accentuat etnic (Germania și Ungaria dominând ierarhia țărilor de destinație), confesional (întrajutorarea membrilor aceleiași confesiuni religioase) și de familie (sprijinul pentru acomodare și găsirea unui loc de muncă fiind oferit baza relațiilor de rudenie).<sup>20</sup>

### Farsa granițelor

Aparent atât de apropiat și de accesibil, Occidentul rămâne totuși intangibil pentru majoritatea covârșitoare a populației românești precarizate din primul deceniu postcomunist. Dacă fantasma sa este celebrată în discursul mediatic și intelectual al perioadei respective, reprezentările ficționale analizate în acest articol procesează distanța resimțită (încă) față de Occident într-un registru preponderent (tragi)comic. Deși „cortina de fier” fusese spulberată, iar visul libertății și aspirația integrării în marile democrații europene și nord-americane păreau atât de realizabile, pe parcursul anilor '90 și până în a doua parte a decadei următoare, granițele se dovedesc, în mod practic, nu doar simbolic, aproape imposibil de trecut. Tocmai de aceea, pentru România primei decade și jumătate postcomuniste, tipic rămâne travaliul (imaginar) de a trece „dincolo”, mai degrabă decât experiența (propriu-zisă, materială, a) lumii „de dincolo”. Respectivul travaliu imaginar se exprimă frecvent în forma farsei tragicomice sau a travestiului burlesc, ai căror bieți actanți rămân ferm convinși că noua lume liberă și democratică le garantează trecerea granițelor și că întregul demers nu depinde decât de propria lor voință. Combinația bufă dintre miturile mobilității și ale individualismului liberal postcomunist este surprinsă substanțial în două filme-cult ale perioadei: *Asfalt Tango* (1996)<sup>21</sup> și *Occident* (2002).<sup>22</sup>

*Road-movie* burlesc și comedie romantică glisând spre șarjă, filmul regizat de Nae Caranfil cumulează atât de multe situații/replici/cadre-cliseu, cu variații uneori programatic simbolice pe tema obsesiei de a evada din România de tranziție, încă afectată de tarele comunismului, încât se poate spune că stabilește „matricea narativă a europenității orientalizate,” în linia unui imaginar care ajunge tot mai influent în filmul românesc de după 2000.<sup>23</sup> Scenariul urmărește călătoria cu autocarul, spre graniță, a unui grup de femei care au semnat un contract cu o companie de cabaret franceză. Registrul simbolic al filmului proiectează societatea românească printr-o lentilă expresionist-grotescă (ex. focalizare pe formele variate ale mizeriei cotidiene, pe figuri masculine grotești, pe rasism și misoginie, șarjare a reminiscentelor coeziunii sociale precum sindicalizarea și greva etc.) și, în contrapunct, asociază Occidentul cu miturile culturale ale societății de consum. Chiar și personajele ori secvențele/planurile care par menite să contrabalanseze sau să relativizeze construcția dihotomică a filmului urmează tot o logică binară. În imaginarul scenaristului și regizorului Nae Caranfil, lumea românească de tranziție poate cuprinde și un bărbat precum Andrei (jucat de Mircea Diaconu), un cetățean modest, adept al valorilor conservatoare, idealist și așa-zis romantic, apărător acerb a instituției „sacre” a familiei, convins că emigrarea în Occident aduce invariabil corupere moral-spirituală (în cazul său, prin trecerea soției Dora de la condiția respectabilă de balerină la cea de escortă/prostituată). Tot astfel, Occidentul

17. Dumitru Sandu (coord.), *Locuirea temporară în străinătate. Migrația economică a românilor: 1990–2006*, (București: Fundația pentru o Societate Deschisă, 2006), 27.

18. Cristina Mereuta, „Mobilising Migrants Skills and Resources in Romania,” in *Coping with Emigration in Baltic and East European Countries* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2013), 128.

19. Antonio Ricci, „Dincolo de «Cortina de Fier»: 30 de ani de migrații din România,” *Rădăcini la jumătate. Treizeci de ani de imigrație românească în Italia*, ed. Miruna Căjvăneanu et al. (Istituto di Studi Politici “S. PIO V.” Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, 2022), 12–39.

20. Pentru o analiză nuanțată a etapelor/cronologiei emigrației românești postcomuniste vezi Remus Gabriel Anghel, Alina Botezat, Anotolie Coșciug, Ioana Manafi, Monica Roman, *International Migration, Return Migration, and Their Effects: A Comprehensive Review on the Romanian Case*, IZA Discussion Paper No. 10445, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2895293>. Accesat în 8 iulie 2024.

21. Nae Caranfil, regizor, *Asfalt Tango* (Les Films du Rivage–Domino Film–France 3 Cinéma, 1996).

22. Cristian Mungiu, regizor, *Occident* (Temple Film, 2002).

23. Claudiu Turcuș, „Imaginarul europenizării în filmul românesc contemporan,” *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România*, vol. V: *Imaginar și patrimoniu artistic*, ed. Liviu Malița (Iași: Polirom, 2020), 206.



nu apare doar ca o proiecție de tip ilustrată, ci se materializează prin figura sofisticatei (în raport cu româncele pe cale de a emigra), dar mai ales pragmaticei, cinicei, raționalei Marion (Charlotte Rampling), reprezentanta franceză a angajatorului viitoarelor dansatoare de cabaret. În schimb, confruntarea celor doi (care are ca epilog un tango kitsch, pe parcursul căruia cinica Marion pare să-și reactiveze momentan latura „sentimentală”) nu generează vreo reflecție oricât de ludică despre condiția esticului în raport cu Occidentul<sup>24</sup>, nici despre emigrație ca exploatare a muncii precare. Caranfil preferă să focalizeze doar tensiunea tragicomică dintre proiecții imagine/iluzorii, cantonând problematica emigrației preponderent în sfera deliberărilor etice și a deciziilor personale, așadar dincolo de orice context social-economic. De altfel, filmul se încheie literalmente la graniță, cu o imagine panoramică a cozii nesfârșite de automobile care încearcă să ajungă „dincolo”.

Nici *Occident* (2002) nu urmărește experiența efectivă a emigrației în Europa. Construit, la fel ca *Asfalt Tango*, prin cumularea unei serii consistente de stereotipii despre motivațiile plecării din România, filmul regizat de Cristian Mungiu (de asemenea, și scenarist) exploatează tot resursele farsei, ale melodramei tragicomice și ale șarjei pentru a reprezenta discrepanța dintre obsesia postcomunistă a evadării într-un Occident idealizat și dezamăgirea că mitul nu se împlinește în realitatea imediată.<sup>25</sup> Perspectiva filmului este una a clasei de mijloc<sup>26</sup>, codificată burlesc, care se aștepta să urce pe scara socială, respectiv să ajungă la condiții de viață comparabile cu cele din Europa de Vest odată cu schimbările din 1989. În contradicție cu acest deziderat, cadrul de deschidere al filmului arată deșertificarea vizuală urbană post-socialistă, pusă pe seama primului deceniu al tranziției. Condițiile materiale sunt departe de așteptările clasei de mijloc, în ciuda vestimentației îngrijite și a dialogurilor reflexive. Sugestia cinematografică este că personajele nu aparțin aceluși loc, că acceptă acest spațiu ca pe o geografie tranzitorie, până când lucrurile vor ajunge la normalitatea fantasmatică a vieții occidentale. La fel ca în filmul lui Dan Pița, *Pepe și Fifi* (1992), dar în altă convenție stilistică, personajele convin că „cel mai bine este să pleci de aici” (adică din România), o formulare semnificativă nu doar pentru universal ficțional al lui Mungiu, ci care anticipează realitățile migrației economice de după 2000.

Filmul lui Mungiu a fost receptat drept comedie neagră, stratificată narativ<sup>27</sup> (cu scopul de a cuprinde variațiile raportării obsesive la lumea occidentală), inspirată de *È pericoloso sporgersi* (Nae Caranfil, 1993) și integrabilă în aceeași familie cu farsele orientalizante ale lui Cristian Nemescu. Occidentul rămâne un semnificant substituit, o alternativă pentru a numi un stil de viață mai prosper. La fel ca în *Filantropica* (Nae Caranfil, 1997), umilirea clasei de mijloc (care în socialism avea un statut cumva mai privilegiat) și depopularea cartierelor „civilizate” ale Bucureștiului (adevărate decoruri inaccesibile ale unui progres economic haotic și prea lent) indică o disponibilitate uriașă pentru emigrare. Cel mai bun prieten al protagonistului masculin vrea să fie bucătar pe vapor (ia lecții de gătit), deși este mecanic auto, există povești despre femei care s-au căsătorit cu străini în Italia, un personaj feminin (tot din clasa de mijloc) nu mai suportă munca ieftină în mall-urile românești, proiectându-și o carieră occidentală în marketing. În filmul lui Mungiu, Europa de Vest înseamnă, înainte de orice, confirmarea sau menținerea (în raport cu epoca anterioară) a unui statut social prin siguranță economică. Dar acesta este accesibil

24. Claudiu Turcuș, *Împotriva memoriei, De la noul estetismul socialist la noul cinema românesc (București: Eikon, 172)*. Această relație de subalternitate este doar sporadic adresată în filmele Noului Cinema românesc care mizează pe o estetică minimalistă, pretins neutră, acceptând ca implicită relația de subalternitate a societății înapoiate estice în raport cu Occidentul civilizator. Chiar dacă a fost considerat exponentul unui curent mai degrabă popular în filmul de după 1989, Caranfil substituie neutralitatea cu burlescul, obținând însă, din punct de vedere a unei reprezentări politice, același efect.

25. Vezi Dinu-Ioan Nicula, „De ce plâng chitarele,” *Revista Film*, nr. 1 (2016): 62–63, care interpretează tonalitățile tragicomice din *Occident* ca „o retrospectivă introdusă de vocile candido din binecunoscutului cântec *Noi în anul 2000* de Horia Moculescu, care vorbesc despre un viitor iluzoriu – devenit demult trecut.”

26. Vezi Costi Rogozanu, „Muntean. Cronica României middle class” și Cătălin Olaru, „Al doilea val”, în *Politicile filmului, Contribuții la interpretarea cinemaului românesc contemporan* (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 89–98; 235–254). Cele două încadrări, una social-tematică (clasa de mijloc), cealaltă tipologic-istorică (conceptul de val cinematografic secundar) includ doar tangential filmul lui Mungiu. Din punctul nostru de vedere, filmul de debut al lui Mungiu este fundamental pentru ambele categorii, atât într-o lectură critică a morfologiei claselor sociale după 1989, cât și din perspectiva unui registru estetic subdezvoltat în industria românească de film care a continuat timid prin filmele lui Marian Crișan, de pildă.

27. Mihai Fulger, „Comediile lui Cristian Nemescu, în context național,” *Revista Film*, nr. 1 (2019), 46–49: „*Occident* de Cristian Mungiu, din 2002, influențat evident de *È pericoloso sporgersi* [...] care impune formula tripticului cu povești inteligent împletite și multiple perspective succesive asupra acelorași evenimente.”

mai degrabă prin emigrație economică decât prin navigarea unei societăți în care capitalismul încă nu s-a instituționalizat în favoarea cetățeanului.<sup>28</sup>

Chiar dacă, „în raport cu cinema-ul anilor nouăzeci [...] renunță la cuplajul încrâncenat al anticomunismului și emancipării europeniste,” filmul lui Mungiu „păstrează [...] tușele înapoierii structurale ale românilor, granița dintre observația sociologică și comedia burlescă nefiind conturată.”<sup>29</sup> Tocmai de aceea, umorul din *Occident* nu e neapărat demitizant și cu atât mai puțin dobândește o funcție lucid-analitică,<sup>30</sup> cât reiterează imaginea unui Est subaltern, ai cărui reprezentanți pot doar să mimeze și să rateze burlesc înțelegerea unui Vest pe care nu ajung niciodată să-l cunoască.

### Mobilități de senzație

Anii '90 prilejuiesc, totuși, și apariția câtorva ficțiuni românești care manifestă ambiția de a reda cât mai autentic procesul emigrației economice în Occident. Numai că un asemenea demers realist nu poate evita influența/presiunea majoră a mitologiei Occidentului imaginat, pe care am descris-o în secțiunile anterioare, iar respectivul conflict generează o serie de provocări sub aspectul reprezentării literare. Cum poate fi acomodată „splendoarea” aceluși Vest atât de mult râvnit înainte de căderea comunismului cu condiția umilitoare a emigrantului postcomunist? Sau, mai exact, cum poate fi portretizat precariatul economic fără a altera decisiv idealitatea unui Occident pentru care orizontul de așteptare devenise deja bine consolidat în imaginarul colectiv și cvasi-imposibil de contestat? Soluțiile formale și stilistice găsite de prozatorii români analizați în acest articol sunt exclusiv stridente, ceea ce confirmă statutul mediocru sau de-a dreptul nul deținut de respectivii romancieri în câmpul cultural al vremii. Cu toate acestea, nu evaluarea „ratării estetice” a romanelor ne interesează aici, ci măsura în care improvizațiile și hibridizările de formule românești pot fi definitorii pentru dificultatea, generalizată artistic și cultural, de a oferi o reprezentare acurată a emigrației economice în România anilor '90.

Un caz tipic în acest sens rămâne romanul lui Grid Modorcea<sup>31</sup> din 1995, *Șobolanii din Italia*. Titlul, vădit provocator, anunță o imagine sarcastică, dacă nu naturalistă, a emigrației, și intră în contradicție nu doar cu subtitlul, *Biblia transfugului*, ci și cu ilustrația copertei întâi, care îmbină imaginea Colosseumului cu o reproducere după Botticelli a lui Ioan Botezătorul. De altfel, întreg romanul este construit prin amalgamul unor formule literare divergente, greu de compatibilizat: literatură de senzație (care implică aventuri spectaculoase, schimbarea alertă a planurilor și a ritmurilor narrative, teatralitate pronunțată a relațiilor dintre personaje, cultivarea imprevizibilului, a spectaculosului și a straniuului), proză de călătorie (realizată prin însemnări cvasi-monografice despre Veneția, Torino, Florența, Roma), narațiune psihologică și de idei (cuprinzând glose ample pe teme identitare, istorice, sociale, artistice etc.). Mai mult, romanul dezvoltă un clivaj pronunțat și comic (în majoritatea cazurilor, acesta fiind un comic involuntar) între retorica narațiunii și trama propriu-zisă.

Protagonistul romanului lui Modorcea este Niki Burlea („tânăr de vreo 30 de ani, slăbuț, spălăcit la păr și la chip, cu ochii albaștri, în adâncul cărora se ghemuiește parcă un animal speriat”<sup>32</sup>), un zugrav din Constanța care „își încearcă norocul” în Italia, unde trăiește experiențe umilitoare (doarme sub poduri, în mașini abandonate, sub schele ale clădirilor în renovare, în case părăsite, pe scările piețelor publice) și trece prin diverse locuri de muncă provizorii și prost plătite (cărăuș, spălător de vase, chelner, zugrav zilier, muncitor în construcții). Condiția emigrantului precar este surprinsă în pasaje oarecum naive, dar plauzibile și necosmetizate: „El se revolta pe condiția sa de *ratto*. Dar o accepta ca să-și trimită aproape toți banii acasă, fiindcă un acoperiș costa o avere<sup>33</sup>”; „Avusese o zi grea, muncise ca un rob și a trebuit

28. Conexiunile dintre aspirațiile sau idealurile (informate mediatic ale) clasei de mijloc și emigrația economică sunt analizate de Ștefan Baghiu și Ovio Olaru în „Capitalist Heterotopia & Lost Social Utopia: Documenting Class, Work, and Migration in Post-communist East-Central European Fiction,” *Central Europe* 22, nr. 1 (2024): 2–17.

29. Turcuș, „Imaginarul europenizării,” 204–205.

30. Vezi Eugenia Vodă, „Spectatorule, fratele meu,” *România literară*, nr. 40 (2002), 23: „Umorel lui Mungiu e uneori blând, alteori caustic, uneori plin de finețe, alteori în tușă groasă, uneori verbal, alteori (mult mai rar) pur vizual – dar întotdeauna lucid. Dacă regizorul *complice* își permite să cultive un orgoliu, acela e orgoliul lucidității. Căderea repetată a diferitelor cortine e hărăzită să demitizeze totul și să jumulească orice iluzie.”

31. Grid Modorcea (n. 1944) este scriitor, regizor, scenarist, critic de film și de artă, realizator TV, editor și jurnalist excesiv de productiv (a publicat peste 100 de volume). După 1990 adoptă un stil tot mai pamfletar și proiectează o serie amplă de romane populare, „licențios-scandaloase”, despre moravurile societății românești postcomuniste. Ficționalizarea emigrației economice pare a se înscrie în respectivul proiect editorial.

32. Grid Modorcea, *Șobolanii din Italia. Biblia transfugului* (București: Emin, 1995), 5.

33. *Ibid.*, 107.



să doarmă iar la întâmplare, într-o *bolgia* și să suporte iar șobolanii care se foiau și treceau peste el ca prostituatele pe Ponte Risorgimento! Și după așa somn, du-te a doua zi la treabă, unde patronul te așteaptă să-i dai zor ca unul ce vine cu forțe proaspete, fără să te întrebe cum ai dormit!...”

În același timp, zugravului Niki orașele italiene îi prilejuiesc repetate extazieri estetice și îi inspiră la tot pasul excursuri docte despre diferențele, mereu cu soluție previzibilă, între mentalitatea estică și cea vestică, despre traumele comunitare (post)comuniste, despre lenea românilor în raport cu raționalitatea civilizației italiene, despre corupție și mită, despre „decăderea morală” extrem contemporană etc. Sosit „din iad, din România” și pășind „pe treapta de sus a civilizației”, simțindu-se înconjurat de oglinzi splendide „care îi reflectau înfățișarea de sălbatic”<sup>34</sup>, Niki se revitalizează admirând capodoperele picturale și arhitectonice ale descendentei Imperiului Roman. Enumerația emfatică și finalul lacrimogen sunt elocvente în pasajul următor: „Orice pas însemna altă priveliște care îți lua mințile: *Ziua și Noaptea, Aurora și Amurgul* lui Michelangelo din capela unde se ruga familia Medici, biroul de lucru, curtea interioară, unde Bertoldo îl inițiase pe adolescentul Buonarroti într-ale sculpturii, Cristoforo din *terra cotta* policromă de la etaj [...] dar mai ales *Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana*. [...] Biblioteca i se păru atât de fabuloasă, de la «îmbrăcămintea» de lemn sculptat și până la hărțile și codicele geografiei «*scrituale*», care dovedeau cum «Firenze a descoperit America», încât îi dădură lacrimile și scrise cu ele în cartea de onoare aflată la ieșire.”<sup>35</sup> După ce înnoptează printre șobolani și se trezește acoperit de găinaț de porumbi (cele două leitmotive ale discursului narativ care descriu experiența locuirii pe străzile orașelor italiene), emigrantul lui Modorcea uită să-și deplângă condiția, nici nu-și mai poate închipui că ar avea de ce să chestioneze miturile sociale, ideologice, economice despre Occident; în schimb, se desfată cu întreaga sa măreție culturală.

Foarte asemănătoare e structura compozițională și narativă a romanului în două părți al lui S. Dinger,<sup>36</sup> *Emigrantă în America* (partea I: *Săracă în America*, 1994; partea a II-a: *Bogată în America*, 1995). Dimensiunea de proză de călătorie este afișată prin inserarea mai multor pagini tip ilustrată, care conțin imagini iconice din New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Dallas etc., în timp ce senzaționalismul transpare mai ales prin traseul existențial al protagonistei Mirela, o tânără bucureșteancă de 20 de ani, care emigrează în SUA fiindcă nu dorise „să trăiască toată viața în sărăcie”. Din păcate, după ce unchiul care ar fi trebuit să-i susțină integrarea în noua lume se dovedește imposibil de găsit, protagonista își începe un șir aiuritor de aventuri, marcat de experiențe traumatizante, precum violul din Harlem, de-a lungul cărora își pierde toți banii. După ce traversează majoritatea orașelor mari americane în căutare de slujbe, Mirela ajunge să cerșească în Las Vegas, reușind să se angajeze ca animatoare în cluburi. Ca prin minune însă, în acest punct, i se schimbă destinul, este promovată într-o funcție administrativă, apoi își lansează propria afacere, datorită căreia ajunge miliardară și e admirată în masă ca femeie de afaceri de succes (proprietară de hoteluri, de restaurante, de magazine, de benzinării și de firme de taxiuri).

Romanul se încheie într-o tonalitate patetic-moralistă, cu o secvență în care miliardara Mirela perorează la un show TV despre „banii care nu aduc fericirea”, ci singurătatea, nefericirea și „sărăcirea” sufletească. În același episod narativ concluziv, protagonista critică „imperialismul psihologic” al filmelor americane, care „dezrădăcinează milioane de copii și adolescenți din toată lumea, făcându-i să-și dorească să emigreze în țara tuturor posibilităților, pentru ca, odată ajunși acolo, să găsească cu totul altceva decât ce li s-a inoculat, cu subtilitate, în atâția ani.”<sup>37</sup> Totuși, dincolo de epilogul în care Occidentul utopic este criticat printr-o grilă populist-moralistă, romanul lui Dinger rămâne un *road-story* extrem de conformist în raport cu șabloanele „visului american”. Oricâte destabilizări concrete ar fi cunoscut pe parcursul călătoriei (violența cotidiană care ia forme inimaginabile pentru europeană estică, sărăcia lucie, mizeria de pe străzi care creștea „înspăimântător” imediat după cartierele financiare ocupate de zgârie-nori, mercantilismul și cinismul angajatorilor), miturile „tărâmului” tuturor posibilităților sunt reactualizate cu obstinție. Din acest motiv, emigranta își continuă neabătută calea, întâlnește oameni providențiali la tot pasul, e stimulată constant de un spirit al locului care prețuiește inițiativa privată, tenacitatea

34. Ibid., 18.

35. Ibid., 85.

36. Șerban Dinger (n. 1962), de formație inginer, este prozator și eseist care adoptă poziții moralist-didactice în raport cu progresul tehnic și științific al modernității. În 1999 publică romanul științifico-fantastic *Prețul supraviețuirii*, în care pledează pentru reumanizarea societăților moderne. Preocuparea pentru tematica emigrației nu are motivații biografice, iar *Emigrantă în America* a reprezentat debutul său editorial. Vezi Voicu Bugariu, „Un tânăr prozator,” *Contrapunct*, nr. 8 (1996): 12.

37. S. Dinger, *Emigrantă în America*, vol. II: *Bogată în America* (București: Occident, 1995), 196.

întreprinzătoare și etica muncii consecvente, ba chiar ajunge să realizeze din nimic visul antreprenorial extrem de bănos care a fost identificat culturii americane.

**Concluzie: neutralizarea ideologică a emigrației**

Râsul din ficțiunile românești nouăzeciste ale emigrației economice – fie el buf sau absurd, grimasă, satiră ori farsă, involuntar sau asumat-autoironic – nu recuperează mai nimic din energia critică, subversivă, respectiv revoluționară cu care l-a înzestrat cultura modernă.<sup>38</sup> O neutralizare ideologică asemănătoare implică și reactivarea la final de secol XX a unor formule artistice (senzaționaliste și sentimental-melodramatice), care, pe parcursul secolului al XIX-lea, când se manifestau plener, funcționau ca principali poli critici/satirici de radiografiere a tensiunilor majore generate de pătrunderea relațiilor burghez-capitaliste în țările române.<sup>39</sup> Atâta cât poate fi înscenată și rostită, destabilizarea miturilor emigrației în Occident, implicit a capitalismului salvator, este proiectată de filmele și de romanele din România anilor '90 exclusiv în registru tragicomic sau senzaționalist, prin eludarea oricăror însemne minimale ale asumării unei conștiințe/ poziționări ideologice critice. Ipostaziată ca imposibilitate sau ca ratare, emigrația nu oferă o alternativă social-economică viabilă, însă eșecul existențial nu atentează vreodată la sublimitatea mitului occidental, ci dobândește explicații orientate strict pe natura și originea emigrantului: de la inaderența așa-zisei mentalității estice, post-comuniste, la valorile capitalismului vestic, democrat-liberal, la scrupulul moral idealist-conservator aplicat mercantilismului societății capitaliste, până la discrepanța clasică și eternă fantasmă-realitate etc.

Experiența emigrației implică un conflict de conștientizare economică, dar și ideologică, pe care regizorii și romancierii români din anii 1990 nu îl pot procesa și din cauză că miturile strict culturale despre Occident erau atât de influente. Astfel se poate justifica de ce problematica emigrației este tratată în registru preponderent tragicomic de către regizori importanți precum Nae Caranfil și Cristian Mungiu, respectiv este evitată de prozatorii pregnanți ai perioadei. Trebuie să treacă un interval consistent de timp până când, în literatura română, emigrația ajunge să fie abordată prin formule narrative mai sofisticate decât cele senzaționaliste (adoptate de Grid Modorcea sau de Șerban Dinger). Numai că, așa cum demonstrează studiile recente ale Adriannei Stan,<sup>40</sup> nici când emigrația economică este explorată de romaniere și romancieri precum Radu Pavel Gheo, Dan Lungu, Liliana Corobca sau Radu Aldulescu, filonul „nouăzecist”, melodramatic, senzaționalist și tragicomic, nu este destabilizat hotărâtor.

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38. Pentru un istoric detaliat al originilor redefinirii moderne(iste) a râsului vezi Anca Pârvolescu, *Laughter. Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).

39. Vezi Andrei Terian, Daiana Gârdan, Cosmin Borza, David Morariu, Dragoș Varga, „Genurile romanului românesc în secolul al XIX-lea. O analiză cantitativă,” *Transilvania*, nr. 10 (2019): 17–28; Andrei Terian, Daiana Gârdan, Emanuel Modoc, Cosmin Borza, Dragoș Varga, Ovio Olaru, David Morariu, „Genurile romanului românesc (1901–1932). O analiză cantitativă,” *Transilvania*, nr. 10 (2020): 53–64. Vezi, de asemenea, studiul sintetic al lui Mihai Iovănel, „Popular Genres: Science Fiction and Fantasy, Detective Novel, Thriller,” *Dacoromania litteraria*, nr. 7 (2020): 137–153.

40. Stan, „Motherlands in Europe,” Stan, „On Your Own.”



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