

## REINVENTING THE ARCHIVE OF LITERARY HISTORY. THE ROLE OF BIOGRAPHICAL FICTIONS

In utterly contemporary historiographical research, following after the wave of poststructuralist theory, there are enduring methods whose limitations and functionality are symptomatically reassessed. The so-called “objective” method of archival documentation and the no-less-common opposite temptation of reinventing, of fictionalising, as it were, the past are topics debated both in the sphere of literary theory and in that pertaining to the theory of the theatre or the visual arts. Theoretical disputes have brought to the fore several concepts with significant interpretative potential, which can be squared with the current research methods, or may lead to the refinement or revalorisation of the older ones: authorship (“auctoriality”), (inter)subjectivity, theatricality, imagological and identitarian clichés, Quixotism [Bovarism], literary geography, comparatism, *aesthetic distance* and *distant reading*, metafiction, new historical fiction, incarnation, absorption, immersion. These are concepts whose interpretative or “interpreting” ability can always be verified, especially when they do not function independently of each other, but are complementary tools for analysis and aesthetic judgment.

In rethinking the concepts above, as well as the distinctions and complementarities between them, their validity or their entry into crisis, I shall resort to the interpretation of two metafictional texts that I consider to be genuine “theoretical objects”, namely two books written by the essayist and novelist Ion Iovan: the biographical essay *Mateiu Caragiale. Portretul unui dandy român* (*Mateiu Caragiale. The Portrait of a Romanian Dandy*, 2002) and the biographical-fictional novel *Ultimele însemnări ale lui Mateiu Caragiale însoțite de un inedit epistolar, precum și indexul ființelor, lucrurilor și întâmplărilor în prezentarea lui Ion Iovan* (*The Last Notes of Mateiu Caragiale Accompanied by an Unpublished Epistolary Novel, as Well as by an Index of Beings, Things and Events in the Presentation of Ion Iovan*, 2008).

In these texts authored by Ion Iovan, there are several layers of fictionalisation, as if this were a *mise en abîme* that is resumed in concentric circles of interpretation. On the various levels of signification pertaining to the fiction that Mateiu Caragiale *lived* in his own life and that has been reconstructed by Ion Iovan, one can detect, most of the times, phenomena of aestheticized self-creation, in the manner of Bovarism and Quixotism, but also of the Dandyism specific to Mateiu Caragiale. In fact, the projection of one’s self into an ideal of *the I* entails the Bovarism of a personality that is exemplary, heraldic, effigy-like, as the dandy Mateiu is concerned to build a destiny – and the word recurs symptomatically –

albeit not through writing. The continuous transformation of life into a work of art seems to him to be accomplishable not so much by living by chance, but by self-control, self-stylisation and self-exposure, like in a mirror, or in other words: by *living methodically*. A section of the “entry” from 9 January 1935 reads: “I am trying to erase from my mind the miserable positions they have assigned me to over the past couple of days. The position of a rural businessman, the position of Marica’s carrier, the position of a stepbrother – I shall forget them all. That’s how you get lost, ending up as a slave to piecemeal existence, leading your life from one position to another. Most of you are happy with this arrangement; you get accustomed to it, lumping your ages unawares. But I have another destiny, I hope I’ll escape. Tout dépend de la méthode” (p. 13). The narrator-character Mateiu Caragiale and author-character Iovan, with his avatar in the world of the book, that Ion Iovan inside his fictional world (portrayed in the *Ultimele însemnări...* by another character, the so-called illegitimate son of Mateiu, Jean Mathieu) are constructed by way of mutual mirroring. Specular recognition occurs not only through Bovaristic self-fictionalisation, but also through strategies of concurrent mythologisation and demythologisation, which are specific to literary history.

*The ideal archivist: the historian turned novelist*

In what way has the interpretation of archival texts changed “reality”, projecting it into fiction? Which are the authentic documents and which are the ones invented by Ion Iovan, the biographer and the novelist? Finally: to what extent are the data of literary history, Mateiu’s manuscripts, that is, fictionally processed? To what extent should we be interested in telling the document apart from its imaginary interpretation or reconstruction? All these questions are likely to draw attention to the method of historiographical documentation, to the reliability of the archiving operation and of the seemingly immovable heritage of some texts, as well to the fact that the selection entailed by compiling an archive is always already an act of interpretation on the part of the “archivist”.

For the historian and the theorist Hayden White, narrative imagination inevitably permeates any interpretation of documentary facts, the writing of history being predicated, like in the case of literary creations, on certain modes of emplotment and on recourse to several tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony)<sup>1</sup>. The objectivity and documentary transparency of literary history archives

---

<sup>1</sup> See Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 1973, pp. 29-30. On the idea of a specific historical situation being shaped by a historian, by building a specific plot, in order to grant a specific meaning to past events, see also Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact”, in *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1978, pp. 83-85. The sense of the past is thus reconstituted by the historian either under the aegis of

are nowadays considered fallacies of traditional historiographical research or, at most, conventions, which in this particular case appear to have been invoked only to be deconstructed. Poststructuralist scepticism towards the historiographical method leads not necessarily to the option for methodological relativism, but rather to the contemporary critical readjustments of the “old” archival methods: the deconstruction of the anachronistic perspective in traditional, “essentialist” historical approaches and their replacement with historicising, with the relativisation of “historical truth” and the value of phenomena, currents, literary works or personalities, depending on the socio-historical and ideological climate in which they appeared.

The essayist Ion Iovan undertakes an experiment of the “revival” type, which is half fiction, half-biographical criticism, a partial revival, that is of a particular outlook on the social and psychological condition of Mateiu Caragiale, caught in the net of family relationships, in his frustrating-conflicting relations with the Caragiale clan, as well as with his contemporaries in the social and literary life of the year 1935 and of early January 1936, the year of his death. Among the modes of the – narratological, cultural, mentality – construction of *authorial subjectivity*, what is essential in the biographical fictions of Ion Iovan is the metafictional relation between author and character. Thus, the fictional diary of *Ultimele însemnări...* becomes a novel that charts the construction of Mateiu Caragiale’s subjectivity through *en-staging*. Acknowledging that he is playing a self-imposed existential role, Mateiu Caragiale also senses, quasi-prophetically, the need to write a journal of the journal (which Ion Iovan will write, sensing, in turn, his character’s desire to be revealed), which will contain the cipher of his destiny, the key to the Mateian mystery: “That’s in my soul. I can’t help it if I appear in the eyes of some with the make-up of an Old Court rake. The book gives me a certain bearing, a serious mind, peculiar habits. When I’m on the Bridge, I try to get attuned to them, to pass like a leopard through the Bucharest herd; the insignificance is not at all unsuitable. This is a role I don’t dislike, but I can hardly take it inside the café, where there are no respectful herbivores rummaging like outside, only barking jackals. What do I mean by that? That without my private records, without a journal, I cannot be revealed, I cannot be understood. Without the journal of a journal in fact” (p. 137).

The Quixotic type of splitting or doubling that the “scriptor” undergoes usually implies either a rift, a rhetorical flaw between the creator and his fictional creatures (a classic case: Pirandello in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*), or the apparent overlap of the I that “speaks” over his fictional mask, his absorption –

---

the tragic or under that of the comic, according to the readers’ expectations, so much so that “what the historian brings to his consideration of the historical record is a notion of the *types* of configurations of events that can be recognised as stories by the audience for which he is writing”.

albeit partial and transient – into his own fictional world (for instance, the case of the Ionesco character in *Improvisation at Alma*, by Eugène Ionesco). Here, however, the dual visage of the novelist Iovan alias Mateiu passes through multiple successive metamorphoses, through reincarnations and role changes, all of these being reversible: Mateiu Caragiale the novelist becomes a quasi-fictional character and a journal author, while the novelist Iovan turns into an essayist, an archivist and a commentator of the Mateian entries, but also, in turn, becomes almost a character (whose existence is extra-quotidian, histrionic), on the border of fiction. The historicity of the postures adopted by the two authors turned characters, the fact that they are portrayed in the context of their time, in the context of the society and the mentality within which they write, grants Ion Iovan's books the characteristics of historiographical, and not merely biographical, fiction. They might be relevant for those hybrid species that are called today “new historical fictions” (or fictional histories) (Martha Tuck Rozett), or *historiographical metafiction* (Linda Hutcheon), of the kind of novels written by Robert Nye in the first person, yet featuring Shakespeare as a protagonist: *Mrs Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (1993) and *The Late Mr Shakespeare* (1998)<sup>2</sup>. Linda Hutcheon demonstrates, moreover, that the themes of the postmodern novel are often linked to the interaction between historiography and fiction, to the subjectivity involved in reflecting the past, as well as to the intertextual perspective and the ideological subtext of the narration of that past (Hutcheon 1988, 117). What the new historical novels have in common with the critical trend of New Historicism is a certain resistance to those “old certainties about what happened and why [and] a recognition of the subjectivity, the uncertainty, the multiplicity of ‘truths’ inherent in any accounts of past events”<sup>3</sup>. It is possible, I believe, to speak about overcoming the conceptual dichotomy *fictionalism/biographism*, as both are, after all, largely metaphorical concepts that can work in complementary manner, as “fictions” or as interpretative models with a heuristic value.

The distance necessary for surveying the social framework and the mind-set of the two eras (Romania in the 1930s and post-December Romanian of the 1990s-2000s), the historicised perspective upon them – all these are achieved, in the writings of Ion Iovan, by way of a dual authorial subjectivity, which can be compared, to a point, to a “neutral mask” (in the sense proposed by Jacques

---

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the unconventional nature of these historical novels and for the relativised notion of historical truth, see the article of Sofía Muñoz Valdivieso, “Postmodern Recreations of the Renaissance. Robert Nye’s Fictional Biographies of William Shakespeare”, *SEDERI: Yearbook of the Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies*, N°. 15, 2005, pp. 43-62, consulted on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January, 2014, at [http://sederi.org/docs/yearbooks/15/15\\_3\\_munoz.pdf](http://sederi.org/docs/yearbooks/15/15_3_munoz.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Martha Tuck Rozett, *Constructing a World: Shakespeare’s England and the New Historical Fiction*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003, p. 2.

Lecoq<sup>4</sup>, that of a reference mask, a sort of neutral generic being). The author turned character or meta-character, Mateiu, comes to dwell within it. And Iovan is not, properly speaking, absorbed by Mateiu – I shall return to the concept of “absorption”; it is rather the case that Iovan assumes the position of a reflector, of a spectator within the text. An “archivist” of the Mateian type of imagination, he contemplates and allows himself to become impregnated by the Caragiale character, and he “grows” within his effigy. The apparent neutrality of the author who is in the position of a literary historian and pedantic archivist can be observed especially in the vast section of *Ultimele însemnări...* entitled *An Index of Beings, Things and Events*.

*Aesthetic distance, critical distance.*

*The host-subjectivity and the simili-character*

It is well known that subjectivity, as a constellation of psychological, narratological, anthropological, even ideological interpretations of the subject, and on the other hand, the complementary idea of authorship, targeting the subjectivity of the creator, of the demiurge artist, *auctorality*, that is, have been the subject of numerous theoretical debates on postmodernity – if we were to think only of the polemical theses regarding the “death” and then the resurrection of the author (Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and the poststructuralist takes on their thinking on American soil). Authorship has been, therefore – conceptually speaking, but also as regards its functionality in interpreting the various fields of artistic expression – in an uninterrupted crisis. It has been a much theorised cultural crisis, from the poststructuralist deconstruction of the notion of power (including authorial power) until today, at the beginning of the third millennium, in the era of debates on the new *posthuman condition*, on the dissemination of the former liberal humanist subjectivity in the multitude of informational agents and virtual avatars.

A new “death” of the author – the one following after the resurrection thereof in the cultural studies of the past decades – seems to loom large in theories on the extreme-contemporary epistemic paradigm, with the increasingly overwhelming affirmation of the idea of interactivity in artistic creation, of intermediality. It might be stated that the idea of authorship has been losing ground since the receiver’s emancipated status from a once largely passive position to that of an active director of the fictional world, which the author does not only behold from afar, but also enters, as an avatar, or as partner in its creation, modifying it

---

<sup>4</sup> See Jacques Lecoq (with Jean-Gabriel Carasso and Jean-Claude Lallias), *The Moving Body (Le Corps poétique)*. *Teaching Creative Theatre*. Translated by David Bradby, with a foreword by Simon McBurney, New York, Routledge, 2001, p. 36.

according to his own choices. The author seems to relinquish his privileged role, the “king’s” seat, to an infinitely multipliable lot including the agents of a techno-cultural creation, “spect-actors”, players, that is of receptors turned “actors”, creators.

However, in an actuality considered as postsubjective, posthuman, transartistic by some theorists of virtual techno-culture, as an actuality of art after the “death of art”, the intention of this paper is to reargue that within the sphere of aesthetic relations, the concepts of *subjectivity* and *distance* (between the receiving subject and the being of the artwork or the world of fiction) are still viable. The argument for the receiver maintaining a necessary critical distance relies on the finding (and the belief) that it is through this privileged *distance*, or through compliance with the convention of an *interval* between the I as a reader/ viewer/ spectator and the otherness of the work that aesthetic value is mainly found and perpetuated. It is thanks to the relationship that is forged between the one who gazes and the one who is gazed at (all in all, a Quixotic relationship, straddling the border between reality and representation) that aesthetic value or relevance, with its ethical-anthropological component, is foregrounded, particularly in an era marked by a genuine avalanche of extra-aesthetic – sociological, political, broadly cultural – interpretations. The aesthetic, therefore, arises rather in the distance (be it even a minimum distance, both spatial and intellectual or emotional) between me as a reader/viewer/spectator and the contemplated object or performance, in the consciousness of that distance and otherness, being less likely to emerge in the immersion of the interactive game.

In recent decades, not only reader-response theory, but also the perspectives of criticism of a psychoanalytical or feminist orientation, as well as gender and postcolonial studies have approached literature through the concept of identification. However, prior to reception theories, the modernist aesthetics of the early twentieth century saw identification as a type of immature, inferior experience, while emotional involvement was regarded as a reaction that was unrelated to aesthetic pleasure and to aesthetic conscience and judgment. In his famous book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (published decades ago, in 1961), Wayne C. Booth considers the somewhat paradoxical complexity of the concept of “aesthetic distance”. Booth notes the importance, for several modern authors (Ortega y Gasset, with his denial of the general public, Bertold Brecht, with his *Verfremdungseffekt*, the aesthetic theory of Theodor Adorno, among others), of rediscovering aesthetic distancing, “after an unrestrained binge of romantic emotionalism and literal realism”<sup>5</sup>. The modern work of art, understood most often in essentialist terms (as the embodiment of a universal essence, contemplated by a

---

<sup>5</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Second edition, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 121.

passive, abstract receiver, who would not react by virtue of his subjectivity, but by that of the objectified recognition of the artwork's timeless value), should avoid both the danger of over- distancing (an excessively distanced work may seem improbable, artificial) and that of the under-distancing (where the work seems too personal and cannot be experienced as an art form).

The problem of distance, which is both aesthetic and critical (called *distant reading*<sup>6</sup>). For example, by Franco Moretti, and considered a prerequisite of knowledge), can be interpreted in a nuanced manner, as I will show, through the complex notion of theatricality, both in the negative sense conferred to theatricality by Michael Fried and in positive, valorising sense proposed by Josette Féral, who acknowledges its surprising hermeneutical opening.

\*

Assuming the difficult task of reconstructing a portrait of the author of *The Old Court Rakes* – who was considered by Ion Negoițescu the most reactionary Romanian author – Ion Iovan starts by acknowledging the lacunary nature of the handwritten documents (the intimate journal, the agendas) of Mateiu Caragiale: “Almost all the handwritten material has disappeared. As if everyone and everything had rallied together”, as Ion Iovan writes in his quasi-fictional biography of *Mateiu Caragiale. The Portrait of a Romanian Dandy*, “to erase the memory of the living man Mateiu Caragiale, and leave before us an image whose features are blurred, a water colour sketch straying in the gallery of the vigorous and educational national ‘oils’.” The almost effaced visage of a man who built his own destiny with the vocation of a dandy, transfiguring his life aesthetically, is

---

<sup>6</sup> Polemical towards the idea of *close reading*, the literary historian and theorist Franco Moretti, a specialist in the novelistic genre, proposes in his essay *Conjectures on World Literature*, the concept of “distant reading”: “But the trouble with close reading (in all of its incarnations, from the new criticism to deconstruction) is that it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon. This may have become an unconscious and invisible premise by now, but it is an iron one nonetheless: you invest so much in individual texts *only* if you think that very few of them really matter. Otherwise, it doesn't make sense. And if you want to look beyond the canon (and of course, world literature will do so: it would be absurd if it didn't) close reading will not do it. It's not designed to do it, it's designed to do the opposite. At bottom, it's a theological exercise – very solemn treatment of very few texts taken seriously – whereas what we really need is a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let's learn how *not* to read them. Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat, *is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, Less is more. If we want to understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something. We always pay a price for theoretical knowledge: reality is infinitely rich; concepts are abstract, are poor. But it's precisely this ‘poverty’ that makes possible to handle them, and therefore to know. This is why less is actually more”. See Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature”, *New Left Review*, 2000, 1, consulted on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January, 2014, at <http://newleftreview.org/II/1/franco-moretti-conjectures-on-world-literature>.

paradoxically revived through an organic fictional-critical reconstruction, since it is written in the spirit of Mateian self-fiction.

In 1935 (a year before his death), the writer commits himself to drafting a monograph dedicated to Count Hoditz (a fascinating *alter ego* of Mateiu Caragiale's, regarded as the seigneur of a domain he keeps organizing and reorganizing, until it ultimately goes to ruin). Placing his life under the motto *Cave, age, tace*, the "natural" son of Ion Luca is committed to creating a projected ideal, artistic, aristocratic, exceptional self of noble extraction. Although he is paradoxically tempted to abandon his condition as a man of letters, one cannot deny that the author of *The Old Court Rakes* has an authenticity of self-fictionalisation. The *mise en abîme*, the problematization of identity as a sometimes agonistic relationship between a self built according to an ideal of aestheticized existence, specifically between the aestheticized and aestheticizing self, on the one hand, and the empirical, "natural" self, on the other hand, is entrenched in the very personality of Mateiu Caragiale. The artistically designed, dandy-esque personality<sup>7</sup> of the one who is a spectator and a critical performer of his own life is largely understood as the quotidian *en-staging* of a work of art.

Who is the one who creates himself? Hypostatized as the "I", the one living under a mask seems to be the narrator self of the character and the spectator inside Mateiu Caragiale, but also inside Ion Iovan, who undergoes a process of entry into a role, of "incarnating" the phantom of the character, as another *I* of his. Symptomatically, the discourse is in the first person, which is a mark of the *en-placement/replacement* of the author – a historian and an archivist – with the mask, the *persona* of Mateiu, of his incarnation in the textual body. Therefore, we can identify several selves, or narrative instances that mirror and contaminate each other. There is, first, the self-constructed "character" Mateiu, then the character that is reconstructed and imagined by Ion Iovan, the protagonist of this new historical and biographical fiction, as well as the phantasm of the "reality" of Mateiu's personality, as a benchmark, as a mirror of mythologised, successively constructed selves in the literary history up to Ion Iovan's oeuvre. The subtextual and supratextual dialogue actually takes place at the specular interface between Mateiu Caragiale and Ion Iovan (the latter being a kind of *twin* self for the former).

---

<sup>7</sup> For Adriana Babeți, Dandyism is placed in the lineage of the *fin de siècle* decadent sensitivity and is representative of the modern crisis of individualism; its key defining terms include: "hyperaestheticism, the cult of the form, individualism, narcissism, the antibourgeois spirit, extensive negativity, the taste for shock-like innovation, but also indifference, the stylization of living, a predilection for artificiality, effeminacy, devitalisation, the fascination with morbidity, agonising breath". See Adriana Babeți, *Dandysmul. O istorie [The Dandysme. A History]*, Iași, Polirom, 2004, p. 81.

The author turned character (Ion Iovan), then his protagonist, Mateiu Caragiale (fictionalised by becoming impregnated with fictional substance and atmosphere, in the manner of the Mateian rakes or of Aubrey de Vere), no less than Mateiu-Iovan, the supra-character who is a writer with a dual identity, and finally, the readers – “Mateianised” spectators – are caught up in loops of reciprocal self-mirroring, entailing the creation of specular intersubjective identities. The specularity of their personality pertains to the dichotomy, but sometimes also to the complementarity between the actor who has merged with the character, the director and the spectator of his own existential and narrative performance. What I referred to, using the words of Lecoq, as a neutral mask acquires – in the case of Mateiu Caragiale, the one fictionally reconstituted by Iovan – more ontological substance than the civil, quotidian self. And yet, it is not the same with the character incarnate, but merely a *host-subjectivity*, as it were, an almost-character, for now, a simili-character, a *becoming*. There is here a privileged condition of availability, the opening of the authorial self toward the fictional mask, towards his character from the “future” (from the future of writing that evokes a past of the history of literature). A “pre-expressive” condition (as the theatre anthropologist Eugenio Barba might call it), but which is specific to the character-writer, an interstitial, Quixotic condition.

The writer’s condition pertains, in other words, to an *ontology of the margin*, of the boundary between the fictional projection he aims to achieve, to incarnate in the text-body, and the character of his own creative, exceptional self, who presents himself to a real or virtual reader/spectator in his very Quixotic hovering astride the border. His existence *problematizes the border*, does not assume it unconditionally, nor does it reject or cross it in order to replace it with a proper immersion in the contemplated artistic universe. While participatory art, which is gaining more and more followers today, involves the well-nigh abandonment of authorship, a plea for maintaining the role of authorship, or of the authority belonging to the “host” type of writer may rely on the core argument that such a creator is open to the “transaction” with the subjectivity of the critic, reader and spectator. This transition is indeed similar to that which Gérard Genette identifies in the paratextual formulas, implying the crossing of a threshold to the receiver, but, I would add, it is a threshold that is also to be crossed by the fictional character, the “theatricalised” one, who is therefore open both to the author as a supra-character and to the reader.

*En-staging identity (cultural, community, emotional)  
and the author’s destiny/ role*

Archival research and the novelistic imagination intertwine in biographical fiction, in a continuous *docu-drama*. Its analysis may lead, if not to the development of new concepts, then at least to some conceptual nuances within the

sphere of the terminology and the interpretative tools found in today's reception theory.

The concept of *theatricality*, analysed outside any derogatory framework, acquires an interpretative function and may reveal the necessary and revelatory correlation, aesthetically speaking, between several forms of artistic expression (literary, pictorial, performative). It also refers to the ambiguity, the duality of the relationship between the actor (and/or author) and the spectator as a source of aesthetic pleasure. The art critic Michael Fried has analysed theatricality in antinomy with the concept of *absorption* in a text that has become famous given the long series of debates it has sparked since its publication: *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980). The theory on theatricality advanced by the modernist critic Michael Fried later occasioned the birth of rather diverse and contradictory perspectives on the work of art and its receptor. What is, very briefly, Fried's negative interpretation of theatricality as a concept and a phenomenon? In Michael Fried's view, an artwork must find its own "essence" by avoiding or refusing theatricality, so as to stay absorbed in itself, in the enclosed *fiction as reality* on the stage or between the frames, that is, in the illusion that there is no viewer/spectator.

The de-theatricalised viewer of a self-absorbed, self-sufficient work, as understood by Michael Fried in *Absorption and Theatricality...*, seems to be the absolute model of the proper receptor, true to his role. The passive-contemplative attitude of the receiver (viewer, reader, spectator) is, therefore, a condition related to the essentialist outlook on art. In the face of a seemingly self-sufficient artistic universe, the receiver experiences aesthetic pleasure from a distance, from a seemingly occult position, located beyond the temptation of any participation, outside the social horizon of the painting, novel or performance.

Two decades after Fried's theory of theatricality, the Canadian researcher Josette Féral highlighted the link between otherness – the spectator's and the actor's alike – and theatricality: "Thus the spectator's gaze is double: he sees in the actor both the subject that he is and the fiction that he incarnates (or the action he performs); he sees him as both master of himself and subject to the other within him. He sees not only what he says and what he does, but also what escapes him – what is said in himself and in spite of himself. The spectacle is the vehicle for all of this, and it is from this ultimate cleavage that one of the spectator's most profound pleasures arises. [...] When present together, all of the cleavages described above allow us to designate an event, object or action as theatrical. They are not only the bases of theatricality; they constitute it<sup>8</sup>".

---

<sup>8</sup> Josette Féral, "Foreword", *SubStance. A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism*. Guest editor: Josette Féral, Issues 98 & 99, Vol. 31, 2002, Nos. 2 & 3, pp. 3-13.

Being immune to any authoritarian, demiurgic claims, the presence of an authorial consciousness, be it floating (as found with Robert Nye, the author of a biographical fiction about Shakespeare, but also with the Mateian Ion Iovan) entails that the pleasure of reception will not be the somewhat narcissist one of full immersion in a virtual avatar or a fictional character. On the contrary, aesthetic pleasure arises largely from noting the movement of hovering astraddle the border, it derives from the “cleavages” (as Féral might put it) that are specific to theatricality: between the one who embodies and performs fiction, the writer-actor, and the character himself, between the authorial, histrionic subject, and the subject pertaining to the character’s being. The author’s desire for fictional otherness, followed by a specific “jouissance” (Barthes), occurs therefore at the border, on the boundary between the character’s fictionality and the reader’s alleged reality, through the theatricalisation that is inherent in the aesthetic distance and relationship.

For the histrionic dandy Mateiu Caragiale, the status as the successful author of *The Old Court Rakes* seems just a role that is willing to disavow, as such, and to abandon. Condescension and even contempt at “autorlâc” [authorship] will be transmitted, by retrospective imitation, to his bastard son, Jean Mathieu. The latter delivers a verdict in a letter to his friend A. de Jollivet: “An author: the man who swallows his life by sweetening it with his own conceit”. And yet, the very posture of an author who denies himself with a certain therapeutic cynicism is still a paradoxical form of reassessing subjectivity and the authorial condition. An authorship that has its own specific ontology, even if it is sometimes autonomous from creation itself.

The characters in *Ultimele însemnări* indulge in self-delusion, in their “projected” destiny, in aestheticising their lives. Their Quixotic vocation makes renders them unattached to the present, but anchored especially in a twofold, idealising opening towards the past and the future. They are in fact the unique Character, consisting of selves that mirror each other in time. As the alleged author of the diary, Matei, the character-narrator sees Romanianness at the beginning of the twentieth century through the lens of his Bovaristic, dandy-esque psychology, and the tribulations of his decadent and disillusioned subjectivity are taken over by Ion Iovan, the man from “Găești” or the “Cicerone”. Through the retro-prospective memory formula of “memories from the future”, Iovan-Mateiu eventually invokes the bastard son Jean Mathieu, the owner of the Mateian manuscripts. Through this last Caragiale, other historical contexts are revealed, and other perspectives are disclosed not only on Mateiu’s identity, but also on the collective identity of Romanianness and the various types of “moftangii” (finicks) from the period of the mineriads. A succession of hermeneutical lenses, alternatively mythologizing and demythologizing [demythologizing] historical reality, vacillates between the alleged objectivity of documentation on the past and the subjective experiences of rewritings in the present.

\*

The case of the “non-canonical” or non-canonisable Mateiu Caragiale, paradoxically canonised in the literary criticism of recent years (in 2000 *The Old Court Rakes* obtained a top position in the critics’ hierarchy) can be reinterpreted in the light of the debate on authority and authorship, on the mythologizing and demythologising incurred by this position of cultural authority. What is also symptomatic is what the character Jean Mathieu, the last bastard of the clan, deemed to be a “finicism” of *autorlâc*. Mateiu’s son (and the grandson of Ion Luca), the partly Romanian Frenchman Jean Mathieu sees the profession and condition of an author and, in particular, of a Romanian author, as an ungrateful role, which he declines, despite his literary propensity that is conspicuous in his epistolary exchange. This effigial flagellation pertains to an imagological perspective that is both classical and postmodern, to a dual canonical attitude on Romanianness and the myth of the national author, seen to be at odds with himself: either in the finical mirror of Ion Luca and his grandson Mathieu, or in the heraldic mirror of Mateiu Caragiale.

The interpretation of Ion Iovan’s biographical fiction can follow at least three levels of meaning construction in the text: that of the discursive strategies, of the projection and construction of subjectivity in the flow of the narrative; that of the fictional architecture, of the morphological hinges of the fictional world; and finally, that of the thematic level, in which the Caragialian canon does not appear to undercut itself, even if when is turned by Ion Iovan against himself: along the lines of Caragialism, he resumes the theme of self-flagellation for one whose identity is that of a “bastard” and a stateless man, an autochthonous “finick”, further endowed with a creator’s Bovaristic condition. Mateiu Caragiale’s bastard, Jean Mathieu Zilverstein, looks – at best with amused if not downright lashing contempt – down on some “scribblers”, local stars of the ‘90s, involuntarily imitating the aristocratic morgue of his father: “You have a foul reek, gentlemen! I feel like shouting at them. But no one minds me, they’re all full of themselves, satisfied that last night they wrote down a stanza, a stunning phrase for posterity. And now they’re mood of strangling one another. I’m stuck in a wasps’ nest, André, the nest of a swarm of agitated and crumpled scribblers; they don’t even bully me, at most one may look askance at my blue-grey suit with a white handkerchief in my pocket. I’ll teach these apes a lesson in this respect” (p. 538). Eventually, self-flagellation brings forth the tragic irony of Jean Mathieu the bastard’s recognition of the Caragiales’ “stateless vocation” and, by extension, of the Romanians in general.

Still, an interpretive narrative on *Ultimele însemnări* cannot ignore the metafictional tier the text allows glimpses of, thanks to the nuanced critical and essayistic vocation of the novelist Ion Iovan. In fact, the fictional biography of Mateiu becomes, I believe, in this regard, a “heraldic” text that explores, in exemplary manner, the dynamics of various perspectives upheld in literary theory

today, for reassessing the historiographical methods, the mechanisms of reception, and the enactment of the reversible, mutually reflective relationship between the subjectivity of the author-actor, of his fictional creature and that of the emancipated, theatricalised reader, the “spect-actor”. In other words, a self-sufficient hermeneutic object, which seems to lend itself to self-interpretation, somewhat like the Borgesian *Aleph* and *Pierre Menard*.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BABEȚI, Adriana, *Dandysmul. O istorie [The Dandysme. A History]*, Iași, Polirom, 2004.
- BOOTH, Wayne C., *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Second edition, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- FÉRAL, Josette, “Foreword”, *SubStance. A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism*, Guest editor Josette Féral, Issues 98 & 99, Vol. 31, 2002, Nos. 2 & 3.
- FRIED, Michael, *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, New edition, Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- HUTCHEON, Linda, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*, New York and London, Routledge, 1988.
- IOVAN, Ion, *Mateiu Caragiale. Portretul unui dandy român [Mateiu Caragiale. The Portrait of a Romanian Dandy]*, București, Compania, 2002.
- IOVAN, Ion, *Ultimele însemnări ale lui Mateiu Caragiale însoțite de un inedit epistolar, precum și indexul ființelor, lucrurilor și întâmplărilor în prezentarea lui Ion Iovan [The Last Notes of Mateiu Caragiale Accompanied by an Unpublished Epistolary Novel, as Well as by an Index of Being, Things and Events in the Presentation of Ion Iovan]*, București, Curtea Veche Publishing, 2009.
- LECOQ, Jacques (with Jean-Gabriel Carasso and Jean-Claude Lallias), *The Moving Body (Le Corps poétique). Teaching Creative Theatre*. Translated by David Bradby, with a foreword by Simon McBurney, New York, Routledge, 2001.
- MORETTI, Franco, “Conjectures on World Literature”, *New Left Review*, 2000, 1. <http://newleftreview.org/II/1/franco-moretti-conjectures-on-world-literature>
- ROZETT, Martha Tuck *Constructing a World: Shakespeare's England and the New Historical Fiction*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003.
- VALDIVIESO, Sofía Muñoz “Postmodern Recreations of the Renaissance: Robert Nye's Fictional Biographies of William Shakespeare”, *SEDERI. Yearbook of the Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies*, 2005, N°. 15.
- WHITE, Hayden, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 1973.
- WHITE, Hayden, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1978.

REINVENTING THE ARCHIVE OF LITERARY HISTORY .  
THE ROLE OF BIOGRAPHICAL FICTIONS

(Abstract)

The so-called “objective” method of archival documentation and the no-less-common opposite temptation of reinventing, of fictionalising, as it were, the past are topics debated both in the sphere of literary theory and in that pertaining to the theory of the theatre or the visual arts. Theoretical disputes have brought to the fore several concepts with significant interpretative potential, which can be squared with the current research methods, or may lead to the refinement or revalorisation of the older ones: authorship (“auctoriality”), (inter)subjectivity, theatricality, imagological and identitarian clichés, comparatism, *aesthetic distance* and *distant reading*, metafiction, new historical fiction, incarnation, absorption, immersion. These are concepts whose interpretative or “interpreting” ability can always be verified, especially when they do not function independently of each other, but are complementary tools for analysis and aesthetic judgment. The study aims to reconsider the concepts above, the distinctions and complementarities between them, their validity or their entry into crisis, by resorting to the interpretation of two metafictional texts that I consider to be genuine “theoretical objects”, namely two books written by the essayist and novelist Ion Iovan: the biographical essay *Mateiu Caragiale. Portretul unui dandy român* [*Mateiu Caragiale. The Portrait of a Romanian Dandy*], 2002 and the biographical-fictional novel *Ultimele însemnări ale lui Mateiu Caragiale însoțite de un inedit epistolar, precum și indexul ființelor, lucrurilor și întâmplărilor în prezentarea lui Ion Iovan* [*The Last Notes of Mateiu Caragiale Accompanied by an Unpublished Epistolary Novel, as Well as by an Index of Beings, Things and Events in the Presentation of Ion Iovan*], 2008.

*Keywords:* authorship, aesthetic distance, theatricality, biographical fiction, metafiction.

REINVENTAREA ARHIVEI ISTORIEI LITERARE.  
ROLUL FICȚIUNILOR BIOGRAFICE

(Rezumat)

Metoda documentării arhivistice, așa-zis „obiectivă”, dar nu mai puțin frecvența tentație opusă, cea a reinventării, a ficționalizării, aproape, a trecutului, sunt subiecte dezbătute atât în sfera teoriei literaturii, cât și a teoriei artei. Disputele teoretice aduc în scenă câteva concepte cu un semnificativ potențial interpretativ, care pot fi puse în acord cu metodele actuale de cercetare, sau pot conduce la redimensionarea celor vechi: auctorialitate, (inter)subiectivitate, teatralitate, ficțiune biografică, metaficțiune, noua ficțiune istorică, clișeu imagologic și identitar, *distanță estetică* și *distanță a lecturii critice* (*distant reading*), absorbție, imersiune. Sunt concepte cărora li se poate verifica, mereu, capacitatea interpretativă, sau „interpretantă”, mai ales atunci când ele nu funcționează independent unele de altele, ci devin instrumente complementare de analiză și de judecată estetică. Studiul își propune o reconsiderare a conceptelor de mai sus, a distincțiilor sau a complementarității dintre ele, a validității sau a intrării lor în criză, recurgând la interpretarea a două texte metafictionale, și anume două dintre cărțile eseistului și romancierului Ion Iovan: eseul biografic *Mateiu Caragiale. Portretul unui dandy român*, 2002, și romanul biografico-ficțional *Ultimele însemnări ale lui Mateiu Caragiale însoțite de un inedit epistolar, precum și indexul ființelor, lucrurilor și întâmplărilor în prezentarea lui Ion Iovan*, 2008.

*Cuvinte-cheie:* auctorialitate, *distanță estetică*, teatralitate, ficțiune biografică, metaficțiune.