

THE DIALOGUE OF THE EPISTOLARY WITH LITERATURE (THE MATEIU CARAGIALE – N. A. BOICESCU CASE)

Diana VRABIE¹

¹Asoc. Prof. PhD, Faculty of Letters, "Alec Russo" University of Bălți, Republic of Moldova
Corresponding author: dianavrus@gmail.com

Abstract

The suite of letters that involves Mateiu Caragiale is composed exclusively of messages sent by him and preserved by his correspondents, while nothing of what had been addressed to him is to be found in well-known collections. The letters of Mateiu Caragiale are nearly the only handwritten writings preserved. One cannot pretend a nuanced understanding of a correspondence if ignoring the subterranean communication between author and his creation, between him and the social context in which he used to live, between the author and his inner universe or even his existential condition. At the same time, these relations should be understood in their complete subtleness, making reference to writer's biography, as well as to the realization of his work.

Keywords: *correspondence, epistolary convention, epistolary literature, bovarism, non-literary boundary*

If diaries, memoirs, autobiographies have quitted the field of paraliterature, being accepted, in the last decades, due to the increased attention received from the part of literary critics, correspondence has yet to face numerous prejudices. Partially, the fault lies with some correspondences that compromised the genre, and partially with reluctance, which is increasingly dwelling on a "border" species like this, as well as with theorists' ambiguities that hinder precise boundaries between *correspondence* and *epistolary literature*, *private correspondence* and *public, documentary correspondence* and *epistolary convention*, etc. Numerous problems still remain open, waiting for settlement, such as the morality of publishing and commenting private correspondence of individuals who never intended to publicly exhibit the intimate details of their life, the fluctuating boundary between literary and non-literary, the type of communication matrix to which it should belong, etc.

Starting from these ascertainments, we dwelled on the correspondence of Mateiu Caragiale to Nicolae A. Boicescu. Apart from the utilitarian character, the goal and special purpose, their epistolary dialogue freely interacts with literature, highlighting the above-mentioned problems of interpretation.

The suite of letters that involves Mateiu Caragiale is composed exclusively of letters sent by him and preserved by his correspondents, as nothing that had been addressed to him could be found in other collections. Being original documents, they confirm the authenticity of the printed version in any context, unlike *the Diary* and the texts of *the Agenda*.

The letters of Mateiu Caragiale (stored in the Romanian Literature Museum archives, in the collections of the Library of the Academy or in Saint-George's Fund of the National Library) are nearly the only handwritten writings preserved. All other important texts, including purely literary manuscripts, have disappeared. The present study is mainly devoted to the epistolary dialogue of the writer with N. A. Boicescu.

In what lies the genuine interest for this alleged correspondence of manifestly literary significance? Could one discover from here, indeed, his inner being, who always posed as dandy, fully assigning to non-conformism, isolating himself in detachment and arrogance, becoming the most bizarre personality of the interwar Bucharest? Shall we discover his real personality under the apparent superficiality of a man who, by his showing-off conduct, tried to suggest his nobility, playing the role of a genuine aristocrate?

In order to avoid possible methodological errors of numerous exegetes (among them, Ov. Cotruș¹, one of the first commentators of Mateiu Caragiale's correspondence), we shall not resort to the "work-to-author" approach for his correspondence, an error opposed to biographism, yet equally severe, preferring the "author-to-work" vector. This option is justified by the fact that, in the case of great artists, leaving aside the biographical person from the literary text per se will trigger capturing the essence. One cannot pretend a nuanced understanding of a correspondence if ignoring the subterranean communication between author and his creation, between him and the social context in which he lived, between the author and his inner universe or even his existential condition. At the same time, these relations should be understood in their complete subtleness, making reference to writer's biography as well as to his creation.

Nevertheless, the letters must be treated with certain circumspection, once known that an epistle reflects one's inner life in a manner adjusted to the nature and character of the interlocutor. It is therefore very much possible that, when addressing his former colleague, Mateiu Caragiale, by acts of bravery specific to youth (both interlocutors were 22 year-old at the time of their correspondence), was trying to impose himself in a Bovarian way. More than that, the young Caragiale considered himself an expert in mundane socializing, thus gradually transforming his letters into a skillful code of thruster seduction.

Dissatisfied with the reality of his own social condition, constantly in a state of discontent and self-delusionment, Mateiu never ceases to create a fictitious personality of himself, mimicking the behavior of some characters. It is not critical that he plays the part of some character (how many at his age did not lend themselves to such trap?), more critical is that the actor starts to "believe" in his role at some point, identifying himself with his character, which leads to self-alienation; there occurs a falsification of gestures and feelings, Mateiu indulging himself in impersonating one or another. Beyond this teenage foamy rhetoric, the letters reveal the forms that the real self-cohabitation with the imaginary undertakes.

Obviously, a correspondence becomes literary when it comes to transgress the strictly biographical description, reaching artistic creativity, which is identifiable in the correspondence of the two friends. In other words, hardly detached from its natural context, a letter, by its ability to design an imaginary universe, may become literature, generating a different context. The intentional lack of information assures access to the statute of a literary text, although it remains only a first premise, the epistolary dialogue remaining to certify its literary value.

Overwhelmed by the modern disease of civilization, the bovarism, Mateiu will oscillate between the drama of the vital instinct and the attempt at remaining himself. The bovaric hypostasis in which Mateiu is situated derives from the conflict between the imaginary situations in which he sees himself as a gallant conqueror, living in a fashionable hotel, with stylish valets, strolling in luxury cars, and the actual mediocre existence, dependent on the annuity sent by his father. In this world of coveted illusions, Mateiu Caragiale lives "the novel" kneaded from life intermingled with fiction. All his dandyish experiences are mediated bookishly, by appealing to their creative potential, to his own readings and to the fiction that invades his life. These issues approach his epistolary to literature, merging them into an intimate symbiosis and transforming the author in a witness, a character, a director in everyday life and in "the absolute".

The dialogue of the epistolary with literature is proved in the perfect way in this exchange of correspondence, which appears as the reception room of the future novelist. An essential part of the topics of his prose is rooted here; still, here, the author specifies his literary intentions, along with the mundane ones, in a close dialectic relationship. Thus, in a letter dated January 16, 1907, we find out that the writer conceived a "vicious" novel: "While I was confined to bed, I wrote a modern novel, palpitating and vicious in a French manner. When I find funds, I will publish it"². These lines are the more precious as they represent the first reference to his profession as a writer. The statement is made somewhat

expeditiously, as if saying that Mateiu did not put much value on his "vicious" novel that was designed, we suspect, on the block of the novels of the decadent era. Another time he testifies that work on his novel is "en train de faire": "I spend my time sleeping, eating and reading, cold paralyzes me, I cannot get out. From time to time I add a page to my novel³." In a letter dated January, 9, 1907, Mateiu clearly suggests that the novel could serve approximation to Zimcutza, but does not provide data on the stage of its development: "I'll try to be introduced to him (which is difficult), he is a strange being and I will dwell in making him publish the novel that will be ready then"⁴. The novel appears here rather as an advertising pretext for its social ascension, notoriety acquisition awe and Donjuanic development. In the same way can be explained the fact that he sees only the novel packaging ("We will edit it with our portraits on Japanese paper") and even less the ideational bone, even though he would like to sew "delicately" on the canvas of decadent vices. Projection of the latent novel results both from the author's statements regarding the conception of fiction writings, but, moreover, from his interest in scenic environments and their specific language. Constantin Trandafir⁵ launched a hypothesis that the novels invoked by Mateiu have made the first impulse for *Craii...*, a supposition, however, with no sufficient argumentation.

We do not know whether the novel finally got its expected contour, still we certainly know that, during the same period, Mateiu started writing verses. The cycle *Pajere*, the lyrical debut of the poet, will include verses written between 1904 and 1914, his first and only attempt of this kind. In his battle with mediocrity that violates life, he purchases books: "In fact, I stay at home. I have been only three times at Mircea Demetriad's to make provisions of books"⁶.

Also, apart from the teachings in love matters addressed to his friend, he does not hesitate to make some reading suggestions: "You should buy *Gräfliches Taschenbuch* that is very interesting, you will read amazing things"⁷, or to share his own readings: "in order to not disappear, I've got a volume to read, these are the poems of François Coppée"⁸.

Mateiu lives in the shadow of literary models, constantly relating himself to them: "I have written so much because you are my only confident (just like Mortimer and Bourgelon in the novel of Jean Lorrain)⁹. His whole life is mediated in a Romanesque way, by means of Balsacian novels or by those of the remote XVIII th century, for which Manon Lescaut was the headliner. Often, he fancies himself as part of the novel, the term being used for the scandalous story, which he found out from his friends: "He told me a whole novel with Hinmay, Greffulhe, how rich, how magnificent and wasteful they are, Greffulhe in particular"¹⁰. The people he meets in his frivolous escapes appear to him as personages detached from the veil of fiction: "This being is an enigma, a personage from a novel, but I have my scopes"¹¹. Another time, Mateiu compares one of Boicescu's lovers, a certain Rolande, with the main character of Paul Hervieu, *l'Armature* (1985), Maria-Blanche de Grommelaire.

Obviously, his correspondence has style; it is designed with nerve and irrigates the fabrics of the future novelist. For Mateiu Caragiale, Bucharest is a "cursed city", his head is "an inferno, a locomotive", etc. As for his observations on life, they are also formulated in a poetic manner: "The road is long, life is short, and a life without pleasures is a long and sad preparation for the supreme exam of death."¹² We could foresee at this point the quality of acute observation intertwined with acid humor. The search for "proper words" will prove essential to his prose. Moreover, through the verbal masquerades in his letters, Mateiu prepares himself for the future verbal virtuosity of his heroes in *Craii...* Atrocious vulgarisms with specific idiolects, as well as picturesque linguistic blends announce *Pirgu*. The novel will equally soak mundane rubrics, scandalous chronicles, the backstage of crepuscular aristocracy, etc. Even the faces of adventurers of the caste of Costăkel Sturdza, Vlădoianu, announce the future Mateine philanderers detached from aesthetic decadence. To Gore Pirgu he will cede his own ambitious energeticism.

Exploration of different stylistic registers shows, in fact, the feverish search of his own style. The author insists on neologisms, poorly motivated, or gives a French version to language

by decalques, sometimes even taking over French words and phrases directly from the source language, hybridizing it, whose expressiveness is derived from the clash of contrasting registers.

Mateiu Caragiale contours his style from the option of paradoxical alternation of subtle Gallicisms clothed in the picturesque argot, with the romance clichés or the indigenous words. Vulgarisms alternate with sensitive mediation, colloquialism with precious expression, the argot with neologisms with pretence, all merging into a confusing cavalcade. In the name of a blazon invoked by the writer who pretended to be a pure-blood aristocrat, Mateiu Caragiale uses the language of decadent aristocracy, interested in taking advantage of the opportunities of this fashionable world in a lively French-Romanian jargon. Exaggerating the capitalization of undigested Gallicisms, of savorous colloquialism, the forced local slang that comes in flagrant contradiction with the elevated forms of the noble code shows that the author assumes a kitsch-like attitude.

Ultimately, the charm of this unusual correspondence lies in the coquettish dialogue with literature. The letters represent the working site and antechamber of *Craii...*, for the creation of which the author puts pledge his own life played in the proscenium of this work.

Endnotes

1. Cotruș, Ovidiu, *Opera lui Mateiu Caragiale*, București, Editura Minerva, 1977
2. Caragiale, Mateiu, *Opere*, prefață de Eugen Simion, București, Univers Enciclopedic, 2001, p.513.
3. Ibidem, p. 529.
4. Ibidem, p. 525.
5. Trandafir, Constantin, *Mateiu Caragiale*, București, Editura Recif, 1996, p.17.
6. Caragiale, Mateiu, op. cit., p. 524.
7. Ibidem, p. 515.
8. Ibidem, p.544.
9. Ibidem, p. 555.
10. Ibidem, p. 535.
11. Ibidem, p. 536.
12. Ibidem, p. 521.