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

Citation suggestion: Olaru, Ovio. "Satire Meets Critical Realism in the European Semiperiphery: A Study on Ibsen and Caragiale" *Transilvania*, no. 05 (2024): 32-41.
https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2024.05.04.

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.[1]

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.[2] 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.[3] 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.

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[4] 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][5] (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."[6] 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,[7] 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 şi 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."[8]

Whereas Ibsen "puts things up for debate," as Georg Brandes articulated the ambitions of the so-called "modern breakthrough" of Scandinavian literature,[9] 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"[10] 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.[11]

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.[12]

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 19th 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* (Iaşi: 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."[13]

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,"[14] 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!"[15] 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."[16]

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,"[17] 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."[18] 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.[19] 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.[20] 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"[21] 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,[22] 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.[23] 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 encapsuled 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."[24] 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,[25] his wife Zoe Trahanache, and his friend Ștefan Tipătescu, the county prefect. The action takes places 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,[26] 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

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,[27] 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."[28]

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 house hold" 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."[29] 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 ..."[30] 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.[31] 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."[32] 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[33]. In this sense, it represents an inverted Ständeklausel—the abolition of which gave us the *bürgerliches Trauerspiel,* the bourgeois tragedy[34]—, whereby *only the peasantry* can portray the tragic. Furthermore, it is the only play where he shows any kind of sympathy towards his characters.[35] 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.[36] 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 Schößler, *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 conştiința contemporanilor săi,* ed. Rodica Florea and Stancu Ilin, 157-166 (Bucharest: Minerva, 1990), 158.

reformulating the Aristotelian principle,[37] 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.*[38]

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'."[39] 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."[40] Instead, he is known for his "German" way of understanding theatre, since he "published *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* rather than submitting them for performance."[41] 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[42], 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[43]. 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—[44] creates a stable

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

38. Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, *Neoiobăgia: 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."[45] 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.

Acknowledgement: This work was funded by the EU's NextGenerationEU instrument through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of Romania – Pillar III-C9-I8, managed by the Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalization, within the project entitled *Measuring Tragedy: Geographical Diffusion, Comparative Morphology, and Computational Analysis of European Tragic Form (METRA)*, contract no. 760249/28.12.2023, code CF 163/31.07.2023.

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