Agârbiceanu and the Devil

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Cette étude analyse un très intéressant paradoxe de «Păscălierul» d'Agârbiceanu, qui réside dans le fait que, pendant qu'une hypostase de l'auteur abstrait lutte contre l'idée de Diable fabuleux, en montrant pourtant des manifestations de l'homme diabolique, une autre hypostase de l'auteur abstrait, derrière laquelle on peut distinguer la voix du prêtre orthodoxe oriental, construit une forte cohérence structurale, en opposition avec la première, dans laquelle le Diable, dans un sens religieux-irrationnel, n'est pas caché soigneusement dans le monde de l'œuvre littéraire mais mis au premier plan. Comme d'habitude, ce qui se trouve sous les yeux de tout le monde s'avère le plus difficile à observer.

Mots-clés: littérature roumaine, Ion Agârbiceanu, diable, symbolisme

At a first glimpse, we find no devils, in the fabulous-irrational sense, in the whole literary work of the Transylvanian writer and the penetrating essay of Cornel Regman, *Agârbiceanu and the demons*, convinces us of this fact. Fighting against the *fabulous Devil*, Agârbiceanu's writings seem to offer a large perspective over the manifestations of the *diabolic man*. That is why, when the local traditional representations of the Devil are evoked by characters in order to make conceivable whatever Evil they might face, a mental reflex of the Romanian peasant, *the wake conscience of the text* – a figure of the moralist who Agârbiceanu himself is – interferes promptly with the weapons of irony to mock at, and thus to annihilate, the fabulous coherence which is about to arise. However, despite all efforts made by the *Aufklärer*, expression by which Cornel Regman names this instance of the text, the general feeling that springs out of Agârbiceanu's works is that the Devil, *the Stranger* invited at first only to be chased away with laughter, refuses to leave and even if that fabulous coherence will never succeed to coagulate itself convincingly, it ends up by seriously damaging the realist horizon, dominant in Agârbiceanu's works.

In this study we intend to discuss a most interesting case where we think we can talk about a Devil-figure, in the irrational sense: *Păscălierul*. This character constitutes an exception in Agârbiceanu's work and although its image coagulates as a failure of the *Aufklärer* and despite its control, it, paradoxically, represents a success of Ion Agârbiceanu *himself*. The *Aufklärer*, in charge with the control of the moral dimension of the work, which can be identified also in *Păscălierul*, as well as in most of his works, can be considered a hypostasis of the *abstract author* (Jaap Lintvelt), and its agenda is given by two tendencies: 1. *the disenchantment of*

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the world and 2. *the actualisation of the moralizing function*. Usually, when this *instance of control* fails to achieve its purpose, and it fails in all the cases in which the suggestions of the work go beyond this moralizing intention, or, even worse, introduce the *moral ambiguity* or *the nuance*, a real "Trojan horse in the city" (Cornel Regman), this failure means aesthetic success. In the case of *Păscălierul*, by far Agarbiceanu's best literary work, the *Aufklärer* would fail to fulfil his task, but this time something different happens: beyond the fact that his failure equals aesthetic profit, the work remains an achievement of *another* abstract author, deeper than the *Aufklärer*: an instance which shapes more honest, in a existential perspective, the worldview of *Agârbiceanu – the eastern orthodox priest*.

Cornel Regman formulates with outmost accuracy the principle of the main character in *Păscălierul*: „propriu-zis, el e creaţia paradoxală a unei vocaţii candid-titanice pentru impostură şi drăcărie"[1]. Practically, from the moment he enters the stage and till the moment of the burning of the book, Constandin Pleşa, *the priest*, cheats everybody, except his wife, the only character who has access to the real motivation of Pleşa's actions. The dynamic of the character is entirely subordinated to *deceit* and the whole lie is structured in two privileged forms: 1. the representation of the Devil as vanishing from a "possessed" man (the case of all exorcisms) and 2. the "construction" of God's point of view in relation to the miseries of the naïve peasants (the case of the "opening of the book" divination practice) – both actions being "performances set on stage" under Pleşa's careful direction. From the observations of the narrative instance we know that the "priest" displays a laic-pragmatic attitude towards the Holy Liturgy, and in what concerns the fearful exorcisms of Saint Vasilios the Great, *Father* Costandin Pleşa betrays a temperamental affinity, because this character is, like the rest of Agârbiceanu's priests, "hot blood", young, strong, passionate, fiery nature, hopelessly dominated by too powerful instincts. Constantly unmasking the imposture of Pleşa, the *Aufklärer* spends his energy in the effort of organizing the scenarios which place the priest in a ridicule position, *demystifying* his actions and mocking at the nativity of the peasants. When Cornel Regman entitles his analysis of this short story "Păscălierul, diavolul burlesc" (*Pascalierul, The Burlesque Devil*), the critic undoubtedly refers to the comic of the „mise en scene" itself, to the scenes which display the preparations of the children who were to embody the Devil in the "drama of exorcisms" and so on, because *the Devil*, in the irrational sense, is not in his attention. However, the *Aufklärer*'s agenda loses sight of a detail of critical importance – without noticing, he begins to act against *the other abstract author*: together with the mocking at Pleşa and his gestures (that is the drama of actualizing the Devil in "flesh and blood" through the play of the cat and that of the children dressed in black and the counterfeiting of the divine answer to the specific problems of the peasants), the result is the annihilation not only of the impostor priest, but also the belief in Devil itself is thrown into crisis, and, together with

[1] Cornel Regman, *Agârbiceanu şi demonii*, Paralela 45, Bucureşti, 2001, p. 108.

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that, the belief in God. The whole supernatural dimension is touched by ricochet. Or, the destruction of the entire transcendent horizon could not have been on Agârbiceanu's black list. However, from the very beginning, another reading coherence is built up discretely, polemic to the one controlled by the *Aufklärer*, a coherence which, sensing his error, begins to work against him, constructing with power another structural coherence: one according to which the Devil himself is in the world of the short story, in "flesh and blood", not hidden, but at the surface, in foreground. But, as always, what is under everybody's eyes is the most difficult thing to notice.

Quite often Nastasia, the priest's wife, asks her husband for clarifications over his behavior and he offers her long and generous explanations. Many pages are spent with this explicative intention. In this way, the reader has the chance to understand the protagonist's most original conceptions about God and Christian faith. The space allocated by Agârbiceanu to this dimension of his work proves that he did not abandon his character to the level of simple buffoonery, for there is a sort of an expectation, implicitly confessed, in all energy spent towards the construction of the priest's ideology. His theory is simple: what must be stimulated in man, at any costs and by all means, is "faith", since "without faith is impossible to please God". However, all miracles, the big ones (the exorcisms) and the small ones (the foretelling and all divinatory acts), are *da capo al fine* falsified and, consequently, the great promise of spiritual salvation is illusory. From this point of view, *Father* Constandin Pleşa is a figure of the deceiver *par excellence*.

Nastasia, the only witness to the whole imposture, instinctively denounces the hidden identity of the young priest, strengthening not the position of the *Aufklärer*, but the project controlled by *Agârbiceanu the priest*, as we named this hypostasis of *the other abstract author*. When she finds out that her husband's entire fast was only a simulacrum and that this lie is itself "theologically" grounded – „Aşadar, fii liniştită, nu învinui pe nimeni şi să-i mulţumim lui Dumnezeu că ne-a ajutat să ţinem postul... *A încerca, popă tânăr, să nu mănânci patru zile, însamnă a ispiti pe Dumnezeu*"[2] – she experiences not revolt, nor anger, but devastating fear: „Femeia se cruci (...) Nastasia îşi frânse mâinile (...) Nastasia se uită la bani, se gândi, părând a face socoteală în cap, apoi *deodată un gând limpede o săgetă şi ea sări de pe scaun speriată cu faţa schimbată*: «Acum ştiu că eşti un ticălos şi un mincinos! Nu eşti popă!»". Or: „omule, iar te-ai apucat de drăcării şi de păcălituri" (Agârbiceanu, 191-192). Or even more direct: „Nu eşti popă cum nu sunt eu călugăriţă. Eşti tot omul cel vechi, care te ţii de drăcii (...) Ai scornit poveşti! Eşti un scornitor de poveşti, cum ai fost întotdeauna!" (Agârbiceanu, 192). When Costandin Pleşa articulates the speeches which legitimate lie and imposture for the sake of a higher, spiritual good, she notices rapidly the fissures in his reasonings, the nuance forcings, and the heretical theological:

[2] Ion Agârbiceanu, *Nuvele*, postfaţă şi bibliografie de Constantin Cubleşan, Minerva, Bucureşti, 1985, p. 191. All quotations from Agârbiceanu will be taken from this edition.

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„Omule, bine am zis eu de atâtea ori, înainte de a te preoţi, că *tu eşti dracul gol*. Dar de eşti ghiavol, nu te mai apropia de Dumnezeu, că te-o bate! *Adică e şarlatanie toată treaba şi nimic alta*. Cartea ta nu plăteşte două parale! Şi, în şarlatania asta, eu să fac începutul să duc povara! Eu să-mi pierd sufletul!" (Agârbiceanu, 197, s.n.).

Or:

„*Întortocheat la minte te-am ştiut de când eşti*, Costandine! Cum n-o fi păcat când omul crede că tot ce ştii din cartea aceea ştii? Nu vezi minciuna ca un pietroi de moară?" (Agârbiceanu, 197, s.n.).

So Nastasia, a figure for the common peasant, has the sight that uncovers instinctively *the Unclean*. Although she may leave the impression that she lets herself convinced by Pleşa's discourses, she will never be truly convinced by the strange priest's theories, and if she keeps the secret and even play a part in the great imposture, she will do it in full awareness and for a large amount of money. Making the proper equivalences, her silence and complicity represent an expression of the old pact with the Devil.

On the level of the structural coherence controlled by the *Aufklärer*, the priest Costandin Pleşa is an atheist. If we ignored that all his efforts are directed towards the *unclean* accomplishment, then he would be the supporter of a *sui generis* therapy through image: by offering the poor peasants a visual representation of a material and vanishing Devil, the protagonist is convinced that he facilitates their salvation. He doesn't really believe in Devil, and neither in God, since all his gestures of counterfeiting the Christian miracle constitute just as many ways of invalidating Christianity. But from the other structural coherence's perspective, controlled by *Agârbiceanu the priest*, the Devil exists and is all the time in the foreground, in the person of *Father* Costandin Pleşa. Judging the facts from this point of view, his discourse is not just untrue, but one that alters the very terms of the Christian faith. Concerning exactly this gesture, Denis de Rougemont said, in his famous *The Devil's Share*, that this is the actual corruption and ruin of the truth's criteria themselves, the procedure by which the lie is installed in a word of the truth[3].

Let us have a closer look at Constandin Pleşa's theology. "Faith is something hard to achieve" retains the priest from the old monk, "and that is why we need…" – and there follows the whole suite of tricks, of plans to *set in stage the miraculous event*. Since only by faith salvation can be attained, the priest's lie, oriented towards the facilitation of the act of believing, seems to bear a higher meaning, of something done for the sake of the many. The major fissure from this argument is easy to see: *when the miracle is present, in front of one's eyes, faith is useless*. Through his game, the strange priest will never help the peasants to acquire more faith, but, from the very beginning takes away from them any chance of believing. Faith has meaning only in the absence of the miracle. The courage and the

[3] Denis de Rougemont, *Partea diavolului*, traducere de Mircea Ivănescu, Humanitas, Bucureşti, 2006, p. 59.

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difficulty of the act of believing consist in the mystical capacity of seeing beyond and against physical evidence. Costandin Pleşa, on the contrary, through the performances he offers, through the simulacrum of the miracle, aims exactly at providing something *to see*. That is why, from the Christian point of view, he embodies Evil in two perspectives: first, as he performs a parody of the divine gesture, and, secondly, because he takes away from the peasants the very possibility of being brought in the situation of believing.

This inducement of "faith" with the instruments of imposture, this therapy through lie and counterfeit image, justified in a candid manner through a suite of discourses, sets the protagonist in the company of the *Great Inquisitor*, from Ivan Karamazov's poem. Keeping all the proportions, we can say that the game played by these two is similar in some respects: the philosophy that the miracle's illusion must be built and kept, the necessity to ground the lie of salvation through the action of "setting on stage" the miracle, the simulation of God's point of view in consoling the trustful peasants, and, naturally, the betrayal of the religion whose apostles they themselves are. Of course, the dostoievskian hero is aesthetically and philosophically different, with larger horizons, abyssal and convincing, for the perspective he assumes without dissimulation and in full awareness: „noi nu suntem cu tine, ci cu el" (with the *Devil*, n.n.), „noi am acceptat oferta pe care tu ai refuzat-o"[4] (see the synoptic Gospels, the scene of Jesus' temptation). Agârbiceanu's hero does not possess such analytical resources and neither does he desire them. Everything is left confuse, equivoque, insinuating. The priest's Satanism is covered by his ecclesiastic language, by the popular man, without enemies, charming, by the way he carefully follows all the *church rules* – terrible twist of accent. His strategy lies in the sophisticated rhetoric, with doubtful syllogisms, mixing what is with what is not, absolute truths and debatable ones, elements of dogma and heresies, the final result being a puzzling construct, a hybrid, difficult to deny and, yet, impossible to accept without reserve.

This type of mixture, of right and wrong, of acceptable and inacceptable, is very well expressed in the narrative and stylistic representation of the priest's idea according to which a child should play the Devil's part:

„Nastasio! Noi, până ne va mai da Dumnezeu puteri, va trebui să nu ne lăsăm. Să avem mereu la casă un copil de trei-patru anişori, că *multă izbândă se face printr-un copil nevinovat*" (Agârbiceanu, 225, s.n.).

This phrase eloquently illustrates the perversity of the priest's thinking and, also, reflects with outmost accuracy what *de Rougemont* called "the actualization of a lie through a word of the truth". The way he places himself in a dependence relation to God, the manifestation of the need of a three-four years old child, the evocation of the comfortable proximity of a child's innocence are all brought together to euphemize an essentially diabolic request: that of turning a child into demon, by dressing him in black, attaching him horns and making him play the

[4] Fiodor Mihailovici Dostoievski, *Fraţii Karamazov*, traducere de Ovidiu Constantinescu şi Izabela Dumbravă, prefaţă de Albert Kovacs, Editura Leda, Bucureşti, p. 359-386.

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Devil's part in the drama of exorcism: „prăpădita de mâţă nu mai sare prin fereastră şi omul nu mai poate vedea pe dracul ieşind şi nu se mai tămăduieşte. Iar asta nu e bine. M-am gândit că în locul mâţei să slujească copilul nostru cel de trei anişori" (Agârciceanu, 223). With this gesture of the priest we witness an amplification of his demonism, or, better said, a more profound exteriorization of his *deceiver condition* and, simultaneous, an annihilation of every trace of common humanity, enlarging at its maximal extent the area of manifestation of the great lie. Instinctively, the priestess refuses, but, as always, she will let herself convinced. So, the child that grows up must be at a certain time replaced:

„Şi anii adeveriseră că şi popa a vorbit serios, şi că nici preoteasa nu s-a ferit de aşa bucurie şi noroc la casă. Şi astfel, când băieţaşul care începuse mai întâi să facă pe duhul necurat crescuse mărişor de a nu mai încăpea în hăinuţa cea neagră, veni altul la rând, şi după el altul, şi iarăşi altul. Aşa că diavolii nu se mai isprăveau. Şi Nastasia făcu de multe ori hăinuţe de şlaier când cele vechi se rupeau şi se vedea subt ele cămăşuţa albă" (Agârbiceanu, 225).

This phrase contains an ironic equivoque, because the happy family image, with many children, the atmosphere of harmony and prosperity coincides with the complete demonization of the priest's family. Nastasia engages in a pact with the Devil for the sake of fortune, actualizing thus a classical type, and the children begin to fulfill their mission with an ever increasing talent, playing the Devil with more and more liberty of improvisation: „În schimb, copilul se făcea tot mai isteţ. Nu se mulţumea să sară în patru labe şi să dispară ca fumul printre perdele. Ci învăţase să guiţe ca purceii, să behăie ca iezii, ori să cucurige când ţopăia după laviţă" (Agârbiceanu, 225).

If ideologically he resembles the *Great Inquisitor*, typologically Costandin Pleşa resembles two great impostors of Gogol's literary universe, *Hlestakov* and *Cicikov*, with which he shares some features: they are all strong impostors, capable to defend their position, naturally, through demonstrations with big fissures, through vulnerable sophisms, they are people of the world, pleasant, and big-mouthed. It is no surprise that Nicolai Vasilievici Gogol, a great religious conscience, had seen the shadow of the "naked Devil himself" behind such figures, the triviality without limits, the eternal mediocrity, which holds the world under its spell[5].

It is now obvoius that in Costandin Pleşa's figure Ion Agârbiceanu invested more than the idea of a comic impostor, as Cornel Regman believes. In order to get a better understanding of this figure we recall two interesting reflections of Victor Iliescu, who authored one of the most penetrating essays in Romanian culture about the idea of "diabolic" in an unfortunately still *cvasi*-unknown work – *Fenomenologia diabolicului* (*The Phenomenology of the Diabolic*). Victor Iliescu states that "*Diabolicul* este numele acelei instanţe de o răutate vicleană, care nu se lasă identificată ca atare. Această instanţă, paradoxal, prezintă mereu, sub o formă

[5] Dimitri Merejkovski, *Gogol şi Diavolul*, traducere, prefaţă, notă asupra ediţiei şi indice de Emil Iordache, Fides, Iaşi, 1996, p. 19-83.

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sau alta, *puţin bine*, suficient cât să producă un amestec neutralizator dintre bine şi rău. În combinaţia rezultată, binele nu are tăria de a copleşi răul, ci numai de a coexista cu el. Însă prin numita coexistenţă, Binele este mereu stânjenit, neavând un suflu, adică o relevanţă sub semnul Spiritului: stânjenit, dar nu negat de Diabolic, spre a nu trezi şi activa virtuţile Binelui[6]. We find this state of things, this cunning report well defined in the legitimizing discourses of the protagonist in *Păscălierul*. The second observation of Victor Iliescu concerns the dominant gesticulation of Costandin Pleşa: „Pot să spun că Esenţa Diabolicului rezidă aici în *a-face-să-fie*, dar fără să fie cu adevărat (ceea ce nu înseamnă însă că nu se vede), în a face să se ajungă nefiresc de repede (frizând în mod caricatural o „minune") tocmai la firescul unui Rău, cu urmările de rigoare" (Victor Iliescu, 22). This observation defines precisely the imposture of the priest, as he intends to skip the very difficulty of any act of religious faith, the fundamental religious text, through the *mise en scene* of the miracle. All the „dramatic representations" which he directs are nothing but caricatures of the divine acts.

Finally, we draw attention to an impersonal principle which activates within the priest. All his gestures and reflections have to do with the instauration of the great lie. He never doubts, he is never introspective, and never experiences a conscience crisis. All his actions (we recall that everywhere in Romanian literature, the representation of the Devil involves s stylistic of the verb) are powered by the vocation of the "opening of the book", by the essential and non-personal principle which dwells in him. His Satanism is symbolically figured also in the end of the short-story, in the scene of the burning of the book: „popa Costandin (...) a făcut un foc şi a ars cartea cea groasă, foaie cu foaie. Mai mărturisea ea că a văzut focul şi că diavoli mulţi se împleteau în flăcări, se zvârcoleau şi porneau apoi săgeată în văzduh. Şi mai spunea că, cu groaza în oase, s-a uitat la foc până la sfârşit, şi că la urmă, după ce n-a mai rămas decât şperla, s-a pornit o volbură de vânt şi a împrăştiat în văzduh rămăşiţele, iar barba albă a popii toată se cănise de şperlă" (Agârbiceanu, 232). The darkening of his white, venerable, saint-like beard equals the symbolic revelation of his diabolic essence and signifies the removal of his human mask, in the familiar proximity of the demons.

We have seen so far two opposed reading coherences: one belonging to the *Aufklärer*, a demystifying perspective, which treated with irony not only the counterfeited fabulous horizon, but also, by ricochet, the general idea of transcendence, and the other one, belonging to *Agârbiceanu the priest*, which constructed, with the help of a theological intuition, an essential image of the Devil. How can this contradiction be explained: positivist, trivial vs. theological, serious? Our impression is that although we have a text abounding in burlesque comic, Ion Agârbiceanu wanted to communicate more than he usually did: *Păscălierul* thematizes the naivety of the popular belief in Devil and the common ignorance regarding the Devil in its essential and serious aspect. The laughter

[6] Victor Iliescu, *Fenomenologia diabolicului*, Eminescu, Bucureşti, 1995, p. 17.

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produced by the *Aufklärer* in this case is not a triumphant one, as in folklore, an expression of superiority over the poor popular Devil, but, on the contrary, is the perfect cover under which *The Unclean* is doing unbothered his work. Or, the penetrating sight of Agârbiceanu, the eastern orthodox priest, sees precisely this danger and provokes an unmasking of the biblical archenemy on the most essential level. For Ion Agârbiceanu, the theologian, all popular images of the Devil are just *masks*, modalities through which the Devil deceives; every stabile or well defined image of his is actually a victory of his: running away and laughing at a mask, the human person ignores the true face of the Devil and his metamorphoses. *Agârbiceanu the priest* feels this danger and, in the spirit of his vocation, which he had never hidden or silenced, needs to worn his readers in this problem. It is in this attitude that we see the source of the paradox of this text. The result, the Devil's unmasking, is one of the most interesting and serious attempts of the kind in the whole Romanian literature.

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