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THE DECLINE OF THE WORLD – AN EXPRESSIONIST THEME IN ION CARAION'S POETRY

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Abstract: *The present article identifies and examines a characteristic theme of German expressionism, the decline of the world, as it is embodied in the poetry of Ion Caraion, an important post-war Romanian poet. The direct literary historical influences are surpassed by striking resemblances of Caraion's poetic sensibility with that of the major expressionist poets, nurtured firstly by the same anguished climate of the war and secondly by a tormented inner poetical structure. This identity in terms of individualities makes them co-exist as expressionists beyond expressionism.*

Keywords: *expressionism, decline of the world, anguish, degenerescence, Romanian post-war poetry.*

From his very first volumes, *Panopticum*, 1943, *Omul profilat pe cer*, 1945, *Cântece negre*, 1947, Ion Caraion reached a climax of agonic poetical expression. A poet of a time crisis at first, Ion Caraion will become, through his contorted destiny, a poet of a permanent state of crisis. The specifics of his poetry, rooted in the configuration of his temperament were pointed out by Cornel Robu in his article on *Ion Caraion* from *Dic□ionarul Scriitorilor Români*: "But the somber obstinacy, the more brutal and tough accents, the fierce, gloomy and depressive mood, so definite for C. have their roots, of course, – beyond the agonizing, objective reality of war – in the structure of his character too. More sensitive to the tragic and ugly side of life, damned to perceive it only as a nightmare and an ordeal, he could afford neither sentimental laments, nor ironical trespassing, but will choose the tough, dark, sarcastic and desperate fight back, insisting on answering to violence with violence, to merciless action with no mercy." (DSR 474)

The apocalyptic visions from his first poems, born in the atmosphere of WWII, turn more acute and internalize. The condition of a witness and chronicler of the end of the world (perceived in the social poems from 1945) is slowly abandoned in favour of a much more dramatic one: he becomes the subject to be haunted by the daemonic side of reality in the volumes published after his liberation from prison, starting with 1969.

Ion Caraion will objectify his inner disasters, transforming the expressionist poetic theme of the decline of the world in a testimony of the agony and collapse of his inner world.

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The theme of the daemonic Creation can be identified in all Ion Caraion's poetic ages. It appears in his youth period as an echo of a specific war atmosphere, then of the prison experience and later on of the exile experience.

His youth poems are to be interpreted as continuing a major expressionist theme, now concomitant with the moment of their writing, namely the degenerescence and the illness of the world.

Creation in its materiality and totality is old and sick, with "hollows" and "wrinkles", tainted by an evil force who acts violently on the moral and physical sides of man, making impossible the simple living in the world: "Cinele la care ne-am oprit, ogoarele / ne-au sucit sufletele, ne-au secat picioarele." (*Antreul poemului)* The poet reaches from this very beginning the true theme of the expressionist work of art, pointed out by Thomas Harrison (1996) who sees expressionism as an artistic and existential answer given to an inner dissonance which begins to be acutely perceived in Europe, around 1910: "Recognizable in their lurid depiction of the nullifying dimensions of human existence, expressionist works do have their own subject after all: the psychological and metaphysical drama of mere dwelling in the world. And this dwelling is indelibly marked by the ecstasy and suffering of the body." (Harrison 14)

The maddening, a dominant state of mind in the first volumes, belongs not only to the inflicted subject, who does not find a place in Creation, but to the Creation itself, its radicalized manifestations aiming at its own destruction. It self-devours: "Sunt sigur că-n pământ copacii şi-au mâncat rădăcinile de ieri / de la prânz…" (*Motiv*) or commits suicide: "Oraşele reci / au intrat pe fereastră în biblioteci / şi până la ziuă au ars într-o ladă." (*Oxidare*) Even if there is a suggestion of a cultural avant-garde cliché, the extinction is not a pompous show, but a slow, secret and smouldering process. It echoes a striking feeling of desolation and inevitable.

Caraion's youth poems are summing up, at the surface, a predictable conglomerate of signs of an unavoidable decline: the degraded civilization to the point where it chooses to commit suicide; the conflict between nature and civilization; nature's hostility, its thoroughly malefic aspect; the dying transcendence, figured as a *deus otiosus* or *deus absconditus*. Towards the world reduced to a limited space, – a hospital, morgue or prison, – explored and displayed in its almost negative naturalistic side by Gottfried Benn or T. Arghezi, in Caraion's poetry both the matter and the spirit of the world are subjected to evil forces. This perception of an illness of the world radicalizes a specific expressionist conflict between nature and civilization.

Although its importance was minimized by the prior commentators (see Petroveanu 1974), the conflict exists and signifies the actuality of the vitality – extinction dichotomy, also a constant in expressionist lyrics. The stress on the negative item intensifies the dramatic of the crisis. Considering nature as the genuine force capable to restore the vitality and man's lost purity, as the place where the dialogue with transcendence takes place the poet admits, but only to deny almost immediately, the right and possibility of man's regeneration: "Ne-am falsificat viaţa ca o introducere în filozofie / şi nu rămâne decât un singur lucru interesant: / să părăsim odăile, pentru a deveni oameni…" (*Lucrurile de dimineaţă*)

Could have been *Omul profilat pe cer* the poem announcing the apparition of the expressionist New Man? There are lines in this poem that could plead for such an interpretation: "Printre pietrele muntelui, / printre ape, / omul profilat pe cer / cât aşteptările lumii crescuse, / cât noaptea, cât iarna de mare / şi tânăr ca gleznele ciutei. //

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Când mergea peste câmpuri, / jivinele şesului îi ascultau paşii – /erau siguri şi tari ca viaţa din arterele lui." (*Omul profilat pe cer*)

Created from world's substances but contaminated by an unhealthy blood of the earth, he is the ultimate product of a nature defined as death and putrefaction, therefore not able to admit regeneration: "Omul profilat pe cer venea din măruntaiele pământului cu căldură, / cu asasinate inedite, cu insule de cadavre plutind pe rezervoare / de păcură de la un sat la altul." (*Omul profilat pe cer*) His fate can not be other than death, announcing the death of civilisation and of the entire world. Not a messenger of the future, or messianic saviour, but an apocalyptic knight proclaiming its final end, is this giant: "– Dimineaţa ca o sârmă ghimpată / s-a oprit în pieptul omului profilat pe cer. // El se uita în pământ / – pământul semăna cu toamna – / şi nu mai vorbea nimeni. // Pe urmă, târziu, s-au auzit mitralierele în oraş…" (*Omul profilat pe cer*)

Historical events only hasten the end of this world, the war being for Ion Caraion, as formerly for Franz Marc, an inevitable consequence of the times before, a punishment given to mankind for its moral decay: "I object to man's lack of imagination, to hate war as war, when instead we should hate ourselves and the abscess in our souls. (…) Nothing is more right and natural for punishment than this war." (Marc 159)

If the poet grants only a few counterpoints to a nature no longer pure and fresh and chooses to represent it as dominated by corruption, the city is constantly the scope of his numerous diatribes. They are condensed in *Cangrenă*, a poem which investigates almost all the negative marks of the modern city, seen first as a place of youth's perdition, defined by sickness and poverty, being abhorrent and estranged, the true battlefront hiding the danger every day. It is also detached of spirituality, a space of ennui and death, forbidding the individual's right to salvation: "oraş în care murim / fără parabola intrării în Ierusalim" (*Cangrenă*) City's devastation is claimed even by its inhabitants, convinced by the alienation they have been subjected to in this space: "Dărâmaţi oraşul acesta, / în care nimic nu mai e sigur – / spuneau trecătorii, uitându-se în urmă." (*Omul profilat pe cer*) and terrified by the impossibility of the regeneration through natural elements: "Nici luna, nici câmpul, nici râul / nu-şi tremură grâul / prin tine / oraş-pământ, oraş-plictiseală, oraş-mărăcine" (*Cangrenă*) and the illness of natural rhythms: "Ploua cu stropi mari ca nişte viermi de argint" (*Cartierul din fotografie*)

The material and spiritual decline suffered by the inhabitant of the great city was foreseeable from the first volume, published in 1943. Through *Mahalale*, *Periferică*, *Cartierul din fotografie*, *Lucrurile de dimineaţă*, *Urbanism*, *Omul profilat pe cer* from 1945, Caraion provides only augmentations of the definitions given to the city in *Cangrenă* and its destiny foretold in *Oxidare*. The poverty and promiscuity of the outskirts, the well-known destinies of its humble inhabitants (merchants, maniac pensioners, carriers and their sad wives, already alcoholic children and depraved girls) all form a desolate image of a sickened humanity, trapped in a ghetto or in a faubourg without escape, already depicted in Ernst Stadler's poems, *Ghetou londonez* (*Judenviertel in London*), *În faţa unei cantine pentru săraci din Londra* (*Kinder von einem Londoner Armenspeisehaus*) or in Georg Trakl's *Föhn peste mahala* (*Vorstadt im Föhn*).

The social aspects of Caraion's poetry are not intended by the poet as a direct action towards the improvement of the life

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of the disinherited ones. His poetry is not an instrument of civic action in the immediate reality, nor the poet a voice of the poor ones. The inventory of the forms taken by evil in this world has a mandatory walk in the outskirts, but apart from desolate pictures of this world we do not see Ion Caraion as regimented in the old activist rhetoric of *Der Sturm* and *Die Aktion*, even if their activity was well-known to him. (see Caraion 1976) Not compassion but distance generated by fear exists between the poet and these ambassadors of disaster that seem to haunt the flaneur's solitude: the Polish refugees, "the woman with pita face", "the man with pitted cheek", the villains shot in the city, the merchants with their strange shout. (*Cartierul din fotografie*)

The poet devotes fiery verses, but it will be always in favour of a poetical action subdued to his own interiority, to make visible at the utmost in the public space the torment of his ego.

If Bacovia's neurosis is consumed in silence and paralysis, Ion Caraion's neurosis and his generation's as well is, on the contrary, always haunted by the danger of an exasperation which can not be dominated and kept between the fragile landmarks of being any longer. His irritability is clearly expressed in the alert enumeration of the mortifications underwent with the self-confessed aim of making poetry: "Noi am scris cu nevroză pe ziduri / şi-am colindat neurastenia, să bem / igrasie din ploaie, rachiu din poem / otrava murdară, ţipătul spân…" (*Antreul poemului*)

It would be too restraining to consider this type of protest only an anti-bourgeois one, easily attributed to an avant-garde kind of reaction. There are, or course, some poems and sequences that allow this interpretation, as in the above quoted *Antreul poemului*: "la fundul purităţii, fără gramatică, / dispreţuim cumînţenia reumatică / a inşilor bolnavi de centimetri pătraţi. / Avem umbletul simplu, dar paşi tulburaţi, / ne gâtuie măsura, ne pune cătuşă / geografia unor molii cu belciugul la uşă. /…/ Peste o sută de ani veţi veni înapoi / să întrebaţi de inscripţii, să vorbiţi despre noi, / scârbe ale lumii cu gravitate de gong, / trântite comod în şezlong."

But this enraged outburst does not exhaust itself only in this direction. It addresses the entire world, being in fact a constant reaction, rooted in this youth poems, to the violence and aggressiveness of the real, a reaction which can be found all along Caraion's poetry.

The protest reveals a sensibility constantly assaulted by the traumatizing answer of the world, or of the other. The aggression of the real is intensified to paroxysm. The poet confers not only to the humblest, but also to the ugliest forms of life the right to reject Man from Creation: "Eu mă întorc, dar gândacii au să scuipe aici. / Nu ne vor buruienile. Vom muri, plini de mâzgă, pe cornute maidane." (*Corespondenţă pe un arbore*)

Even youth, intensely claimed in the avant-garde rhetoric as the force of destruction and reconstruction of the world, panacea of a sickened civilization, can not act any longer in Caraion's world. Under a negative temporal sign – "atâta tinereţe avum – / rodul, ca smârcul se-alese: amar" (*Oxidare*) –, debilitated, it will be ironically dismissed by the poet: "Ne-a plecat şi tinereţea. I-am dat şbilţ / ca la un papagal care totdeauna a spus ce-a vrut altul." (*Ciclu schizofrenic, IX*)

Given this agonising background, youth is not catalysing the end of the crisis, but it is used to deepen it. Not salvation, but mortification, reaching unbearable limits, self-flagellation is what the poet is looking for. Nevertheless, only the energetics arising from youth itself can be at the basis of acceptance of the victim's role, in order to assume it and declare it proudly

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afterwards, wearing the damned blazon. Furthermore, the entire *Panopticum* is dominated by the excess of the negative embodiment of the poet: he is at the same time *poète maudit*, exiled, rootless, alienated, and abandoned by a suffering transcendent. Later on, Caraion's poetry will develop the dying poetic self, the executed, and the posthumous one.

It is obvious from Ion Caraion's poetical beginnings that freedom and reclusion are both anguishing. Mutilated by a daemonic Creation, who hates and drains him, depriving him of any hope, rewarding his good intentions with atrocities: "Cu mâinile ciungi, tatuate / ne ducem în cârcă pustele depărtărilor toate; / carnea înțeapă – zăpezile, anii / ne-au spart inimile, ne-au omorât bolovanii..." (*Antreul poemului*) the poet is condemned to be an eternal wanderer, unable to find a refuge. An exiled, condition of the poetic ego, resumed at the end of his life in *Agonie*: "De-atunci orbecăi. Nu ştiu unde merg, unde-ajung, / Pururi în gol, pretutindeni uşarnic, / orice drum vechi mi se pare mai lung, / orice drum nou – mai zadarnic."

Isolated in front of city's aggression, wearing the ill and death stigmata, the confined ego is condemned to captivity in "the death land". There is no escape from here, except through delirium. "Închişi în camere pătrate, presimțim / din geam în geam, văpaie cu văpaie, / oraşul grav cu heleştaie negre / cum urcă-n pat, cum bâjbâie-n odaie. // Meridianul nu ne mai ajunge…/ Plutim prin zona lâncedă de febre" (*Viziunea de la nr. 7*) But this inner journey does not provide any salvation. It is not a volitional act, coming from a Rimbaldian explorer pride, but a consequence of a fatal condition, lurked by evil signs and death omen, defining another existential condition, that of a dying man. "Ne depărtăm... În noi destinul sună – grav metal / cu tot ecoul înăuntru: cancer. /.../ Oricum, e tot ce face-un muribund / – călătoria asta ne sugrumă... /.../ La podul din Pădurile Nevroză / delirul creşte straniu din portret, / picherul negru gâfâie-amanet / la linia ferată, cu hipnoză." (*Carnet lapidar*)

If his own interiority can still be imagined as a final refuge in a world already invaded by evil as in *Preludiu*, this illusion is readily abandoned in the following volumes. Retreat was seen as a fundamental attitude of Ion Caraion's poetry (see Simion 1978). Eventually, the poet desperately understands that the retreat is impossible. Withdrawing in order to escape time, he will become nonetheless a victim permanently chased away until his death: "Am părăsit apele şi ne-am retras în pietre / am părăsit pietrele şi ne-am retras în copaci / am părăsit copacii şi ne-am retras în aer / am părăsit aerul şi ne-am făcut închipuire şi stele /…/ De fapt murisem de-atunci" (*Pământ de tristețe*)

Still under the sign of a voluptuous negation, Caraion resumes in poems around his prison experience, the theme of the declining nature which enhances, through the suggestions of corruption, decay, lack of hope and violence, the detainee's ordeal. Both nearness and distance are now permeated with evil: "Aeru-i o cloacă", "Zări de vâsc şi zări de fiere, / ca pecinginea, ca iodul." (*De rerum natura*) The poet's view, swinging hallucinated between the layers of the world, uncovers the horror of decay, corruption and death. Man's fate, sealed first by his fellows, is accomplished by nature: "Inşi pământii cu fețe de ghips / ne-alungă pe câmp cu bolovani. / Pustietate... croncani... / Ies cârtițele logodnelor de apocalips. // Duc azi furca şi târnăcopul. / Metri cubi… metri cubi… / Primăvara-mi râde cu plopul / ciuruit de hulubi." (*Omul cu lada*) The world changes into an apocalyptic panorama, as the result of a possible divine punishment. "şi ne-am înfrățit cu ceața, cu timpul urât. /

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Căţeii pământului rumeneau în frigări. / Aerul opăritor depăna-n depărtări / penele îngerilor care nu s-au mai pogorât. // Sus, foarte sus, unde – de frig – iarna jucăuşă / aducea-n oameni ceva din stridenţa / croncănitului ciorii, / soarele, ca un şoarece, rodea norii / şi se ascundea din când în când / prin plapuma lor de cenuşă. // Mă-ntorc peste ruinele noastre / cu fiorii de nebunie ai unei seri de abatoare. / Fiecare cicatrice mai doare, / mai musteşte-a dezastre." [*Ne-ajung poate orele tragerii la sorţi…*]

Gradually, the forefront vision of a declining world acquires new meanings, all of them from the same expressionist imaginary. If the confinement space creates, through a painful negative compensation, a perspective onto a degraded nature, the urban space acquires further on the connotations of a prison. So the dwelling, a true everyday cell resembles the one inhabited by a prisoner sentenced to death: "A paragină şi crimă / vântu-n cubul meu de piatră / stau şi-ascult… ascult cum latră / peste seara anonimă. // Pe la roua de cobalt / apa morţilor păstrună / sună-n van; de-altminteri sună / a tărâmul celălalt." (*Iarna din cub*)

Reduced to essences, the world will be depicted by a single word, "darkness", suggesting both anguish and moral confusion. In his last volumes, the experience of world as an inferno is, for Ion Caraion, the experience of extreme human relations marked by indifference and cynicism, be it the tragic relation between the executioners and the victims, be it the erotic relationship. The moral relativism is accompanied by an unconscious indifference that makes all torturers' statements even more harsh, disclosing at the same time an immense death mechanism which, impersonally, governs this world: "Vă vom chinui, vă vom ucide şi vom râde / pe urmă vom fi ucişi şi se va râde / suntem destul de bătrâni şi de vicleni / să nu ne pese / totul e adevăr, chiar şi minciuna / totul e minciună, chiar şi adevărul – / întunericul se face singur." (*La marea putredă*)

Dominant in Caraion's entire poetry, the theme of the decline of the world signalise a poetic consciousness marked by a profound crisis, generated by the subtle perception of the demonic quality of the modern world. Alienated from nature and transcendent, the modern man sees evil as permeating the history, the existence, the human corporality. From here derives anguish, guilt and the presentiment of a near end, tragic for most of the expressionist poets who, unlike their direct ancestors, the Romantics, do not have open anymore the possibility of the restoration of the human condition.

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