# THE SIGNS OF THE AESTHETIC IDENTITY OF ION CARAION'S POETRY

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*Abstract*

Ion Caraion is one of the most interesting lyrical voices of postwar Romanian literature. He begins under the sign of apostasy, as one of the leading representatives of the "war generation", advocates the detachment from the literary tradition, the renewal of poetry, in mission, vision and poetic language. Through his poetry and attitude towards the totalitarian regime, he falls victim to the political system and goes through the inferno of the communist gulag. His life is marked by the memory of suffering, torn out by compromises and by the option without return for the exile. It is reflected in his "black" poetry, which develops a bleak, violent vision upon the existence, of an inexpiable tragism. Biographically, Caraion is a tragic case of the East. In his poetry, he assimilates the influences of the major literary movements and experiences in Romanian and universal poetry. He creates a poetic universe of great complexity, in which the lyrical modes of expression, covering an extensive range of aesthetic metamorphoses and versatility, contribute to the affirmation of a new poetic formula, proper to the poet. The literary identity of this poetry is constructed of a series of aesthetic signs. By its twofold determination, aesthetic and existential, this intense lyrical experience is rooted in the great poetry and in the fertile in suffering territory of a tragic existence. Caraion's poetry remains an aesthetic challenge for contemporary literature.

**Keywords: black poetry, violent vision, tragism, aesthetic signs, poetic identity**

In the universe of great complexity of Ion Caraion's poetry, some fundamental aesthetic features stand out. Not only that these particularities are iconic elements for Caraion's poetics, but they also make out a strong case for the modernity of his writing. They are *the signs of the aesthetic identity* of Ion Caraion's poetry in the Romanian literature: the antipoetic and anti-aesthetic poetics as a way of revolutionizing the poetic canon, the aesthetics of ugliness at the level of vision and expression – aesthetic and stylistic instrument of the new poetry, the lexical investigations and the systematic effort of innovating the poetic language, the creative usage, with spectacular aesthetic effects, of surrealist techniques in a modernistic poetic discourse, the imagism deriving from surrealism, the metamorphoses of the poetic discourse, the deconstruction of the text, the disintegration of language in poetically challenging formulas, with a high degree of novelty in our post-war poetry, Expressionism as a fundamental aesthetic mark, which changes the poem into a violent act and into a cry, *the ultimate figure* of this poetry. It is interesting for us to see the way in which each of these defining aesthetic elements – identity *signs* – are objectified in Ion Caraion's poetry.

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**An anti-aesthetic Poetics**

We can see from his programmatic articles and his manifesto poems that Caraion delineates the direction in which his poetry will evolve: an a-poetic, anti-poetic and anti-aesthetic poetics. This tendency expresses a new impetus that is spread throughout the era and inspires the young rebels. However, his 'newness' is relative, since a radical spirit of innovation had been displayed, not so long before, in the avant-garde literature. The anti-aesthetic tendency is a constant of modern literature, of its innovative and revolutionary spirit, which can be traced through its reifications from Baudelaire and Poe to postmodernism and thereafter. New and interesting is the way in which this spirit is objectified in Caraion's poetry, a writer known to be outraged, from the very beginning, by 'innocence,' 'reasonableness', 'geometry' and so forth. He is animated by a kind of an a priori revolt, which offers him the fertile ground for expressing the tendency to reject everything that is old and outdated and build a new literary vision and thereby a new poetry. In the series of metaphors on which his aesthetic diatribe is built up, the poet incriminates a mentality that does not meet the needs of the modern spirit and denounces the literary canon related to it, which is criticized in raging indictments as anachronic for the aspirations of the new generations. The formula proposed by Caraion as aesthetic program and poetic art is a 'black and ugly' poetry, meant to express real, frantic and genuine life, the sordid, grey, daily reality, the cloudy aspirations of the soul, the life of a human being throbbing with energy while being faced with a new genesis. The new poetry, announced in the terms of an aesthetic messianism intended to change the man, the world and to reclaim the primary meaning of being, places its stake, above all, on *authenticity*. And since life itself is not 'beautiful', with the meaning of literature's aesthetic perspective, poetry cannot be 'beautiful' either. With such a vision serving as premise of creation, Caraion's poetry from his first writing period, which is associated with an outstanding debut, will turn to the plain, trivial, quiet, ordinary existence, towards the grey and sordid areas of life, towards its dramas where suffering, pain and death are involved. It is very important to note that the poetics which the author outlines as an 'aesthetic' direction is not only assigned to the first three books, but evolves and develops throughout his entire work.

Paradoxically, in a way, by denying the aesthetics, the poet puts forth a new aesthetics based on refusal and dismissal: thus, we are talking about an *aesthetics of denial*, of rupture, erected on a series of negative categories. In other words, by repudiating the aesthetics, the poet will build his own aesthetics, his personal artistic manner of expressing his vision about the sensible reality of conscience and the external world. This aesthetics of anti-aesthetic, anti-rhetorical and anti-poetic formula lays at the basis of Caraion's poetry, with its various metamorphoses, from the "classic" poem, molten into a traditional paradigm, to the dissolved, deconstructed, fragmented and disrupted one from the later books. The rejection of aesthetics as an aesthetic option is, from a psychological point of view, a way of polemically referring to tradition, a way of dismissing the established lyric pattern, for the sake of innovation and of a new order in poetry – a



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movement which carries challenges and major literary risks. From an artistic point of view, such an attitude is symptomatic to the modernist poetry, an attribute of the modern lyrics and a sign of the modernity of Caraion's poetry, which transcends the time boundaries of an age and expresses in an essential way the spirit connected to the evolution of aesthetic ideas and patterns.

**The aesthetics of ugliness**

A fundamental means of developing the anti-aesthetic aesthetics cultivated by Caraion is the *aesthetics of ugliness*. From Poe and Baudelaire till now, the modern poetry has discovered, by investigating ugliness, a new aesthetics, with a fabulous artistic, expressive and philosophical potential. In our literature, Arghezi made a poetic art out of the aesthetics of ugliness, a programmatic way of revolutionizing the view on poetry and the poetry itself, opening new horizons to it by means of knowledge and expression. In Caraion's case, the aesthetics of ugliness has two major models in Baudelaire and Arghezi. From the beginning and throughout his work, the poet is influenced by Arghezi, both of them sharing a unique interest for the one who wrote *Les fleurs du mal*. Inspired by the French poet's book, Arghezi writes *Flori de mucigai (Mildew Flowers),* poems which outrage the literary mentality and reveal to the Romanian poetry new universes and stylistic resources. As for him, Caraion signs a cycle of poems under a defiant aegis, with a programmatic meaning: *Cantece negre (Black Songs)*. The latter's preference for the aesthetics of ugliness is psychologically justified by his resentment, also animated by the spirit of the period, towards a literary canon that has proven sufficiency and caducity in the rebellious and idiosyncratic mentality.

The aesthetics of ugliness is a fundamental element of Caraion's concept of poetry. In his poetic universe, it acts both at the vision and at the poetic expression level. Following a rough, cruel and aggressive perspective on life and reality, and, from the artistic level, a "desecrating" vision on poetry, Caraion focuses the poetic act, as a way of knowledge and expression, upon the obscure, vermicular, sordid and horrid areas of life. In order to translate his vision at a discourse level, manifestation of a daring and innovative endeavor, the poet needs a proper instrument which turns out to be the language. To that effect, he introduces in his poetry words from the lowest layers of the language, 'ugly,' outclassed, humble, that lacks any trace of poetic artistry; he comes up with terms from areas of decay, pathologic and patibulary, meant to attack and induce horror to the reader used to aesthetic or intellectualist approaches in poetry. The author finds such terms from the underground, the dark and swarming settings of language and uses them in the poetic discourse, sometimes in shocking circumstances which strike, aggress and attack the reader's horizon of expectation. The effects are, for the most part, spectacular, as such terms potentiate, strain and invest the discourse with an extraordinary expressiveness. By making use of the aesthetics of ugliness' unaesthetic language, which carries the texts into a non-poetic area, poetry reaches unimaginable expressive capacities, becoming itself a stylistic force and a gnoseological way of comprehension. With regard



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to the aesthetics of ugliness, Caraion continues what Arghezi had begun and had magisterially accomplished, but even in a more aggressive and violent, sometimes, way, both in vision and expression, than the author of *Cuvinte potrivite (Adjusted Words)*.

**The renewal of the poetic language**

Through his poetry, Caraion contributes significantly to the innovation of the poetic language. The aesthetics of ugliness represents one of the means of making this groundbreaking step forward, although it is not the only one. The poet masters the extended grounds of language, as a genuine squire of words, having at hand an entire lexical and stylistic universe in the genesis and alchemies of his work. He is aware of it and he admits it, not without pride, in an autobiographical confession. The process of renewing language must be associated with the poet's anti-aesthetic aesthetics, by means of which he has the opportunity of transcending the space, aesthetically circumscribed, of the 'poetic' words that are construing the poem in the literary canon's restriction. Caraion has much to say as his poetic universe involves complexities and tones in need of a proper lexical body, capable to express them. To this effect, the poet invents his own poetic language which he will perpetually enrich and reinvent, throughout his entire work. There is no censorship and no kind of discrimination to stop words from entering the vast lexical universe, with great expressiveness resources and from having an equal ontological and aesthetical status.

Caraion's poetry is defined by an extraordinary richness of language which includes "poetic" terms or from the common language, trivial, dull, frail, pale, dry words and apparently lacking any poetic potential, elevated words, notions and concepts, abstractions and neologisms, rough, powerful words, sometimes marked by an aggressive expressiveness. It also includes words from the vast and underground areas of ugliness, as well as regional, archaic terms, remote, lost, forgotten words, strange vocables with obscure meanings, though with great semantic and stylistic virtuality. Caraion uses this luxuriant lexical material in the most unusual contexts, associates words of a blunt, disarming concreteness with notional and abstract terms, mixes the semantic and referential areas, creates new relations between the aspects of being, the mediums and kingdoms of existence, within the framework of some unprecedented poetic scenarios.

He unleashes through his poems a fabulous offensive of words, in a major force deployment, in an aggressive and impetuous style. By virtue of this lexical frenzy, the poem become sometimes an avalanche of words, a dense, torrential, overwhelming aesthetic reality which sets up semantic synapses in unlimited combinative possibilities, on the levels and the extents of reading. The effects are spectacular both from the meanings and the expressiveness' point of view: the poem gets to express completely unexpected new meanings, within the referential spaces opened by the poetic logic, becoming, by means of the expressive force of words, a stylistic force. The poet is like a mine digger in the labyrinthine and dark underground of language or an explorer in the jungle of words, in a ceaseless undertaking research, aiming to renew the poetic language. The poet



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undertakes a daring role, an endless battle of pioneering in the fabulous universe of language and poetic expressiveness, which he does not cease to carry, reaching and taking hold of new territories, throughout his entire work.

**Surrealism and imagism as aesthetic dimensions**

Caraion begins to write and be perceived as a militant for the cause of poetry innovation in a period of search and affirmation of the Romanian surrealists. In this effervescence of identity definition, of literary delimitations, affinities and contaminations, against the established aesthetic mentalities and realities, the poet could not keep himself aloof from surrealist experiences. Within the framework of a structural openness towards avant-garde poetry, surrealism is a fundamental aesthetic dimension of his lyrical universe. Without actually being a surrealist poet, as the promoters and the militants of this movement standing out from the avant-garde understood it, Caraion assimilates the surrealist techniques of the automatic dictation and the unusual associations of terms and exploits them in a creative manner in his writing. It is interesting to observe that Caraion's surrealism is not just a poetic manner, a stylistic turn of phrase, but it becomes, throughout his writings, a structural way of thinking, a lyrical *forma mentis*, a real poetic canon. He filters his lyrical ideas and revelations through the surrealist grid, a complicated genesis from which new aesthetic forms, unusual metamorphoses of the poetic spirit result. In this process, as if through an aesthetic purgatory, the poet's arghezianism is filtered through the surrealist experience, which leads to the stylistic augmentation of idea and vision, like a miraculous transfiguration. This is what happens, in many instances, to Caraion's lyrics of Bacovian influence. This poetry's modernist discourse, in which various poetic elements melt at the high temperatures of the creation process, is profoundly influenced by the surrealist poetics and techniques, in a substantial innovating process that leads to complex and spectacular metamorphoses. The surrealist transfiguration of the modernist poetry is an essential contribution, of great authenticity, of the poet in the assumed effort to renew poetry and the literary canon.

Technically speaking, as we have seen above, the poet does this work of retrieval and transformation with the help of two established surrealist methods: the automatic dictation and the term associations exposed to hazard and to metalogic logic, of a poetic substance. In Caraion's case, as in the surrealists' as well, dictation is a way of delivering the ideas which populate in the inner universe. The censorship of reason is defeated and the abolishment of mind control opens the gates of the self's anarchist world. Often, in Caraion's case, this process resembles with the opening of Pandora's Box, due to the fact that the dictation brings to the surface from the inner hell and labyrinths of conscience gloomy thoughts, dark ideas, obsessions, suffering, pain, trauma, sequelae, frustrations and anguish, hate, despair, agony. Essentially, we cannot talk yet about an automatic dictation in Caraion's work as the surrealist poets practice (or pretend to be practicing). In his case, dictation does not transgress, in fact, the control of reason: it represents a poetic means to investigate and express the conscious and subconscious, a way of transcending



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the borders of logic, a path towards a greater freedom of the poetic act, partly emancipated from the rigors and constraints of canonical thought. Thus Caraion's poetry is born from the combination of the rational process with the dictation technique in a comprehensive poetic act that explores the territories of reason, fatally limited, but also the infinite irrational ones, in which the spirit does not encounter any limit. At the poetic level, this complex process of genesis is objectified in discourses undermined by lack of meaning, that appear to be simple notations, or telegraphic recordings of ideas anarchically sequencing in the inner universe, a more or less precise registration of the flow of consciousness. Hence the impression of hazard in the coagulation of the poetic text: but it is a *controlled hazard*, because, beyond the appearances of the semantic void, there are hidden, in virtual, dormant state, meanings waiting to be discovered through the act of hermeneutics. On the other hand, lexical and semantic associations are for Caraion a vast maneuver space, practically unlimited, where anything is allowed. The poet joins together, pairs, agglutinates words from different referential areas, sometimes in flagrant semantically discrepancy, terms without mutual affinities, notions, concepts, abstractions with vocables of disarming concreteness and materiality. The result is shocking – spectacular associations, with an expressivity that is hard to reach through the usual stylistic techniques, and aesthetic entities with infinite possibilities of covering the poetic universe.

Most of the times, from these constructions there are born *images* that embody new ontological and gnoseological dimensions of being – from a multi-dimensional, endless poetic universe –, otherwise inaccessible. Surrealist images are a kind of sequences in an essential, archetypal reality of existence from an *imaginal* world, where the spirit communicates freely with idea, the borders between things and being are dissolved, where revelations, illuminations, or nightmares are taking place. From the poetic associations and from the images they create, it is shaped another aesthetic dimension of Caraion's poetry, iconic for its poetics: *the imagism*. Such a stylistic and aesthetic feature explains the *visuality* of Caraion's poetry, an effect of its way to express through representations of optical nature. Born from the surrealist alembics of hazard and free fantasy, the imagism is an iconic aesthetic phenomenon of Caraion's poetry, symptomatic for its modernity and originality, in its versatile and always surprising objectifications.

**The deconstruction of the poetic discourse**

But maybe the most visible sign of originality, modernity and novelty of Caraion's poetry is the deconstruction and the disjunction of the poetic text. If, in the first volumes, the poems are following traditional patterns or modernist structures, based on the freedom of the blank verse, along the way, after the long silence, in his aesthetic maturity years, the poem enters in a deconstruction phase with dramatic effects in terms of form and poetic substance. With Caraion, this process unfolds in special stylistic conditions, which explain its novelty and singularity in Romanian poetry. The text traverses a gradual decomposition, leading to extreme defragmentation, decomposition and disintegration.



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Such technique suggests the tectonic movements that take place in the consciousness, the dissolution of the self under the ontological tension. Therefore, the discourse becomes discontinuous, scattered with big pauses and syncope, disseminated and crumbled like an image of the inner universe, reflected in the text's mirror. This decomposition reverberates from the text's horizon to the level of meaning. In other words, the advanced process of deconstruction addresses not only the discourse, but also the meanings expressed by it. The poem goes through a semantic alienation associated to the material, textual, discursive one, as a reflection of the inner state of emergency. The crisis of consciousness expresses itself through the *crisis of the text* and the *crisis of meaning*. The deconstruction works on vertical plane, in the depth of the poem, in the multiple levels and layers of the text's meaning, and also horizontally, at the surface of the discourse, having significant effects. The new reality of the poem, resulted from discontinuity and fragmentation, partly explains the difficulty of Caraion's poetry, already complicated enough because of the nature of the poetic thought of its author, based on encryption and obscuration. The deconstruction of the speech constitutes for Caraion the technical means of expressing an adrift interiority, a universe on the verge of destruction along with the alienation of the self. The poet takes this process to the last stylistic and aesthetic consequences, in a daring act of creation which assumes an evolved poetic consciousness and a deep vision of the poetry as a means for knowledge, expression and liberation. He could be placed in a sort of *textual surrealism*, in the larger context of the *extreme modernism*, *of avant-garde essence*, that the poet practices and that becomes a stylistic mark iconic for his poetry.

The fragmentation, obscuration, the hermeticism and other negative categories identified by Hugo Friedrich in his aesthetic system as central attributes of modern lyrics, to which we can also add the deconstruction of the discourse and message (Derrida), define aesthetically Caraion's poetry from this important phase of his becoming. The dramatic process of deconstruction at the level of the poetical idea and text places Caraion in modernity and literary actuality, perceived not only in their temporal determinations, but also within a state of mind permanently connected to the poetry's metamorphoses in its modern and postmodern becoming. The spirit of continuous and systematic search for new ways of expression defines Caraion as a prodigious experimentalist, a poet of an avant-garde structure, not only through his literary option, but mostly through his poetic thought, which assimilates, investigates, and invents aesthetical and stylistic formulae through a creative act unfolded at high intensities.

## Under *the sign* of Expressionism

A last sign, the leading and iconic sign of Caraion's poems, its basic aesthetic *figure*, linked to the very essence of the lyrical experience, is its expressionist feature. As we have noticed, this poetry exceeds the limits of modernism as such, or even those of neomodernism, as a recovered and reedited version of modernism in new contexts, placing itself in a spiritual state of modernity, an essential way of the spirit in its reference



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to the aesthetic realities in continuous becoming. In the context of its modernity, Caraion's poetry defines itself psychologically and aesthetically through a structural expressionism that crosses it from one end to another, in any of its stylistic or discursive metamorphoses. The aesthetic becoming of this poetry takes place on the essential coordinate of expressionism: the *Arghezianism*, the *Bacovianism*, the avant-garde, the modernism, and the neomodernism of the poet develop in the frame set of an expressionist vision that imprints its deep mark on the indeffable matter of the poetic idea and substance. This explains the aggressiveness, the violence, the roughness of this poetry that turns into a cry, the gloomy, dark representations of the poet, driven by pessimism, the nihilistic ontology and its tragic tone.

A fundamental sign of identity, Caraion's poetry is the *tragic poetry* of the post-war Romanian literature, conveying with such unprecedented tension and intensity the devastating crisis of the conscience. Caraion is a *tragic poet*, a psalmist of suffering who cries in vain, *a prophet of nothingness and death*. His cry, transfigured in aesthetic hypostases, transcends the limited frame of existence, and the horizon of finiteness and becomes, beyond time and times, a tragic and symbolic testimony of the human being, an iconic and archetypal form of poetry, as a fundamental way of being, confessing and knowing. A sign of the force and dignity of the spirit that fights to the end. A s*ign* of the great poetry.

**An aesthetic challenge to literature**

All these poetic properties are the essential aesthetic signs of the literary identity of Caraion 's poetry. They are the structural elements of his poetic universe, fascinating in its themes and their aesthetic objectification. In terms of aesthetics, this poetry is a creative laboratory, in which the poet, like an alchemist of ideas and words, experiments and invents literary formulas in a complex process of poetic creativity. The aesthetic formulas of the poetry are the poetic support of the ideas that populate the lyric universe, in spectacular literary metamorphoses, proving novelty and originality. In the horizon of ideas, it is a poetry of searching, suffering and despair. Based on its biographical determination, in a higher, symbolic, plane, it transcribes poetically the human being's rebellion against the absurd and the hazard which dominate the world, against the cruelty of existence and destiny. Man has no chance in this universe, is a priori convicted, the birth is the entrance into death. Love, the essence of life, the illusion which man clings on looking for happiness, is itself "the pseudonym of death". To understand Caraion's poetry, we must consider his life, a tragic existence, in the political and ideological conditions of the communist regime. The existence is reflected in poetry, essentialized and transfigured. His poetry can be, therefore, read as a testimony, as the confession of a victim of ideologies, of the communist gulag, of time and destiny, as the essential image of this ontological adventure, exemplary in its tragism. In its ultimate significations, this poetry is a tragic confession, aesthetically transfigured in remarkable poetic metamorphoses, a challenge to meditation, an aesthetic universe still to be discovered.



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Caraion is a singular poet, through his lyrical universe, hard to fit in a stream or a formula. Although our contemporary, part of the recent history of Romanian literature, he is an almost forgotten poet today. The modernity of his poetry lies in two fundamental aspects: the aesthetics of poetry, which, by its formulas, anchored in the fertile ground of Romanian and universal poetry, responsive to the latest trends, affirms a great poet, and the poetic universe, which, by its themes, is enrolled in the eternal actuality of the human being, a universe built on the key themes of man in the great ordeal of the existence, on his questions, obsessions and fears. In this aesthetic and conceptual context, it still has a high poetic interest. Caraion's poetry remains a cry of revolt to the human condition and for the chances of the human being, an aesthetic challenge to the literature of today and tomorrow.

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