Textual Transpositions and Identity Games in I.L. Caragiale's Late Writings

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The first critical edition of I.L. Caragiale's *Works*, initiated by Paul Zarifopol in 1930 at "Cultura Națională" Publishing House, opens with the famous photo of the author taken in Berlin, in which Caragiale sits cross-legged, oriental-style, on a similarly themed rug, dressed in Balkanic garb, wearing a fez and white long socks, posing evidently for the camera with his chin resting on his closed hand and his eyes gazing intently to the right. But, even in these carefully asorted Levantine surroundings, one cannot fail to notice that behind the posing artist there is a heavily stacked library, filled with thick manuscripts that seem to overflow. The image is, therefore, twice symbolic: on the one hand, because in it Caragiale seems to claim to be returning to the "ethnic roots" that he often reclaimed polemically, orally and in writing, precisely to contradict the partisans of a ridiculous and violent Romanian nationalism; on the other hand, because this return takes place in the foreground of a library, or better yet of literature[1].

Caragiale's entire work is characterized by a frequent use of intertextual procedures, but these appear to become even more often in his last period of creation, in Berlin (1905–1912). The critics have long remarked that "Caragiale drew a character face for himself" (Tomuș 1977: 340) but he exploited it especially now, in the later years at Berlin, to present himself under the largely known name "nenea Iancu" (*Țal!...*) or as an "old prompter" or "old journalist" (*Inițiativa/The Initiative...*), as a retiring artist solicited to give fashionable speeches on social occasions (*O conferență/A Conference...*), or under the disguise of emblematic characters such as Ion or Kir Ianulea from the similarly titled works. At the same time, in some memoir-like proses, the old consacrated writer, widely celebrated in Romania in his final years, chose to remember his childhood in words that were

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[1] Marta Petreu discovers in the writer's letter to friends from Berlin "another Caragiale, made from other stuff than the Balkanic one" (Petreu 2003: 184).

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either self-ironic or simply nostalgic (*După 50 de ani/50 Years Later* or *Duminica Tomii/St. Thomas' Sunday*). The writer had long been preoccupied with manners of "framing" the textual world through bold and provoking narrative techniques. He had to opt from his very first writings between the narrative and the dramatic and has succeeded in finding ways to "open" the scene of his comedies to new zones of reference and even to the mediatic condition of the theatrical spectacle. But now, in his later years, he was openly rejecting mimeticism, that is the representation of social life and social "mentalities" (a discourse he openly rebuked, for example, in *The Initiative...*). Paul Zarifopol observed in this same period an increase in the "pleasure" of story-telling, a new preference for the epic, for the descriptive and the picturesque, and the fact that the writer was now enjoying to present himself as a "moralist", that is an observer of human typologies (Zarifopol 1971: 329). Indeed, with a few exceptions (that are, however, characterized by the above-mentioned manner of "quoting" old lines and phrases from his previous, well-known texts), the works of this period no longer represent a "mirror", albeit an unfaithful one, of Bucharest life around 1900, the way his earlier *Momente/Moments* had been. They usually are more concentrated, allegorical or parabolic (*Ion*, *Partea poetului/The Part of the Poet*), or turn to tales or to anecdotes with Walachian-Balkanic overtones (*Kir Ianulea*, *Pastramă trufanda/First-Class Pastrami*, *Abu Hassan*, *Pradă de război/War Spoils*, *Făt Frumos cu Moț în Frunte/Ugly Prince-Charming*, *Mamă.../Mother...*, *Poveste/A Tale*, *Calul dracului/The Devil's Horse*, *Dintr-un catastif vechi/From an Old Register*). There is an obvious reorientation of his own work, a new "game" that requires a fresh "strategy" (I am alluding here to Florin Manolescu's excellent explanation of Caragiale via reader-response theory in *Caragiale şi Caragiale. Jocuri cu mai multe strategii*/*Caragiale and Caragiale. Games with Multiple Strategies*, 1980, 2002), a resetting of writing rules and of the meaning of literature. The volume *Schițe nouă/New Sketches* (1909) represents an enrichment of his work, making up for the failed attempt to return to playwriting in the unfinished project *Titircă, Sotirescu et C-ie*.

This new "reading offer" in Caragiale's late work (one of many possible others) may be followed by observing the genre category and the means of textual production employed now by the author. Zarifopol showed that in *New Sketches* Caragiale went from the narrative "scene" of the *Moments* to the novel and the tale, to longer texts that were less related to a playwright's vision, with a new impetus and a new writing attitude (Zarifopol 1971: 330). He had written tale-like texts even before 1900 (*O invenție mare/A Big Invention*, *Poveste. Imitație/A Story. Imitation*), and the novels were his first new developments after the end of his playwright stage (*O făclie de Paşte/An Easter Flame* and *Păcat/Shame* were written in 1889–1892). This is why the period of the *New Sketches* is not accurately described by the turn towards the tale. Caragiale's interest in discursive modes particular to the fairy-tale, such as description or exhillarating narration, began at an earlier date, and Zarifopol mentioned once *A Story. Imitation*, dating from 1894, as the first text to employ such devices. But one must not conclude that Caragiale wrote in his later years only tales. In the few texts which may be called thus, such as the fantastic novella *Calul dracului/The Devil's Horse*, in his posthumous unfinished *Poveste/A Story* and in the parody *Dă dămult... mai dă dămult.../Once Upon a Long, Long Time...*, the

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"adventure" is either a comical pretext (as everyting is played "fast forward", like in a Charlie Chaplin movie), or a camouflage for ironic overtones and erotic allusions. Caragiale's poetics is not fundamentally reformed in his Berlin years. But the newly rediscovered appetite for the picturesque and the descriptive passages help in giving Caragiale's late prose a particular feeling.

The disposition to adopt foreign subjects is still another characteristic of this creative period that Paul Zarifopol attributed to the writer's "laziness" in his new lavish life abroad (Zarifopol 1971: 325). Indeed, much of Caragiale's new work is actually "borrowed", whether we talk about parodies[2] (*Once Upon a Long, Long Time...*) or "ameliorated" translations (*Curiosul pedepsit/The Punishment of the Curious*, from Cervantes, or *Ugly Prince-Charming*, from Charles Perrault). As implied in his Berlin photo, Caragiale writes numerous proses on oriental themes: *Kir Ianulea*, *Pastramă trunfanda/First-Class Pastrami*, *Abu Hassan*, *Pradă de război/War Spoils*. The source is revealed by the author himself (who indicates Anton Pann as the source of his anecdote *War Spoils*) or by his editors (who identified a *Sottisier du Nasr-Eddin-Hodja* published in 1832 by J.A. Decourdemanche). Such sources serve to amplify the note of Balkanic picturesque that Caragiale enjoys to stress in these late writings, maybe as a means of distancing himself polemically from nationalist critics who might have wanted him to be a different type of ambassador to national culture. The situation is different with the most "oriental" of these texts, the ample novel from the Phanariot Bucharest entitled *Kir Ianulea*, which is inspired not by an Eastern source, but by an Italian Renaissance novella by Niccolò Macchiavelli (*Belfagorx the Arch-Devil, or The Devil Who Took a Wife in Marriage*), rewritten later in French by Jean de La Fontaine. However, this Oriental-Occidental dispute is solved in a spiritual manner by Caragiale in his correspondence with Paul Zarifopol, through a lexical *travesti*: he introduces his younger friend to "this beautiful tale of our immortal Nikolaki Makiavellis" (Zarifopol 1987: 98). By making the Florentine author's name more Greek, the Romanian writer emphasizes his own conversion to Balkanism/Orientalism.

The technique through which one text is transformed by translation, adaptation, shortening, amplification or another type of focalisation in the hypertext is called by Gérard Genette transposition (Genette 1982: 237). This category is vastly illustrated by the French poetician, who makes clear that it includes both summary and "localisation", "actualisation", the amplification through lengthy narration, the "unfaithful" translations or the "fake summarization". Texts and writers situated very far from one another are brought together, and one can use the identification of the transposition procedure to make up series of writers that are bookish or series of subjects turned into literary myths attacked by numerous writers. The recourse to such a literary technique presupposes the recognition of an affinity or stating an afiliation.

The works of Caragiale belong to this literary category, which is the result of modifying a hypotext and developping it into a new form through a reorganisation of its initial form and meaning. Although the "borrowed" theme is a prestigious one,

[2] For the various categories that parody falls into, see Iacob 2011: 22 sqq.

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Caragiale does not use in his transpositions famous references, and his stories or anecdotes do not capitalize the fame of great authors. He does not ever attempt to write a new *Odissey* or a *Faustus*. His only writing with a "noble" genealogy, *Kir Ianulea*, represents a "transposition proximisante", as Genette would call it, that is an adaptation by localisation, with a thorough modification of the very structure of the story. But Macchiavelli's novella *Belfagorx arcidiabolo* did not enjoy the stature of a literary myth, even though it had been rewritten in the 16th-17th century by other Italian and French authors, among which La Fontaine. The Romanian author did not seek to gain further symbolic capital from the texts he worked on. In the case of *First-Class Pastrami, Abu Hassan, War Spoils*, there is no major modification of the source-texts: the localisation is the same, and the author only contributes to the concision of the text and a great number of comic references which enhance the humorous outcome and the comic cohesion of the novel. The new texts are better organised than the initial texts had been, but the Oriental tale stays the same. Therefore, using quasi-anonimous texts (except for the Macchiavellian novella), Caragiale ellaborates his mature version of Balkanism. One reason for bringing to light persistently the secondary status of his texts, as well as their rather "humble" origins, might be a stand the author makes with regard to literature and particularly to the national relevance of his own work. Caragiale might be stating ironically the "foreign" roots of the masterpieces of Romanian literature that he writes, uncovering the layers of Balkanism from under the purely Latin identity constructed by the Romantic writers of the 19th century and thus contributing to a broader definition of cultural identity, both national and regional. One must at this point remember the library behind the Oriental-looking writer sitting on a rug in his Berlin cabinet: Caragiale discovers his Oriental sources in books and sometimes in foreign books, even though he might pretend to have heard some anecdote in his childhood from a "chir Ştefan, the master of barbers in Ploieşti". The return to the Orient is the decision of a responsible writer, well aware of the implications of his "game". His option for the Balkans resembles Eminescu's option for the beauty of Romanian folk tales discovered (also in Berlin), in a travel book by Richard Kunisch. Caragiale "invents" his Balkans, using as an intermediary the universe of the *Arabian Nights*. But his Balkanic texts are at the same time placed in a dialogue with other, earlier writings of his, in line with his earlier moral feature of the "Miticism" that he had ellaborated at length in his texts from 1900–1901. I am stressing the fact that Caragiale's Balkanism is an "invention", and not a discovery of supposed old roots for himself. By this I am contradicting Mircea Muthu's claim in his synthesis *Literatura română şi spiritul sud-est european* (*Romanian Literature and the South-East European Spirit*) (Muthu 1976) that Caragiale illustrates the period of awareness of Balkanic literatures. Caragiale's Balkans represent the proposal of a mature writer as a correction to collective identity and not the discovery of some Balkanic patriot trying to pinpoint his people's national spirit. Caragiale's Balkans are in fact a commentary on Balkanism, and not Balkanic themselves.

The texts rewritten by Caragiale in his Berlin period must be connected to the question of national and regional cultural identity. Talking about the old Walachia, about the multiethnic Levant of merchants and sailors or about the Orient of the *Arabian Nights*, the writer envisages a representation of a particular type of

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"humanity" (i.e. morality). Caragiale's "humanity" is an expression of the author's ideology from his earlier work, which is now searching for its descendance, its "origin". In his comedies humor was born from the rapid alternation between various language strata that were regularly incompatible semantically or from the point of view of the lexical register. However, in the Berlin period humour results from an alternation between words from various epochs from the history of language. Paul Zarifopol remarked the disturbing presence of several neologisms and French-sounding words that were not characteristic to the Greek-sounding language of *Kir Ianulea*. The critic thought that the "negligence" was due to the linguistic automatisms of the old Bucharest journalist, interfering with Caragiale's usually very proper sense of expression. But it is more plausible for the archaic-neologistic alternance found in Caragiale's Oriental prose to be considered a new form of comical contrast. The author is now working on the vertical of language history instead of the horizontal lexel of the syntax, as he usually did. Caragiale exploited the lexicon of 18th century Romanian. Since he did not have the archealogic instinct of Hasdeu or Eminescu, who resorted to the chronicler's speech from the 15th-17th century, he reconstructed an urban language which he placed in Walachia around 1800, using the linguistic repertoir or Anton Pann, Costache Conachi and other authors, highly praised for their potential as a source of comic idiotisms. On the vertical of history, language gains spatial properties, as it illuminates the areas of origin of certain words, thus restoring a specific geography and a cosmopolitan democracy in a Romanian-Turkish-Greek territory (also Armenian, Jewish or Gipsy)[3].

First-Class Pastrami

This short prose seems only an anecdote, and it is presented as such by the author in a subtitle. However, one must note its aesthetic artfulness, its display of complexity, reflected both at the level of the theme and at the level of its poetics[4]. The prose talks about a hilarious misunderstanding, but at the same time plays with race stereotypes and produces a comical and shocking image of the Balkans as a multicultural territory, home of absurd plots and funny tragedies. The oriental world depicted here, between Jaffa, Jerusalem and Kavala is characterised by an "unbearable lightness" of morality, of grotesque misunderstandings, of crude violence (though unintended), of unexpected compatibility between the defects of the most diverse nations. The local colour is obtained by the well groomed tempo of Caragiale's syntax, and not by a colourful discourse. The Jewish lexical elements are minimal (consisting mainly in one systematic syntax mistake), the Turkish words are reduced to a banal interjection: "Bre". But the Levantine identity of this piece of prose is given instead by allusions to ethnical stereotypes (Jewish cheapness, for instance, or Turkish naive honesty), the euphemisms for those (which make the

[3] It is known that, at *Timpul*, in 1877/1879, three editors had thought to put together a Romanian Grammar: M. Eminescu would have written the Etymology, I. Slavici Morphology, and Caragiale – Syntax. Although his was an inspired option, one must admit that Caragiale would have been just as qualified for Language history, at least for its more recent part, in the 18th-19th century.

[4] On the complexity of Caragiale's irony, see Papadima 1999: 150 sqq.

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reader an accomplice of the author simply by being able to decipher them), and the comical defusing of several historical threats active in the area: a virtual pogrom is diminished to the dimensions of a mix-up, brought about by the benign interaction of defects. The attitude recomended in the face of such a conundrum is perplexity at the weirdness of human nature and a skeptical resignation ("everything is possible") synthetized in the "short Turkish word" (presumably: "siktir!") that the muslim judge uses to quell the quarrel between the Turk and the Jewish merchant and to put an end to the whole story.

Abu Hassan

This is an ample novel about the alternance between reality and illusion in the Oriental mind, generating mistrust in reality, but also thirst for life. This story has somethng more to offer than a "moral wisdom" to be extracted tacitly at the end, and it is contained in the story of moral edification undergone by Abu Hassan, taking place at the very beginning. After having ruined his fortune in parties with ungreatful friends, Abu Hassan takes the habit of spending every evening in a quiet manner, together with a visitor who happens to come by, so that his generosity may be exercised randomly, without the hope or possibility of a reward (or of a disappointment). He drinks with his visitors wine (a thing forbidden by the Islamic religion), and in front of the khalif Haroun al-Rashid, who dressed as a foreign merchant, expresses his adversity towards the Imam and the four founders of the local mosque,

> liars [who] only gossip and plot to bring enmity and discontent in all the quarter: they are simply dying because they cannot master all our neighbours and play them as they like.Well, this is what gets to me: instead of taking care of their books and their administration, they interfere with the people and do not let them be (Caragiale 1984: 255).

But why should Abu Hassan be so disgruntled at the five old men? Maybe because he isn't a frequent visitor of the mosque, or maybe because he doesn't obey the Muslim precepts to the letters, as he is a drinker of wine (a practice aproved by the khalif himself, who drinks along several pints). Abu Hassan is an "independent" who edifies a personal moral code separated from the generally (and religiously) sanctioned one, but not in an open, polemical manner. It is probably this situation of a free moral thinker that intrigues the khalif, who decides to kidnap Abu Hassan and sumbit him to the treatment of illusion, making him live for a day among his coutiers and odaliques to see how his mind will react, once his individualistic ethos has to function in a higher position and decide for others. Abu Hassan proves, unsurprisingly, a good administrator, who is wise enough not to alter the traditional course of things and who, likewise, can party and compliment the fourteen odalisques who are there to brighten his day. His only authoritarian slip is the fact that he orders his enemies in the neighbourhood to be punished with a beating.

When he returns to his previous situation, Abu Hassan refuses his old modesty and, implicitly, his individualist ethos, believing himself to be still the khalif. He insults his friends and neighbours and he is taken to the lunatic asylum, where he will be treated with daily beatings, much more than he had ordered as punishment for the old people at the mosque. Since Abu Hassan can blame himself

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only for this, he will explain his punishment as a consequence of this sin. This is why, when he will discover, the second time at the court, that it has all been a game mastered by the khalif, he will be happy to see his sin absolved and Haroun al-Rashid to take responsibility for everything, including his old punishing initiative. The independent man, given to a quiet hedonism in virtue of a privatized ethos, yearns not to be independent anymore, because that would mean he has to accept a responsibility he doesn't want (cf. Diaconu 2012: 19). However, there is yet another response that Abu Hassan gives to the weird moral situation he finds himsell trapped into, and it is his gesture when he sees himself for the second time surrounded by the palace decorum from his previous "dream":

> Abu Hassan gave out a scream, and then all the guitars, tambours, drums and voices began to sound loudly, and the young women and officers started dancing like crazy. Then Abu Hassan stood up in that noise and jumped in his noght gown among the dancing women, took two by the hands and started jumping and moving more wildly than anyone else (Caragiale 1984: 269).

Initially terrified of having lost his mind, Abu Hassan embraces enthusiastically and desperately the illusion of his existence at the court, dancing like crazy.

If there is a "lesson" to this novel, it regards the dangers that an independent ethos may undergo when the individual is subjected to a test and taken out of his regular living condition. When a sudden change of course makes the ordinary individual a victim, he will gladly renounce any claim to independence and embrace his destiny with desesperation and enthusiasm. The independent ethos functions only as long as it is isolated from temptation. Once subjected to the play of the world, it betrays itself and becomes a will to power. And once the power of the world over the individual is established, he will give up his narcisistic independence. Between Abu Hassan, who lives his life moderately by personal laws and Abu Hassan jumping in the middle of the odalisques' dance lays the distance between the man who treasures his independence and the one who has accepted the unpredictability of fate. The Muslim judge's perplexity that puts an end to the story in *First-Class Pastrami* and sums up its weird moral contortions receives here the complement of the desperate exaltation of Abu Hassan's dance.

Kir Ianulea

One of the many differences between the Macchiavellian hypotext and Caragiale's text consists in the local colour given to Hell in its Romanian version. In the Italian novella, the first scene was a gathering of the "princes of darkness", but in the Romanian one, Hell, governed by Dardarot, looks like a big family where tenderness may be expressed by grotesque violence: Dardarot spits Aghiuță on the nose (so as not to give him the "evil eye") and kicks him "where the back is called a tale", yells at him while declaring his love for him. His friendlyness does not exclude licentious double entendres. But one has to notice that a similar type of familiar love-hate is at work in Kir Ianulea's mansion: Acrivița throws a pot of hot sup in her huisband's face and is attacked by him "with clenched fists", but later they will tenderly express their love with Greek phrases: "fos-mu, parighoria tu

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kosmu". So there are similarities between Hell and Walachia about 1800 emphasized in Caragiale's text, and these are part of the novella's theme, a novella on the possible similarity (or identity) between life and Hell, between people and devils (or, maybe better, between Balkan people and the upside-down world from below).

Kir Ianulea tells his life story as soon as he comes to Bucharest to his old lady administrator, Kera Marghioala, in order to make known a version of his past life that would mask his devilish identity. His story is long, adventurous and full of colourful facts and Ianulea ends it with severe threats to Kera Marghioala for her discretion, all the more surprising since they are preceded by declarations of respect towards the old lady. Thus the similiarity between Hell and Walachia in what concerns the expression of feelings is renewed. The old woman promises not to tell anything, but in fact divulges his life story, "flourishing" it, and the same will be done by all the others who tell it further. As a sign of the fabulatory habits of the Walachians, Ianulea's story becomes a legend: "from then on, when fasting, nobody eats radishes with beans, everybody eats beans with radishes" (Caragiale 1984: 226). This enriches the novella's theme: the world is worse than Hell (corolary to the initial thesis: woman is worse than the devil). Even clearer: the Balkanic Walachia is far worse than Hell itself. But the complexity of the situation is bigger, since Acrivița's Walachian city and Aghiuță's Hell are intimately related, as Acrivița's crosswise gaze symbolizes, in the folk traditions that Caragiale ususally refers to, a devilish kinship (Ianulea is especially in love with this gaze; furthermore, Ianulea will complain once that Acrivița is worse than the devils below, which, coming from his part, should be remarkable).

Fabulation and gossip feature again in other main episodes of the novella. It happens, for instance, when a young girl possessed by the devil (Ianulea-Aghiuță) babbles about secret facts which are morally condemnable: theft, corruption of the authorities, incest, forgery, sexual corruption in the church. Caragiale uses the advantages of the "sympathetic style" (remarked by Vianu 1966: 179) to camouflage the identity of the person who reports these things. The speaker is, probably, one or more gossipers as representatives of the morally corrupt Walachia, the world which exhausted Ianulea-Aghiuță, who now wants revenge. But it is ironic that the devil choses to punish this Balkanic people by telling the truth (for the things babbled by the possessed girl appear to be truthful), when Hell is, by tradition, the kingdom of lying. It seems that Aghiuță's worldly (and Balkanic) experience was so traumatizing that it altered his values. His punishing adventure will fail altogether, for the dirty truths do not shake the moral fibre of the people. Furthermore, Aghiuță appeals to the traditional defects of Romanians: the "secrets and gossip" told by the girl possessed are retold by the other people voluptuously, and the corrupt mores of the public are encouraged, instead of being punished.

Perplexity, which emerged in the two other proses discussed, appears here again as the experience of a "stranger" who happens to be the devil himself. But perplexity is a sign of non-participation, of remoteness from this ethics. It results that perplexity is the state of an external contemplator of South-East European mores who fails to find a definitive or stabile code in the constelation of defects flaunted by these people. There is a very unorthodox conclusion to this: there is an equivalence or, better yet, a substitution of the values of Hell and the Balkanic

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world. Hell does not punish evil, nor can it reward it, for it is overwhelmed by the evil power of these South-East Europeans. But why should the devil be terrified by a world that cultivates Hell's values, even in a higher degree? Of course, this is a hyperbole with comic overtones, meant to stress the uniqueness of the Balkan morality, its strangeness evident to anyone who tries to approach it. But if the sentiment of the one who contemplates the Walachian humanity is perplexity and distance, inside this world the participation takes the form of voluptuousness, and especially of the pleasure of talking, of gossiping. Devilish as it may seem to the frightened Aghiuță-Ianulea, this world retains values that are not at all satanic: a light and intense way of living, a vitality and a conviviality that overshadow the moral strangeness. It is here that Caragiale's appetite for the picturesque and the descriptive in his Berlin years proves most resourceful. In numerous passages one identifies enjoyment, pleasure of living, a very Balkanic partying style ("cheful"), especially transparent in small fragments of story-telling that bring a lot of colour to the stage: a lady who, dressed only in her slippers, dances on the green lawn, the small merchant Negoiță, friend of the devil, smoking his cigar on a veranda, the Greek officer Manoli Ghaiduri singing by the night fire, or Acrivița herself, gazing crosswise with her unforgettable eyes.

What this tells us in the end is that Caragiale's final image of the Balkans given by his last prose texts is an ambivalent one, morally condemnable but affectively embraced. The writer adopted a "stranger"'s view, opting for foreign texts and adapting ("transposing") them for a Romanian context, but his remoteness gave way to an unexpected feeling of intimacy. At the same time, Caragiale's version of a national identity, offered in these texts in light of the Eastern, Oriental mores and habits, is ambivalent. One's identity is discovered as unexpectedly intefering with one's neighbour's in a painful and shocking way (in *First-Class Pastrami*), or one's personal ethos dissolves under the agency of an occult power (in *Abu Hassan*), or one is forced to accept gossip to enjoy comfort, devilish malice to contemplate feminine beauty (in *Kir Ianulea*). What is essential is that Caragiale refuses to reduce cultural identity to a singular trait, defusing any militant ambitions regarding his art at the same time.

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Abstract

In his late prose written in his Berlin years, Caragiale uses frequently pastiche and parody, writes memoir-like prose, tales and anecdotes. This new orientation in his work echoes a persistent identitary interogation, in the context of a consecration of his literary stature in Romania around 1910. This paper addresses the texts that fit into the category of "textual transposition", adaptations and localisation of foreign prose pieces. They are all made to reference life in the Orient, providing Caragiale's work with a solid Balkanic dimension. It all has to do with the situation of the textual transposition as inviting a "stranger"'s gaze to familiar realities and with Caragiale's own need to diversify his literary interests in the last period of creation. But this does not qualify as a straightforward definition of national identity. Caragiale discusses identity in ironic, tale-like novellas such as *First-Class Pastrami, Abu Hassan, Kir Ianulea*, and exposes it as an ambiguous construct, at the same time exotic and familiar, pleasurable and evil. Cultural identity is seen as ambivalent and complex, illustrated by necessity through a resourceful, ironic, non-militant literary prose.

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