THE THEMATIC AND AESTHETIC UNIVERSE OF ION CARAION'S POETRY

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Abstract: Thematically, Caraion's poetry addresses the eternal actuality of the human being. The fundamental theme of this poetry is the failure of man in the universe. The human being is the victim of time, history, political ideologies and regimes, of the absurdity of existence. Love itself, the founding principle of the universe and of the being, is "the pseudonym of death." In this nihilistic revelation, creation is under the rule and terror of the Non-being. Poetry is an "adventure in the inferno", it tries to be "the form of pain to the form of thought". Aesthetically, Caraion's poetry covers the long way from modernism to postmodernism, through the avant-garde, surrealism, expressionism, neomodernism. The avant-garde and surrealism leave a substantial footprint on this poetry, defined by a strong avant-garde spirit. Its fundamental aesthetic mark is given by expressionism. The violence of the poetic vision, poetry as a cry (Munch), the tough perspective upon the world, the "black" poetry belong to the expressionist aesthetic matrix, in Caraion's metamorphosis. Out of this aesthetic universe of great complexity, a new poetic formula is born, under the species of an extreme modernism, of avant-garde essence.

Keywords: poetry, nihilism, avant-garde, surrealism, expressionism

Poetry as a tragic confession

When reading them nowadays, Ion Caraion's poems seem imbued with a feeling of ineffable contemporaneousness, as if they were sequences of a recently uttered confession. This unprecedentedly dramatic and tragically intense confession bears the whole weight of the strain exercised on a conscience that, while expressing itself, reveals a stirring tragedy, ongoing in real time while reading. A tragedy that surpasses its temporal confines and ascends in the symbolic plane of the human condition, unaltered in its essence, except for its individual, infinitely varying metamorphoses.

The fundamental tenet of this poetry, expressed through a varied and complex lyrical casuistry, is *the failure of man* in the Universe, under the rule of absurdity, cruelty and death. On the phenomenal plane of existence, the individual lives under the tyranny of time, of history and of his own finite condition, governed by arbitrary rules and inscrutable laws, all of which build up to transform people into victims, causing atrocious suffering and profound existential crises, alienation and agony. From a metaphysical point of view, man is ruled by destiny and by randomness, prisoner of an existence that means nothing more than illusion and divulsion, lacking the transcendent arbiter that has allowed death and nothingness to prey upon its creation. Mankind, the world and the Universe buckle under the absolute rule of Non-existence. According to Caraion's ultimate revelation, life is just the anticipation and the *living of death*, a kind of rehearsal for the moment when everything will fall into the nothingness that stalks existence from the shadows. Love, the supreme expression of humanity and of man's transcendental condition, the axis of the theandric relation, is *the pseudonym of death*, in this overwhelmingly nihilistic representation.

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From the standpoint of its lyrical universe and of the ideas that it is built upon, Caraion's poetry stays grounded in the present because it tackles fundamental themes, such as: life, death, destiny, transcendence, the inferno, under their various manifestations in the context of recent history. These poems deal with the obsessive themes of mankind as they undergo the metamorphoses of literary modernity, while also anticipating postmodernity, many a time with remarkable foresight. They vibrate with tension, quiver with emotion and tautness; an inner force breaks through the verses, an energy of suffering, frustration and hatred convulses the lyrics, transforming them into cries, yells, howls that exceed the times, the contingency of reading and of being alive. They are essential testimonials of a man facing existence as a traumatic experience threatened by absurdity and death. None of it is obsolete; the poetry is not threatened by the passage of time, neither in content, nor in form. These poems are part of the generic actuality of being, which symbolically transcends the temporal limitations and becomes etched in the eternal present of the human psyche.

Caraion only writes about himself, through an intense, obsessive *act of self-reference*, which turns his poems into a tragic confession. The poetry revolves around the poet's ego, unable to break free from his colossal, magnetic attraction. His own existence becomes a much too strong, vast and incomprehensible poetic subject to ever conceive that it could release the poet from its hypnotic, narcotic and destructive hold. The experience of being, life's tragedies, traumas and scars are so deep that he will stay their prisoner for all eternity. The poet's conscience contains within a veritable inferno, torn apart by tensions, ravaged by internal passions, permeated by screaming, despair and agony. Caraion is held prisoner by his own, inescapable conscience. It is the worst of all banishments: an *exile in one's self*, in one's inner gulag. Inside it, all hope is abandoned; no salvation is possible, like in Dante's Inferno. The poet cannot break out of the inferno because he is the inferno. Therefore, writing is all he has left. Writing – an act of survival, of confession and of accusation, an outcry of despair, offering the delusive hope of breaking free and of being redeemed.

Caraion's poetry is an *adventure in the inferno*. With this tragic internal determination as a starting point, everything that Caraion touches and thinks turns into misfortune, suffering, agony, tragedy, lament, death. The poet is a King Midas of sorts, ruling over a universe that he creates in his own image, by virtue of the "gift" bestowed upon him, of touching things with the implements of an overwhelming lucidity, of seeing the truth beyond appearances, beyond the treacherous skin of objects and phenomena. The metamorphosis caused by this knowledge-imparting touch is nothing less than the revelation of the essential condition of existence, of the world and of the Universe. He uses poetry to reach the fundamental knowledge of these intuitive realities, sometimes foreshadowed by premonitions of terrifying accuracy. For Caraion, poetry is simultaneously a manner of gaining knowledge and an act of desperation, an ontological denunciation, a means of survival, an outcry, a scream, a howl. *The outcry* is the fundamental figure of Caraion's poetry, ingrained as a sign of identity in its aesthetic essence. By sharing this confession, the poet makes us accessories to a tragic existential and aesthetic adventure, a descent into the inferno, with the hallucination of truth in his eyes. It is an unveiling of truth, a revelation, an unmasking, shouting from within the poetic text: the emperor has no clothes, it is all a lie, life is suffering, the world is governed by death, *love is the pseudonym of death*, the Universe is just the playground of nothingness, in a hallucinating show of horrors, cruelty and absurdity, under the sign of the Void.

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Caraion's poetry is intimately connected to the contingent experiences, events and meanderings of the poet's life. Unlike the poetry of the Avant-garde or that of the surrealists, the poetry of Ion Barbu or of Nichita Stănescu, it does not represent a pure aesthetical experience, abstract in its core, self-contained, generated by the need of an idea to be expressed, a gratuitous act, a secondary game, a lexical and syntactical exercise or a textual experiment. Despite the fact that it incorporates elements of other poetics and continually experiments, this poetry has, for the most part, real origins, phenomenological roots, as it is triggered by past or present "facts" of existence that, when reflected at the level of the inner universe, marks the poet's conscience with variable degrees of intensity. Growing out of this subjective determination, the lyrical act becomes the outline in which the event or the condition is transfigured into a poetic idea. During this transition from the ontological to the aesthetic, from the reality of being to its sublimation in sensible forms, Caraion's poetry undergoes a complicated process of becoming. With this complex causality, it can be seen as the radiogram of a primary subjective reality, an image of the situation that generated it – coded and abstracted by using the language of poetry. The poems arising from the great fires of his internal crucible communicate the essence of high intensity ideas, conditions, sensations, in a fragmented, tense and contradictory form; his speech is suspended in time, shaped from words that seem radioactive cores of soul-fueled intensity and from void spaces that trace the inner movements, earthquakes and convulsions of his conscience.

A definition of poetry: "The form of pain to the form of thought"

This poetry is born under the sign of rebellion, rage and disenchantment, dominated by an irreducible crisis, in a continuous crescendo that reaches paroxysmal intensities in some of his works. The apostasy vibrates and quivers in the poem, making it boil up to tremendous pressures and insufferable intensities that threaten to cause the inner universe to explode and disintegrate its discourse. The psychological motif of the rebellion will define all of Caraion's poetry, following aesthetic personifications, descents and ascensions of the tone, processes of inner focus or, on the contrary, of externalization, reaching intensities as high as cries of despair. "The form of pain to the form of thought", the poet writes somewhere, thus offering a terse and essential definition of poetry. Under this light that shines on the essence of things, poetry reveals the autoscopic nature of meditation, of living and contemplating existence in the mirror of the conscience, through a narcissistic and masochistic act, in a psychological and aesthetic quest to conceptualize pain and transform it in the sensible aspects of the idea. Under the same psychological auspices, this poetic adventure will be concluded after a series of complicated and substantial aesthetic metamorphoses. Caraion's poetry will never find its peace, it will never reach the realm of abstract serenity, and it will never become a detached contemplation of the spectacle of ideas. Once uttered, once released into the world like a shout, like a tragic confession, accusation or anathema, it will continue to circulate, to be broadcast into infinity and nothingness, like voices lost in the Universe, fueled by the force that generated it, by the power of the suffering, frustration, hatred and misery that it expresses and nuances on all scales. "I am more unhappy than unhappiness itself", as the poet puts it in a verse that is an expressive and staggering epitome of a whole existential tragedy.

There is no way to know how Ion Caraion's poetry would have evolved if his life had not been torn by his two imprisonments. The suffering he experienced in the communist labor

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camps, the trauma and scars of his misery, the events these triggered (especially his collaboration with the communist secret police) have had an obvious and decisive influence on the substance and course of his creation. His poetry became reclusive, focused in the universe of conscience, it became self-reflective, an instrument used to investigate his own ego and, over time, transformed itself into a cry of despair, modulated in several tones, an act of accusation and reprehension of mankind, destiny, transcendence and the Universe itself. The traumatic experiences of prison have exacerbated an inner life governed by tension, the alarmed state of conscience has fueled a vision of the world that was already turning out to be somber, even since the earlier poetic developments, both on an existential philosophy level, as well as on an expressive level. However, there is no way one could imagine that, in case the tragic events of his political imprisonment and all the suffering associated to them were to be missing from his life, in the utopian hypothesis of a normal course of history, without the political and ideological accidents that changed him, Caraion's poetry would have been full of serenity and purged of all tension. Conflict is his nature – tense and contradictory; his inner inferno was there before he became a victim of history. The labor camps, the permanent fear, the terror of death and all his later suffering only awakened and aggravated an a priori vision, proper to his nature, to the structure of his inner world. It was already there, in the profound depths of his ego, as an archetypal presence in a vast and dark cavern: the suffering he underwent at incandescent intensity activated it in its psychological potentiality and projected it over his entire existence and, therefore, his entire poetic works. Caraion's poetry would not have been fundamentally *different* even without the tragic intermission, the trauma he endured and the perpetual torment that followed – *the perpetual ending*. A man that bears the seeds of suffering and crisis can only write *poetry of the crisis*. Considered on the basis of this fundamental data, from the point of view of its themes and of its lyrical universe, Caraion's poetry is and will continue to be up-to-date due to its complex nature and to the fact that it is an ontological, gnosiological and aesthetic act that revolves around a perennial theme: man and his status in the universe.

The aesthetic versatility of poetry: from modernism to postmodernism

Beyond the themes of his lyrical universe, inscribed in a sort of eternal actuality of spirit and being, the modernity of Caraion's poetry is fully manifested at the aesthetic level of the poetic formulas and metamorphoses. It arises during the modernist era, in a time of extraordinary emulation and creativity, in the space of fantastic aesthetic diversity and it goes on through several decades of literary evolution (interrupted by an unfortunate interlude, that of the political gulag). It then developed through neo-modernism, the period in which the interwar modernism was reconsidered, and peaked in the age of transition, during the '70s and '80s, close to postmodernism. Modernity and innovation are defining features of this poetry, surfacing against a violent and vindictive background, which promotes a divorce from tradition and from the canons, in the name of aesthetic renewal and revolutionizing the concept of poetry itself. During a time that was favorable for literature, but torn asunder by pursuits and attempts to institutionalize new forms of aesthetic expression against a backdrop of aggressive and insurgent activism that tried to revolutionize art, Caraion's poetry is born *in the name of the future*, affirming a Messianic role for mankind and claiming its intent to change poetry by bringing forth a new vision and new stylistic methods. Its redeeming nature

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is proclaimed loudly, aggressively, virulent, through the stylistics of the crisis, imperative and intolerant, on the coordinates of an impetuous rhetoric of emergency. Using the historical and aesthetic crisis as a foundation, Caraion shapes his poetic universe, defined by a complexity and depth that sets it apart in the landscape of our contemporaneous poetry. The events experienced by the poet dramatically mark his existence, generating major aesthetic consequences in this ever-branching and multidimensional landscape.

Affirmed and developed on the seismic background of the rift, Ion Caraion's poetry grows from the fertile soil of the modernist poetry, from an aesthetic viewpoint, with two important models in its complex genesis: Arghezi and Bacovia. Even since the first volumes, elements of symbolism – traces of "decadent" symbolism – can be detected, inflections from the hermeneutical lyricism, from the poetry of Ion Barbu or Adrian Maniu, fleeting touches from Voiculescu and so on, which prove the extraordinary openness of the new literary universe. Among his most important models we find two great poets of the world, Baudelaire and Poe, the patriarchs of modern literature, with which the Romanian author has deep aesthetic affinities and which have a significant influence over his work. Over time, Caraion also assimilates the influences of other poets, which he systematically reads and translates, in his continuous, intense, obsessive, overwhelming pursuit of poetry. He translates a lot of American poetry, which becomes an important aesthetic source for his universe; he also publishes a lengthy anthology of American poetry. Among the American poets whose influence over Caraion cannot be disputed we find famous names, such as Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, E.E. Cummings and Allen Ginsberg. Their influence over his poetry can be found in the Messianic accents of his beginnings, in his (transitory) tendency towards the primary surges, the elementary, genuine aspects of life (Whitman), in the poetics of the image and in *imagism* (Ezra Pound), in certain contaminations with the perspective on the human condition on the plane of existence and history (T.S. Eliot), in his tendency to unravel the structure of the poems (E.E. Cummings), in the ontological rebellion that peaks in the despair and intensity of the outcry (*howl*) and in the openness of the poetry towards the poetic investigation and innovation areas of postmodernism (Allen Ginsberg).

The avant-gardism and surrealism of Caraion's poetry

We cannot talk about this poetry yet without taking into account the strong influence that the Avant-garde and the surrealism had over it. Caraion has complex affinities with the literary Avant-garde, perceived in the new and challenging poetic vision, in the anti-lyrical lyricism, in the traditional sense of the concept, in the essential willingness of the poet to innovate and experiment. These appropriations or contaminations have had remarkable manifestations on an aesthetic and stylistic level. Before the full manifestation of the Avant-garde poetics in his poetry, its presence is visible in Caraion's attitudes and theoretical positions, expressed in the *Avant-garde spirit* that fuels his programmatic articles. His inclination for breaking away and renewal, for the violent divorce from tradition and the aesthetic canons, for affirming the necessity of a new vision and of new forms of expression is rooted in the spirit of the era, defined by the irrepressible desire to denounce a new world that reached its twilight and a literature that (in the opinion of the youth) had consumed its energies. The poet is also fueled by this spirit and, at the same time, by his structural

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predisposition towards rebellion, protest and the desire to institutionalize his own ideas and aesthetic forms instead of the "old" ones.

This tendency develops in the context of a *Protestantism that has an Avant-garde essence,* which forms the psychological background of the aesthetic evolutions of the age. In this alchemy of determinations, the spirit of the Avant-garde plays a fundamental role: in the 1920s, the young activists of the Avant-garde are the ones that launch the idea of breaking away and changing, through some resounding manifestos, written in an aggressive and violent style that defied the existing cultural order and the common sense of a world that was settling down after the First World War. But even after this culminating moment of defying rage, of proclaiming a radical change in literature and arts, the manifesto strategy remains active throughout the '20s and '30s due to Avant-garde and surrealism militants that carry on the denouncement of the obsolete mentalities and of the aesthetic forms that are worn-out or incapable of supporting the artistic act, regardless of their metamorphoses, while also affirming revolutionary concepts, visions and forms, at least on a theoretical level. The newer proclamations keep the same violent, Messianic and apocalyptic tone, furious and accusatory, that announced the urgency of revolutionizing the conception of literature and other forms of artistic expression. Through surrealism, the innovation undertaking continues until the second half of the '40s, when history stops all progress. It can be noted that the spirit of protest is constant throughout the interwar period, a reality that affirms the paradox of the *continuity of the break*. In this psychological and aesthetical climate of discontent promoted by the Avant-garde in its various incarnations, the protesting movement of *the lost generation* appears, which has Ion Caraion as a first role representative. From an attitude and manifestos standpoint, he is one of the most important promoters of this new (and also old) state of mind, which proclaims a break from the tradition, though it has its own tradition. That is why the attitudes of the Avant-garde and of the surrealism are found, in new manifestations and metamorphoses, with new psychological tensions and stylistic intensities, in the programmatic texts of the poet, which impetuously express the necessity of change under the rule of existential and aesthetic emergency, against the background of the generational crisis.

The influence of the Avant-garde and surrealist poetics over Caraion's poetry manifests itself continuously from this point on, as an essential and defining dimension of the poet's aesthetics. Its mark in the lyrical universe of Caraion is deep; it is active in the vision and style of the poet, defined by a higher degree of writing freedom, and in the horizon of the discourse, in the metamorphic textual manifestations, structured on several referential levels, turning the text into a stratified and branching semantic entity, an open-ended hermeneutic experience. Furthermore, as it surpasses the temporal and aesthetic confines of a literary current, the poet's Avant-garde must be regarded as a *state of mind*. There is something about Caraion – his rebellious, capricious and contradictory nature or maybe his pride – that makes him report himself polemically to the existing aesthetic and axiological order, to be forever discontent and to desire to change things, to impose his own vision about them. This psychological predetermination is the root of his inclination towards innovation and experiment, a sort of *a priori* and perpetual Avant-garde as *poetic attitude*, through which the poet investigates, experiments, innovates at an aesthetic and stylistic level, in term of ideas, perspectives and texts. In Caraion's case, we can talk about a structural openness towards the literary Avant-garde, and also surrealism – as a form of aesthetics derived from the poetics of

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the Avant-garde - but also towards the *idea of the Avant-garde*, towards the philosophy of change and renewal contained by this generic term. In other words, towards an *Avant-garde literary mentality.*

Expressionism – the fundamental aesthetic mark

The fundamental aesthetic mark of Caraion's poetry is expressionism. Caraion is the Romanian poet from the second half of the 20th century that has been influenced the most by expressionism. Beyond the influences of this current, exercised through some of the great German poets that have made it famous, Caraion's expressionism poetically translates more than a form of aesthetics: it acquires a fundamental state of mind that is the origins of the expressionist vision and a particular style that he incarnates in the manifestations of the discourse. This condition is defined by tension, anxiousness, angst, fear, terror, by irreducible inner conflicts, rebellion, frustration and hatred that, all together, generate a tremendous ontological crisis. It constitutes the premise of a tense relation with the external world, the psychological outline of a deformed and augmented reflection of the universe in the space of the conscience and of developing a specific perspective on the world. In expressionist terms, poetry becomes a way of manifestation for the self that is torn apart by stress and contradictions, of expressing the crisis in the ego. In its turn, the poetic discourse passes through stylistic and textual metamorphoses determined by the great inner fires that such a condition fuels. Under these psychological conditions, in the context of the aesthetic avatars, the expressionist poetry becomes a cry, a yell, a howl of misery, despair and indignation.

The expressionist poetics is an open experience that clears the way for several aesthetic formulas within the concept. This has also happened in the German expressionist poetry, that hosts several types of coexisting poetic discourses and it is also true for Caraion. Through a complex and versatile evolution, it goes through a series of aesthetic and discourse-related manifestations of its fundamental determination: influences from Arghezi, Bacovia, the Avant-garde, surrealism, against the backdrop of the comprehensive and multi-valent literary experience that is the poetic modernism. The lyrical alchemy of the poet, his subtle combinations and his creative experiments gave birth to new forms and formulas, such as Arghezi or Bacovia-inspired poems in surrealist metamorphosis, modernist discourses with Avant-garde essence and others. Beyond the method through which the vision and the discourse are brought to life, the background of Caraion's poetry is expressionist par excellence. In the lyrical universe that the author creates on top of this aesthetic foundation, several types of expressionism can be told apart throughout his poetic works: influenced by Arghezi, by Bacovia, by modernism, by the Avant-garde, and by surrealism. All of these experiences, experiments and metamorphoses are due to the poet's calling for innovation, to his desire to open new paths for the poetry. One could argue that he remained consistent with the programmatic attitude expressed in the manifesto articles and poems, virulent pleas for the necessity of changing the poetry. Caraion's capacity to assimilate essential influences, starting with the great lyrical experiences, the force to innovate and invent aesthetic formulas bearing the unmistakable mark of his own vision of poetry, visible features of a prodigious and complex body of works, all of these constitute a powerful argument that supports the novelty and modernity of his poetry, beyond its temporal limitations.

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A new aesthetic formula

The poet's originality resides in the fact that he knows how to assimilate all of these influences and how to use them to create novel lyrical forms that, over time, impose a distinct aesthetic formula, of undisputable novelty. He absorbs fundamental experiences of Romanian and universal poetry and harnesses them into a personal experience that affirms a new aesthetic reality in our poetry. In his laboratory, Caraion, a cultivated and scholarly poet, a critical and deeply introspective spirit, creates a poetic universe with extraordinary complexity and intensity. The poet's modernity is based on this complex work of lyrical assimilation and summarization of the influences, which, together with original elements, gives birth to a new poetry. It appears and grows within the poetic modernism, but it goes beyond its limits due to the force and richness of the experiments that the poet undertakes throughout his intense and spectacular lyrical experience. He once talked about his "artistic personality, still difficult to define even nowadays", proving that he was fully aware of the difficulty of framing him into a current or a formula. Starting from the interwar modernism, at the scholarly crossroads of several ages and currents, the Avant-garde, surrealism, neo-modernism, postmodernism, Caraion outlines, in this prodigious and defying space, his own aesthetic formula, a sort of *extreme modernism*, with an Avant-garde essence, pushed to its very limits, up until the total disintegration of the discourse and of the poem. The poet's *Avant-garde modernism* includes a series of metamorphoses that are connected through his remarkable inclination for experiment, his essential willingness to find and use new aesthetic and stylistic forms of poetic language. At its core, his aesthetic formula is composed from several formulas, several incarnations resulting from the poetic metamorphoses of the inner universe. By using techniques of the Avant-garde and of surrealism, this Avant-garde modernism surpasses the limits of proper modernism or neomodernism and leads the poetry towards a new experience, hard to fit into a canon, original, with its own aesthetic identity.

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