

The Journalist as Character in Caragiale's Work

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Abstract: *The construction of the journalist as character in Caragiale's work starts obtusely, as a principle, at the same time and rhythm with the original, the genuine journalist. Before following the sinuous line constant – variables, the common feature must be observed. The latter is identified by Lyndon Baines Johnson, former President of the United States, quoted by David Randall: “Being a journalist is the proof of a certain lack of character.” (1998: 60.) Far from being a virtue, the lack of character is rarely a definite flaw, since the journalistic ethics itself seems to have surrendered long ago on this front. From Randall's point of view, a good journalist rushes towards the topic on a slide of quick, sprightly features, which do not exclude lack of character. Here they are: frankness (including “all the virtues and most vices that a reporter needs”), determination, gumption, passion, enthusiasm, curiosity. (Randall, 1998: 60-62)*

Key words: *journalist, character, media.*

The following study deals with a top character, the protagonist of the sketch *Report*. He matches this standpoint for certain reasons; however, let us moot on the preliminaries:

“*National Rebellion* appeared under my direction about fifteen years ago, in the times of the Brătianu government. It was an exclusively militant newspaper, creating terrible opposition. Our strength did not consist in polemic or leading articles, but in sensational news hatched with poisonous comments. The public, the politicians, and especially the colleagues were driven mad by our disclosure of the most intimate secrets of the political, social and even family side-scenes. The police was going mad trying uselessly to find the source of the news published in the *Rebellion*.” (Caragiale, 1969: 70) Here we step into another field, that of scandal news, proper to the phenomenon called *tabloid*. Thus, we must find out the reason why this way of building the media message should ask for a *different* path in reporting news as well as creating a *new* type of reporter. C. T. Popescu states:

“The argument brought by the journalists involved in such media scandals (resulting in exorbitant circulation) [is that,] essentially, their aim is to serve the public, its members being thus presented with the proof of the hypocrisy/infringements upon morality committed by some of their leaders.” (2002: 391)

Therefore, it is easy to see what a reporter who serves such a paper should look like: dynamic, *dynamite*; to search everywhere for plain, explosive, sometimes plausible, maybe truthful, but sweet and always fabulously polished information. Being in a desperate shortage of sources, the editor of the *Rebellion* releases this piece of cascade-epics: “Then, we took a special reporter.” The brave Caracudi seemed a promising player as early as his official presentation; he had no quakes (as colleague Rică did) and had been enlisted in order to enhance the fight (definitely, not Edgar's fulcrum). Nevertheless, in his first official match, the potential star disappoints... Here is the summary of the encounter:

A meeting of the Council of Ministers was held today, at the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Prime Minister is leaving for Florica tomorrow. It is likely that he will return on Monday or Tuesday, unless he decides upon staying there for some more days. The Minister of Religion worked together with His Majesty yesterday.[...]
Mrs. Tudorița Ștefănescu and Mrs. Fani Teodorescu have been transferred on demand, the former to the position of midwife in the small rural district Z... in the latter's place, and the latter to the same position in the small rural district X... in the place of the former. (Caragiale, 1969: 70-71)
[our transl.]

Disappointment. The special reporter as a pattern would rather look like Venturiano than this vapid Caracudi. Slothful news, dull information; thus the newspaper seems to be swimming through a new tunnel of informative decay, towards the sole. Anything new? Somewhat. We are restlessly feeling the fear for the flat, common journalist to be abundantly multiplied. On

the other hand and for a premature relief, we see him being given a mature, managerial, post-defeat lecture:

“[...] Say, do you intend to smother our *Rebellion*, mate?”
“No, sir!”
“Then?!... My man, I need sensational political news.”
“They don’t...really exist, sir...”
“They have to! ... Otherwise, regretfully, my friend, you’re not fit for us!”
“Yes, sir.”
“Get out, run all over the place! Poke your nose everywhere, among the people, in restaurants and official premises, in political circles; hunt everywhere for everything, shadow everyone, hear, learn, find!” (Caragiale, 1969: 72) [our transl.]

Marching on, we must emphasize a certain fact: the duo officer-private has vanished, in order to allow the appearance of an athletic coach-player couple. The editor’s appeals are rather sportive, teeming with dynamic verbs, finally thrusting themselves into a treble, genuinely journalistic comb: *hear, learn, find!* And Caracudi sets to work. We perceive the turn as strange, tasting of a somewhat unstable, momentary transformation: a few hours after the thrashing, our worthy man makes a proud and masculine return and starts proving himself:

1. Great commotion in the council of ministers;
2. Impending ministerial crisis;
3. The government’s intention to multiply the standing army and prolong the conscription time;
4. Rumours of a critical diplomatic incident;
5. Scandalous divorce in the high society” (Caragiale, 1969: 73) [our transl.]

Thus, our *American* fellow fully assumes his role and becomes the motive for the rebirth of the paper, asserting his status for the first time and generously showing the revival of the expectations implanted in him. From now on, Caracudi embraces the theory and seems to be diving into the seraphic haze of the original Privilege; he simply harmonizes with the *rumour reporter* pattern (e.g. the rumours concerning the diplomatic incident) and starts sliding among rumour-kites, on an escalator that descends uncommonly, perhaps from downstairs upwards, on the following track: *was held today – is leaving – it is likely that he will return – unless he decides upon staying – religion – His Majesty – Tudorița – Fani – midwives – the latter – the former*. That’s it. And now... *great commotion – impending crisis – rumours – critical diplomatic incident – scandalous divorce – high society*. This is a certain segment. This is *the way*, beyond any doubt. In the newly-formed angle the rumours are ripening, everything becomes grave, perhaps scandalous, divorce plagues society. High society. Still, where does the dragon get his strength from? This is exactly what the editor wants to find out, i.e. what kind of material is the magic formula (The Source) built of. One may strongly believe that the no-conjunction, freethinking, unscrupulous journalist has been found, as he seems to be gifted, on the contrary, with speed and a certain kind of watery discretion at the same time. Anatomically, Caracudi is a secret, has no first name and the last name itself is part of an abundant tradition of Caragiale’s work; the reporter in focus is a nobody, a true *caracudi*, so that, up to the wonderful chase on the streets of Bucharest, he seems to arouse a general feeling of genuine sympathy, as the audience acclaims the champion but makes friends with the anonymous competitor.

Fluffy, illegal, old, almost vicious, an undignified anti-dope test appears, felinely stepping: “All my insistence with him remained unsuccessful; it was impossible for me to find out the source of his topics. His stubbornness exasperated me. I’ve decided to break his resistance by extorting his secret even in a shameful way.” (Caragiale, 1969: 74)

This is the second race that deserves to be quoted entirely, after the scene in which Rică Venturiano is hunted. While the former had been broadcast by the chased, the latter is a report of the pursuer; one must keep in mind, though, that both routes are descriptive masterpieces, as long as the essence that washes them is the journalistic one. Rică, the

journalist, along with the editor of *The National Rebellion* seem to perfectly lubricate the profusion of the race detail with the strictness of the track.

Without suspecting anything, Caracudi stepped out on Calea Victoriei Boulevard. He stopped for a moment in front of a haberdasher's window; then, walked further at slow pace. Reaching the corner of Nouã Street, he stopped at Capsa, sitting down at a table, outside. I was waiting at the corner of Hotel Boulevard. He kept me there for about twenty minutes, with him sitting and me standing... He stood up and made for the palace, with me on his tail... But, unfortunately... somewhere around Oteteleşeanu, by the large opening of Teatrului Square, I lost him in the crowd... I looked up and down to find him: nothing... Perhaps he went inside some hotel, to meet his man – some deputy, senator... or I don't know what. Just when I'd lost any hope and was thinking about going back to the editorial office, planning to restart the game on the first opportunity, here comes my man out of the tobacco shop with a small package in his hand... He had bought tobacco! ... He goes due north, towards the palace... Me, on his tail... [...] Passing by the palace, Caracudi crosses the road, greets someone standing in a window and walks further at slow pace. As I arrive in front of the palace, I steal a glance and see a young officer standing at the window... Caracudi has a sudden flash as he walks closer to the Bishopric and he turns back [...] He goes right by the little park of the palace... In Sf. Ionicã Street... Me, on his tail... In Rosetti Street... to Cismegiu... He crosses the bridge... He goes straight to the bistro...[...] He gets a coffee and a smoke from his fresh tobacco. Certainly this is the proper place to meet his informer... He's going to wait for him... I'm going to wait as well. **The reporter takes the notebook out of his pocket and starts writing...** (our emphasis) The weather is wonderful and the garden, under the clear autumn sky, is more beautiful than ever. There is quiet in the air; yellow leaves are falling here and there, whirling around their withered stems in long moments to the earth, while the cry of a swan can be heard from afar...

But my man has finished writing (our emphasis) [...] Where is he taking me?... Let's see... To the editorial office... (Caragiale, 1969: 74-75) [our transl.]

Along the race, the creature functions on the classic pattern of the chased individual, without tricking (consciously) his pursuer. Seemingly, it is the ordinary information rush, working simultaneously, as a dual device. But the racing lanes are not perfectly parallel, so that the athletes realize only too late (just before the final bet-banquet) that each of them runs towards a different source. The finish lines are also different, as if the two of them were not competing the same event: the editor looks for a source that could be validated as such (possibly similar to the original lady-source), without knowing what could it be (a deputy? a senator? the young officer from the window? the saleswoman? the service official?), while Caracudi is an amphibian, feeding accurately. He knows perfectly well where he is going and what he is looking for: actually, he is not looking for anybody in Cismigiu. He is looking for *the bistro in Cişmigiu*, with leaf salad, autumn, silence, yellow and other similar ingredients. „*Certainly this is the proper place to meet his informer.*” Not exactly. Caracudi does not go to a meeting that he could be late for, but to a loose rendez-vous with Information, having as a source the Bistro itself, so as the time doubles with extreme delight: the boss has absolutely no idea that he waits in vain, while the reporter knows that he waits for nothing. Fabulous! Undercover agent, Caracudi is now spreading a pair of dazzling, shredded wings, on which one can read, among orifices: *jvarţ* (left) and *Cişmegiu* (right). Journalist, the editor chooses the highway towards the source. *Also journalist*, Caracudi prefers the green path towards *the source of inspiration*. Poet.

One may notice that the sketch may be divided into three parts: the first part (hierarchical in nature) is also without turmoil, due to the fact that the director is, actually, the reporter's superior (soap-operatic information – reprimand – *Yes, Sir!*). The second part, however, which includes the athletic challenge, gains in brilliance by the very reverse adjustment of relations, since at this point superiority slides in the opposite direction, along with the change in garment. Hierarchically superior in the first episode, the manager falls under the table in the second, due to his complete uselessness as an observer (due, therefore, to the redundancy of his surveillance of the other). To be remarked here is the complexity of the story-telling, to a greater degree than Venturiano's commenting style, because the rhythm of the film is uneven; a double perspective is revealed at this point. Thus, the first part of the

commentary corresponds to the first episode of the sketch; the manager leads the hunt, sure of his victory, and Caracudi is slowly being pursued (Calea Victoriei Boulevard – Nouă Street – Capșa – Boulevard – Oteteleşeanu – Teatrului Square – the Palace – Administration – Bishopric – the Palace again – Cișmegiu – bistro). Actually, the bistro is a genuine landmark for a turn in the register; after that crazy track, with a supersonic comment by the manager, the sly Caracudi seems to whisper to himself in the true style of Trahanache: *have a little bit of patience, if you please!* The narrative suffers a change in perspective and marks the passage towards the second dimension, belonging to the reporter. *He obviously has an appointment with his informer here... He's going to wait for him... I'm going to wait as well...* (our emphasis) *The reporter takes out his notebook from his pocket and starts writing in it.* The waiting seems the only niche for the two people to meet along the way. The moment of the reporter conjures a new sign in the zodiac, a second start, missed by the manager who allows himself to keep on waiting. The reporter, on the other hand, had already made his hasty departure ...and he was at that time crossing the finish line: *There is quiet in the air; yellow leaves are falling here and there, whirling around their withered stems in long moments to the earth, while the cry of a swan can be heard from afar...*

The third section is coffee, an ordinary denouement and quite culinary in its nature. While being flat, it is also of no consequence outside being an appendage, since, be it victory or defeat, the table will still hold champagne. Even so, we may remark that even the threshold of the editorial office maintains the original rhythm: Caracudi steps it first, idly (how else?), while the manager comes second breathing fast and heavily. Deputy. Because it is the reporter who brings (produces?) the information, and the manager accepts it, being able – from this moment on – to smile.

At the editorial office... He enters... (steps, suspension marks, second person) I rush in (rocket, full stop, first person) As I enter, Caracudi produces his notebook. First prize.

To summarize, we identified several types of the *also journalist*, as we named it above, as well as delineating the connexion journalist-poet. We dealt exclusively with Caragiale's universe so as to render unity to the endeavour and, since the works mentioned so far share extensively in the style and aspect of certain markedly journalistic species, Caragiale can also be included – on a modified scale, obviously – in the group of art journalists. Moreover, the artists should get one final curtain call: Venturiano is just a Rică, but one with the eyebrows of a deputy, whereas Caracudi is *a nobody*... Not so! He's *my brave Caracudi*.

And now, let us see: *what is on the mind of the sovereign?*

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