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SHADES OF MEMORY IN MATEIU CARAGIALE'S *THE RAKES OF THE OLD COURT*

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Abstract

In Remember (first volume-edition in 1924) and The Rakes of the Old Court (first Romanian serial edition in 1921, in print in 1936 and English version in 2021), Mateiu Caragiale (1885-1936) exposes a world on the verge of extinction. Drawing on his knowledge of heraldry, Caragiale presents several males who indulge in pleasure, knowledge and group-affirmation as they preserve their own principles. These rakes possess the financial means to engage in various types of experiences that others do not have access to or an appetite for. While employing the Saidian concept of "Orientalism" and that of "Balkanism" coined by the Romanian critic G. Călinescu, this paper examines the construction of a refined narrative. Scenes and portraits are typically painted in heavy, rather dark tones, with sophisticated fragrances and attire in tune with equally complex entertainment and conversational practice. What do the main protagonists think about their own identity and how do they pursue their interests? While knowledge and wealth are the key to a comfortable life, being one of a select few is vital to the key protagonists. They enjoy time spent together, as well as looking back at their roots. Visual, audio and linguistic representations, diluting or enhancing distinct temporal, spatial and personal ingredients, build on a particular universe in which introspection and companionship are the key ingredients to one's existence.

Keywords: Mateiu Caragiale; The Rakes of the Old Court; Balkanism; identity; memory.

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1. Introduction

In his ground-breaking study, Edward Said states that western Europeans have invented "Orientalism" for a large geographical and cultural area of the world, initially consisting of India and the Middle East (Said, 2003, 2-3). It was therefore not the intention of "Orientals" to describe themselves as such. The very suffix of the concept conveys this perspective: "-ism" suggests in this particular case an affirmative political movement that implies a particular authority of one entity over another. In a similar case, the term "colonialism" refers to the West as the coloniser aiming at controlling various regions or countries as colonies. Considering such a purposefully-constructed notion between the agent, the West, and the subject, the "Orient", "Balkanism" could stand for a parallel example. Similarly, to the way "Orientalism" emerged, "Balkanism" reflects "a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts" (12), even if its shades are perhaps more diffuse and open than the first concept. In his recent contribution,

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Călin Teuțișan inspects the nuances of “Orientalism”, as well as “Balkanism” versus “Balkanity”² according to the views expressed by Edward Said, Misha Glenny (1999), Maria Todorova (1997, 2000) and Mircea Muthu (2002). In order to understand the way that this territory, specific to the Balkan peninsula, opens itself to association with the novel authored by Mateiu Caragiale, one should consider *The history of Romanian literature from its origins to the present* written by the critic G. Călinescu (1941), in which the latter indirectly elaborates on characteristics, albeit missing the opportunity to define Balkanism clearly and consistently. Firstly, for Călinescu Balkanism did not specifically relate to a close geographical area; secondly, it rather hints at “Oriental” elements, so the critic distinguishes literary products in this area from those in western Europe. In addition, Călinescu states that Caragiale the father’s focus on petits bourgeois stands for an expression of “Balkanism” in that it represents a highly heterogeneous social composition in the late nineteenth century. Fourthly, a mixture of “mizerie prafoasă orientală” [“Dusty Oriental dirt”] (1941, 443) and eminent aristocratic names contributes to such a landscape of considerable disparities. Such an environment is not only hybrid but open to adventure and opportunism, contrasting the archaic type of setting in which aristocracy and peasants had rather stably defined roles. The examples provided by the critic show that “Balkanism” emerged, in his view, in the late decades of the nineteenth century.

Balkanism could also stand for an ongoing effort to modernise the whole society along Western lines: through cosmopolitanism, urbanisation, stronger ties with Western Europe and an appetite for travel and entertainment, to name but a few. It therefore had a certain positive connotation as well. While Călinescu valued the contribution of the clergy and literati to the changing literary canon, he also looked critically at aspects reminiscent of the Ottoman legacy as impediments to the development of new models. It is this very vision, possibly coupled with personal judgement, which explains his perspective of Mateiu Caragiale as an outdated, eccentric presence in Bucharest. The critic comments that the obsolete clothing of the writer denoted a degraded aristocrat or even a butler on holiday. The literary historian delivers a similarly parsimonious view on *The Rakes of the Old Court*: it is not a narrative, but a narration; he also declares that the writer is a “highly failed” individual (1941, 815), since he did not accomplish a higher purpose in this work. Călinescu does not bring further evidence to support such a statement though he voices a certain dislike towards Mateiu Caragiale (in what regards his appearance and status) and his work (unable to contribute to the affirmation of a new theme and style). Călinescu even included the novel in the series of surrealist writings, assimilating Caragiale the son’s work to Edgar Allan Poe’s prose. Although the critic does not state it plainly, the absence of realism and the combination of sophisticated knowledge with elements associated with Ottoman or even Roma culture turn it into a product that is unqualifiable in Romanian modernism. In his view, refinement should not match the appetite for degenerate pleasures or low social strata that the characters in the novel exhibit extensively. More recently, Laurențiu Hanganu discusses the uncanniness of the novel, as well as its establishment as a literary canon (2013), while Florin Oprescu and Monica Oprescu (2017) examine the narrative against its critical reception and the personal correspondence of the writer.

This paper examines the novella *Remember* (Romanian edition 2009) as well as the novel *The Rakes of the Old Court* (first English edition 2021). The key questions it asks are: what do the main protagonists think about their own identity and how do they pursue their interests? While knowledge and wealth are the key to a comfortable life, being one of a select few is vital to the key protagonists. They enjoy the time spent together, as well as looking back at their roots. In order to analyse the two narratives, I take into consideration various representations that build on a particular universe in which introspection and companionship are the main ingredients of one’s existence.

² The author of this paper translated fragments from the Romanian publications into English: Mateiu Caragiale, *Craii de Curtea-Veche*, București, Jurnalul Național, 2009; G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* [*The history of Romanian literature from the origins to the present*], București, Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, 1941; Șerban Cioculescu, „Un «personaj»?” [A ‘protagonist’?]. *România literară*, 12(45), 7.

2. Identity, hybridity and affiliations

The novel debuts under the vision of “life is a dream”, which connects Caragiale the son to Calderon’s *La vida es sueño* (1636). Such a possible immediate affiliation connects two distinct yet close zones: distinct geographically yet close culturally, since they share Romance languages. In addition, as Philip IV, King of Spain and Portugal, knighted the Spanish writer, it appears that the Romanian writer is hinting at a deeper potential connection, on merit based on talent. In addition to this, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, canto 1, in which the inferno is assimilated to a dream-like condition, might have been a secondary source of inspiration; in this case, Caragiale’s narrative suggests a fine, even slightly blurred delineation between heaven and hell or salvation and damnation.

In *The Rakes of the Old Court*, the narrative appears inspired by a late Romantic style (Hanganu, 2013, 38); however, the protagonists are the very expression of hybridity, mixing aristocratic behaviour with entrepreneurship. Pirgu is the exponent of this particular type of otherness in his role as a mediator between the upper and lower classes and a catalyst of profitable engagements, in both joyful or pragmatic circumstances. He is critically perceived by the main protagonist, who does not appreciate his preferences, whether about women or sarcastic references to Paşadia, who has the highest social and financial status in the group. In *Remember*, a similarly analytic narrator describes Aubrey de Vere as “the young male with the face of an old portrait” (Caragiale, 2009, 56). De Vere surprises and charms the narrator with his physical appearance: a young dandy, most likely a disciple of George Brummel (1778–1840), the English arbiter of fashion. In fact, a possible source of the writer’s inspiration for this protagonist may have been the nineteenth-century French writer Jules-Amédée Barbey d’Aureville (1808–1889), who authored *Du Dandysme et de Georges Brummel* (translated as *The Anatomy of Dandyism*, 1845), which would have chimed with Mateiu Caragiale in terms of both authors’ shared preoccupation with fashion and status.

According to Călinescu, the typology of characters and the aesthetics of the narrative qualify the novel as “Balkan”. Such a narrative contrasts a more modern or realist vision. Călinescu referred to various Romanian writers in this series, including Ion Luca Caragiale, the father of Mateiu Caragiale. In his opinion, such authors focus on “the colour of the Bucharest periphery” (1941, 443), so he distinguishes between the linguistic repertoire of either archaic expressions or neologisms meant to build the setting. In this Balkan world, a highly composite stratum pretends to be liberal without understanding the principles of liberalism. They thus join the ranks of “mahalagii” in the sense of fallen aristocrats, publicly inactive in the society (Călinescu 1941, 814).

The narrator in *The Rakes of the Old Court* is an alter ego of the writer, Mateiu Caragiale. He presents various traits of in-betweenness. This protagonist, present in the novella *Remember*, indulges in pleasures regularly yet pursues a well-defined goal: a high social status. Throughout the narrative, he is a passive companion, voicing the actions and opinions of older peers. This main character, whose identity remains obscure to the end, is a relatively mature individual. In *Remember*, a narrator of similar age looks at Aubrey de Vere, who is younger than him. While this would entitle the main protagonist to appear more knowledgeable and therefore more active than his younger peer, the contrary occurs. The experienced raconteur expresses his plain admiration in front of a youthful interlocutor, the first noting the latter’s particularly striking intellectual gift: “What self-control might have he exercised to disguise himself thus, at his age, beyond betraying himself?” (Caragiale, 2009, 59). The mature character is, in fact, an admirer of the younger man. Such an atypical view of each other indicates that the narrator may use elements extracted from various individuals in order to get de Vere’s portrait.

The Rakes of the Old Court and *Remember* have both similarities and differences: for instance, the number of characters is considerably higher in the novel than in the novella. The three men standing out, Paşadia, Pantazi and an unidentified storyteller, look for and enjoy companionship selectively. They also share the skills of the fourth member, Pirgu, who is both the joker and the lackey in the group. The narrative often takes the form of a personal confession, occasionally at the border of

reality and dream. There is a notable age difference between the protagonists: Paşadia is the most experienced one, yet Pirgu derides him for this, suggesting that he is “a poor, broken man, he once was somebody” (2021, 11). The nameless narrator is the youngest in the group, so he does not dare to challenge the others as Pirgu often does.

The three men could also represent three stages of experience: Paşadia possesses a vast knowledge of senses and affairs, while Pantazi embodies the unstoppable refined connoisseur willing to explore the vast territories of human knowledge. The narrator accompanies the two, being keen to learn from and even mediate between the first two, Paşadia and Pantazi as the more experienced ones and Pirgu, who is tolerated rather than fully accepted, whenever his comments become acid. While certain scholars include the fourth, Pirgu, in the group, others think that this character needs to stay distinct as he does not match their ideals and lifestyle. Pirgu has a Mercurian nature and is able to both gather and exchange valuable information. The first encounter described seems to continue in the disheartening spirit closing the novella *Remember*: the group listens to a melancholic waltz while Pirgu falls into a “black sorrow” (75). He imagines how he would weep at the funeral of Paşadia. Another symbolic number is seven: it resurfaces in various contexts. It was initially mentioned at the end of *Remember* when the key character admitted that this was the number of years that had passed since de Vere’s death. Pirgu indicates the same number but its significance connects with the future: according to Christian practice, the bones are retrieved seven years after entombment, the religious service aiming to support both the spirit in its further voyage, as well as the living in their commemoration of the deceased. In the Vedic tradition, on the other hand, seven is linked to Ketu, an enemy of the Sun; however, the number does not always have such dark associations and can also mean to “enhance qualities that are inherent in their psychic or name number” (Johari 1990). Such an interpretation derived from eastern esotericism is alluded to by the nameless narrator, who plainly states that the trio is largely interested in western and eastern occultism. He mentions several adventurers, philosophers and freemasons knowledgeable in the area: “we were attracted by all that seemed supernatural: the mirror of St. Germain, the carafe of Cagliostro, the baquet of Mesmer, the bizarrities of Swedenborg and Schröpfer found with us, who no longer believed in anything, credence” (Caragiale 2021, 33).³ In numerology, it also hints at wisdom and faith, when the self, number 1, renews its strength (number 8) (Blackwell Lawrence 193). Mateiu Caragiale appeals recurrently to various obscure references; while these show that the author enjoyed erudition, it stimulates the reader to look for deeper meanings. Thus, the Romanian critic Şerban Cioculescu observed an apparently obscure note on the very noun “rakes” (“crai” in Romanian), which is used by Pena Corcoduşa, a fallen, once highly seductive woman whose looks stirred aristocrat Serghei Leuchtenberg-Beauharnais. She had used the term as a sarcastic yet telling marker of the group. Her portrait, as well as the account of various events, come across to the reader rather indirectly. By employing such an elaborate yet oblique technique, the story becomes composite, a carousel of memories rather than a typical modern narrative. Given this characteristic, the story lacks the typical depth of narratives in which characters stand out through

³ Compte de Saint-Germain, an adventurer (1710-1784 ?), known for his interest in alchemy and freemasonry; see “comte de Saint-Germain”, Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/comte-de-Saint-Germain>, accessed 10 February 2023; the count of Alessandro di Cagliostro (born Giuseppe Balsamo, 1743-1795), author of *Mémoires authentiques pour servir à l'histoire du comte de Cagliostro*, Paris, 1796, Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alessandro-count-di-Cagliostro>, accessed 10 February 2023; Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), German physician, founder of hypnotism, Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Franz-Anton-Mesmer>, accessed 10 February 2023. He used a large tub known as “baquet” to treat patients using animal magnetism, see Nicole Edelman, « Des machines à guérir : le baquet de Mesmer et les premières machines électriques (fin XVIIIe-fin XIXe siècle) », *Corps et machines à l'âge industriel* [online]. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 201. Available on the Internet: <<http://books.openedition.org/pur/109272>>. ISBN: 9782753568075. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pur.109272>., 25-40, accessed 10 February 2023; Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1782), scientist, mystic and philosopher, Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Emanuel-Swedenborg>, accessed 10 February 2023; Johann Georg Schröpfer (1738? – 8 October 1774), German charlatan and freemason, known for magic lantern projections, Deac Rossell, “The Magic Lantern and Moving Images before 1800”, 40/41 *Barock-Berichte*, Franz Wagner (ed.), Salzburg, Salzburg Baroque Museum, 2005, p. 686-693.

their actions and emotions. In *The Rakes of the Old Court*, what emerges as credible is the elaborate flavour of the past. In abundant references to either familiar artists or scientists or rather obscure travellers, cuisine, art and popular types of entertainment, the novelist connects the eastern world, extending far beyond Romanian territory, with the western one. Similarly, the life of the protagonists becomes part of the existence of earlier generations that the heroes empathise with or reject. Despite the lack of immediacy, the narrator switches from one mood to another as he retrieves memories and presents them to his audience. By doing so, the atmosphere of a glorified past prevails over a blurred, rather insignificant present. Such an impression is only enhanced by frequent references to various rulers, intellectuals, adventurers, scientists or occultists.

3. *Colours, shades and blurs*

The series of meetings that the narrator describes are at considerable distance from the moment at which they occurred in reality, the verbs, adverbs and adjectives, including locutions, suggesting timing. For instance, in the chapter “The Three Peregrinations”, the narrator mentions the long duration of their relationship: “[a] friend since the world began” (Caragiale 2021, 19). That was when Paşadia and Pantazi used to meet quite frequently. In *Remember*, the narrator states that the venue of their encounters was Berlin, briefly yet poignantly referred to “all but flowers” (Caragiale 2009, 53); such an observation suited the mood of the two characters as well, whose emotions grow or fade as naturally as those of the surrounding environment. The apparition of a tall, red-haired female breaks the flourishing relationship between the two men. The seven Ceylon sapphires she possessed open up to symbolic interpretation such as the use of sapphires in occult practices or the use of gems by potent royals or even their alleged power to cure illness. In fact, the seven sapphires could also represent the seven deadly sins faced by mortals, which explains the allusion to Dante’s inferno. On the other hand, the allusion may be deeper than that: “Sefirot” stands for “emanations” of how the divine manifests in the world. The sapphire, whose etymology goes back to the Semitic “sappir” and ultimately to the Sanskrit root of “sanipriya” (i.e. “sacred to Sani/Saturn”), is able to convey light while preserving its dark depth. Given his interest in heraldry, Caragiale must have been well informed about the occult power attributed to sapphires; as George Kunz describes it: “the sacred character of the stone was attested by the tradition that the Law given to Moses on the Mount was engraved on tablets of sapphire” (Kunz 1913, 140). The gem appears in various ancient cultures and the Eastern connections extend as far as India, since the Kalpa Tree offering to gods contains numerous glowing stones. In the Hindu treatise *Mani mala*, its branches consist of pearls and emeralds, the younger leaves are corals, the ripe fruit are rubies, the roots are sapphire, the trunk is diamond and the foliage zircons. Kunz also mentions that the sapphire is the gem of autumn since its blue suggests the colour of the sky, which humans associate with the virtues of honesty and constancy. Ironically though, in the narrative these are not personal attributes manifested by the actions or conversation of the key characters.

However, the omniscient storyteller refers to the blue associated with the precious gem in a rather different way. In *Remember*, the colour points to distress if not terror as well: “One says that fear is blue, I have seen it in all colours, undergone its entire hell, going down in its endless abyss, climbing up the most abrupt crests, the peaks of terror that are lost in the clouds of insanity” (Caragiale, 2009, 66). This is actually his state of mind after the morbid discovery of the body of de Vere in the waters of the Spree close to Charlottenburg; the place holds its own symbolism, given the German etymology of the stream, coming from the word “Spree”⁴ which means “to flow”, coming from the Latin “spargere” denoting “to scatter” or “to spread”. De Vere’s body had the signs of a violent death, the young man having been pierced by a spear in the left side of his chest. His more mature companion laments over the loss of his friend, noting his Apollonian nature: “he was young and beautiful” (Caragiale, 2009, 67). As he confesses, the narrator had found in de Vere a representation far beyond the human as such, into a memento mori confession conveyed by the very title of the novella: “I had found him beautiful as I saw in him living an icon of the past, I saw the very dear Past revived. The

⁴ CARPZOV, Joh.[ann] Benedict, Neueröffneter Ehren-Tempel Merckwürdiger Antiquitäten des Marggraffthums Ober-Lausitz [Newly opened Temple of Honour of Strange Antiquities of the Margraviate of Upper Lusatia], Leipzig, 1719[3], 214.

long-gone Past” (68). As he meets an acquaintance who feels prompted to reveal sensational news about de Vere, most likely his dramatic death and the conditions leading to it, the storyteller abruptly declines such an immediate offer: he prefers to leave his former associate in the realm of memory only. He invokes the charm of his friend’s mysterious persona. By doing so, the author addresses a deeper personal need to preserve a fragment of the noble past that is, in his view, a constitutive quality of a being beyond the average.

In portraits or description of places or states of mind, colours appear frequently, being occasionally associated with tastes and/or smells. Even the soda drunk by the gallants suggests, through its blueish shade, the distinction of the individuals. When the rakes describe a young Jewish female, they note “her matte face white like a wax doll” (Caragiale, 2021, 10). To contrast her complexion and dress, Rachela’s personality is compared to that of a dark and dangerous orchid: “she recalled the comparison of women and flowers – black flower, tropical, filled with poison and honey – endangered unintentionally by the warm scent rippling, dizzying and passionate, from each of her motions” (2021, 12). Psychological differences dominate the personality of Paşadia, who strongly condemns his predecessors or the local from whom he distances himself “observing and judging with unrelenting severity all that was Romanian, often took his obstinacy to the point of bad faith. The hatred that smoldered unawakened within him would swell and surround him, whirling, enormous, burning him like coals, buffeting him like a gale” (2021, 13). Double colours also come up in connection with people or places, meant to highlight specific contrasts: “[Mima Arnoteanu] swiftly pinned up her hair, put a little white here, some red there, and dressed herself from head to foot” (84) or “[t]he great white and red flame was carried down from Pandina palace” (2021, 93).

Paşadia Măgureanu is for the narrator “a brilliant star. A series of events had endowed him with one of the most complete formations possible to the human mind” (2021, 6). Such a reference may hint at a particular interpretation: in Romantic imagery, the Morning star has a particular luminosity among other astral bodies. Mateiu Caragiale may refer in this passage to Venus or Ἑωσφόρος/Heōsphoros, known as the torch-bearer in ancient Greece. For Latin authors, its equivalent was Lucifer, who could either embody enlightenment or, on the contrary, refer to someone descending from height into an abyss. Similarly to de Vere, Paşadia is the descendant of a noble family yet had to be educated by foreigners. He had enjoyed liquor ever since he was a youth. The narrator seems to praise his behaviour rather than condemning it: “Could one say that he had lowered himself? Not at all. With sober elegance, full of dignity in carriage and speech, he remained a European man-of-the-world to the tips of his fingernails” (2021, 7).

Eye colour or shade is often associated in various cultures with personality; in particular, green with evasiveness. In the case of Pena Corcoduşa, the narrator describes her as having “a pair of large green eyes, cloudy green, sides-of-a-fish as the Romanian says, heavy-lashed and over-browed, with a drifting gaze” (2021, 16). During her brief interaction with the gallants, she tells them that they are “rakes of the Old Court” (15). Whereas in several ancient mythologies the depth of one’s look or the third eye’s spiritual ability are influential, the allusion to the sides of a fish implies that the character lacks such wisdom. Pena was once an appealing woman, but she failed to surpass her own condition. Thirty-three years before the rakes meet her, she had been courted by prince Sergei Leughtenberg-Beauharnais, the grandson of the tsar. Though once beautiful, her appearance has faded; the hardships she has encountered have led her into alcohol dependency. The green nuance may thus suggest her state of mind, either troubled or passing from sobriety to intoxication. Her brief suggestion about “the Knights of the Bronze Horse” (2021, 16), as she calls the rakes, alludes to the environment populated by smugglers, bandits or crooks whose work often took place literally in dangerous waters.

Closer to the ending of the novel, the writer uses two telling colours in a scene:

In an old court, in the chapel of evil passions, the three Rakes, great abbots of the most serene rank, celebrated their final service of vespers, silent vespers, vespers of the beyond. They wore long mantles, each with a saber at the thigh and cross on the breast, and aside from the scarlet of the heels, they were vested, bestoed, and enhusked only in gold and green, green and gold; I expected our earthly banishment would come to its end. A

gentle song of bells announced that the Lord's spirit descended upon us; ransomed by our pride, we had to re-earn our high places. Over the priest's chairs, unseen bearers lowered banners with crests, and one by one all seven altar candles went out. And the three of us departed over a bridge toward the sunset, toward heavens ever more enormous in their emptiness (2021, 97).

This scene, rich in religious iconography, elevates the rakes to the status of high priests, the trio being reminiscent of the three magi. On the other hand, it could also suggest rituals specific to the Order of Malta in which Caragiale was interested in (Perdiğao, 1998, 12). Though the connection with the Bible stands out, the writer could also have been concerned with the search for illumination, which can occur when one receives the favours of those who possess knowledge. From this point of view, green and gold were iconic to the point that Mateiu Caragiale used them for his own coat of arms in Siona, the estate he had obtained through marriage (Tabac, 2020, 76). The writer's appetite for heraldry surfaces several times, for instance in the chapter entitled "Confessions" in which Gore Pirgu details his mixed ancestry, starting with his Mediterranean seafaring legacy:

The two branches of my family stem from Zuani the Red, through two of his sons. According to our origins we should be barbarians, as my host in his palace in Catania once strove to convince me; he was the head of the Sicilian branch, called the panther, because to our old blazon – a shield held aloft by chained unicorns, azure, a swan argent, volant, its throat pierced by a purple arrow – it added a black panther, on a gold field with a fur border, in honor of an illustrious addition to the family (Caragiale, 2021, 42).

The group chronicler reveals that it was not Paşadia the knowledgeable but Pantazi the financial potentate who was able to sustain the gatherings of the quartet. Willing to respond to Pantazi's generosity, the former invites the others to his own home, the interior of which is refined and luxurious: "[t]he sumptuous sitting room flowered with yellow roses, waxy translucencies in the gentle amber light of those sweet autumn days, the beautiful remains of the year" (38). Though brief, the description of his abode contrasts such a meeting with the regular ones in town, where their lively or languid conversation, delicacies and entertainment matter. The heavy rococo decor matches both the physical as well as the psychological profile of the owner, Paşadia the connoisseur. Though intimate with the others, he keeps the source of his wealth or love affairs open to gossip, without talking about them with his friends. In addition, he regularly leaves the group for the mountains, yet his precise destination remains undisclosed to the others.

4. *Late Romantic or modern carnivalesque?*

Throughout the novel, characters and events are depicted poignantly as well as light-heartedly, the entourage feeling either elevated or low-spirited, ranging from darker more melancholic moments to the carnivalesque, as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984). Such contrasting representations may explain why Călinescu has attributed a surrealist touch to the novel (1941, 815). In the two works, the characters might wish to exemplify heroes but they are fallen ones, even when relatively well-off: their entourage is limited, they receive lower-class people within their group and display no ambition or effort to contribute to the society of which they are a part. To a large extent, they show their indolence or resistance to going beyond their innate limits. However, Bakhtin's observation that "Rabelais connects the growth of generations with the growth of culture, and with the growth of the historical development of mankind as well" (1981, 204) is valid for both narratives. Paşadia, Pantazi and the narrator often stay within their own circle for regular meetings, at which their conversations are about past personalities. There is only one brief allusion to the identity of the nameless narrator, in the chapter entitled "Confessions", when Pirgu addresses the former as "good doctor" (2021, 60). If examined symbolically, this could refer to the Biblical saints Cosmas and Damian, known for their work without a fee. As regards Caragiale the son's biography, this could hint at the father's aspiration for his son to complete studies in law. This second case is more probable when the youngest character ironically examines Pirgu's life:

What a man he would have become! The most brilliant lawyer ever known, glory of the Romanian bar. He would have defended Paşadia against accusations of sexual assault, and he would have gotten him off, by

proving he was impotent. Lawyer and university professor. He would have dabbled in literature in his lost hours, would have mocked morals, would have scribbled plays – bad ones, of course, histories – and with long dialogues strung together between characters from different periods, would have played the leading role himself, stuttering, snorting, raging (...) As distinguished as he was, he would become a diplomat; for this he would need curiosities as Poponel, and at the end of the day, why not: didn't he have Paşadia handy? But his fondest dream would be to live on the land, like a patriarch; he would have pushed a plow, pruned his vines... (Caragiale, 2021, 71).

The monologue is, in fact, a dithyramb of Caragiale the son towards his own father, seen as a rather poor playwright. Secondly, it may suggest the son's attempt to become a diplomat or his prospects of acquiring a fortune; in reality, he only got his own estate after his marriage to Marica Sion in 1923.

The men's regular meetings turn into a discreet personal journey, surpassing the borders of physical encounters. Though their bonding is lasting, the group of three do not only stay within their social group: they also meet in public and in proximity to the Knights of the Bronze Horse. These so-called "knights" were in fact well-known thieves or smugglers similar to those populating the Pont Neuf area in Paris. By employing such an idiomatic expression, the writer connects western and eastern Europe, identifying similarities across geographical borders. While the critic Cioculescu clarified this contextual reference, its deeper meaning for the social and symbolic background of the group remains open to interpretation. Does the idiom mean that social classes were to interact and learn from each other more frequently than assumed, as the affair between Pena and the Russian prince in the first chapter might suggest? Or is it just an ironic take on the way that the three members of the group openly open themselves up socially? The answer comes unexpectedly from correspondence between the writer and his father, the playwright Ion Luca Caragiale. According to Cioculescu, the father persuaded his sister, Lenci, to leave her money to him, although Mateiu had initially had chances to receive it. Utterly upset with his own parent, the son calls his father a "filou" ("thief"), the precise French term associated with the "courtisans du cheval de bronze" as a rather plebeian social grouping (Cioculescu 1979, 7).

The fact that the three men accept Pirgu and often meet him in public, allowing a lower-ranked individual into their social circuit, validates the supposition that the group shifted socially, in Pirgu's case, from making an exception to accepting a relationship; at the same time, the three men become gradually more distanced from other individuals in their circles. Despite their aristocratic descent, the trio is contaminated by temptations typical for the nouveau riche, such as dining at an exquisite French restaurant. This presents a paradox in Paşadia's case: for the last fifteen years he had spent his nights in restaurants despite the fact that he employed a cook and a butler. He had even separated himself from his servants in terms of living quarters, which led to the startling case that a coffin had left his estate without him having any idea of the identity of the deceased. The capital is quite open to unrestricted excess:

Bucharest had remained faithful to its old norms of decrepitude; every step reminded us we were at the gates of the Orient. And yet, the debauchery surprised me less than the madness that dominated at every turn; I admit I did not expect to see so much and such varied freakishness fermenting, to encounter outbreaks of unbridled insanity" [...] He would not suffer his domestics, who emerged to fulfil his wishes and vanished mute as ghosts, to live under the same roof with him; they dwelt serenely in a building apart, where they coupled and spawned families and hangers-on of whom the master knew not a thing (...) there was a famous tale of the day he looked out through his window to see a long box being drawn out of his courtyard, and never did he ask the identity of the dead man (Caragiale, 2021, 27-28).

While observing the decay of the city and its inhabitants, the storyteller firmly advocates for the pleasures of the intellect as if to compensate for the lack of urban amenities. The fact that the passage includes such a consistent enumeration shows that the novelist was well informed about such personalities; the fragment debuts with the suggestive use of deictic form "we", meant to suggest communal accumulation of knowledge:

And we were mad for music, we campaigned for Rameau and for Gluck, and like three Rakes from the East, we knelt before the child that would be Mozart; we had a weakness for adventurers: Neuhoff, Bonneval, Cantacuzène, Tarakhanova, the Duchess of Kingston, the Chevalier d'Éon, Zannowich, Trenck - they all enjoyed our support, either hidden or public; we housed the old and depressed Casanova with Waldstein at Dux; we were attracted as well by all that seemed supernatural: the mirror of St. Germain, the carafe of Cagliostro, the baquet of Mesmer, the bizarrities of Swedenborg and Schröpfer found with us, who no longer believed in anything, credence. And we paid close attention to the works of Scheele and Lavoisier (2021, 33).

Mateiu Caragiale's alter ego, the raconteur, finds the pleasure of conversation and companionship as a lifelong motto: "[b]ut the real pleasure came in our idle conversation, the palaver that embraced only the beautiful? Travel, the arts, letters, history – history especially – gliding through the calm of academic heights" (2021, 14) only to be abruptly interrupted by Pirgu's cheap humour. The earlier enumeration including the Count of Cagliostro illustrates Caragiale the son's own interest in various fields that the upper classes looked for, such as alchemy, animal magnetism, occultism and theosophy, which he had learned about in Berlin before he returned to Romania in 1905. This cannot but support the opinion of critics that Caragiale the son aimed at presenting a human typology completely different than his parent did in his works. As a result, while the range of characters covered by the father mostly consisted of petits bourgeois, animated by the desire to emulate those on the upper scale, the son criticised such a view and focused on aristocracy as the key carrier of both intellectual and material values.

5. Conclusion

In *The Rakes of The Old Court* and *Remember*, the high regard for the past is coupled with a pragmatic approach to one's social ascent; both emerge as narratives solidly anchored in the changing milieu of the first decade of the twentieth century. While the novel expands on the type of elitist intellectual initially presented in *Remember*, the main characters fluctuate between their affiliation to the past, where they feel comfortable, and the challenges of a society in which they need to coexist with individuals outside their closed group. They are mostly perseverant in their quest for knowledge and pleasure, yet they frequently fall from a joyful state of mind at the beginning of their meetings to melancholy or passiveness between themselves and even those they interact with. The absence of a sustained plot, symbolic references and the mix of dark and light touches might explain, if only partly, why it is taken for a surrealist work.

Despite the effort of the writer to portray a world on the edge of extinction as being closer to an exemplary society, the narrative presents obvious features of modernity: Pirgu both unsettles the main group, whose members need him, and rejects his inclination for cynicism and abjection. Though the narrator does not explicitly state it, it appears that Pirgu will take over the role temporarily occupied by Paşadia and group others around him. In doing so, shades once blurred yet typical for an eastern community on its way to modernise itself will turn even more diluted. The four men are rather atypical for the Romanian capital: in entertaining themselves, they fail to find a clear aim in their life. Staying within a limited social circle may, in fact, be a temporary commodity to which the next generation will not have access. Further discussion of the two works may also open towards gender, art and food studies.

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