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Andrei Pleșu
Comedii la porțile Orientului
Farces at the Orient's Gates

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For the consummate skill of an author as Andrei Pleşu who remarked himself as a versatile critic and interpreter of artistic, philosophical and theological themes, journalism might hide a sort of paradoxical challenge. The challenge consists merely in merging the brevity of a short article or essay with the ineffable stamp of a moral or a philosophical reflection. On one hand it might summon the writer's energy to address his favorite issues in a simpler, yet more elaborate style, on the other, it could possibly drain the author's gusto for theoretical demonstrations into persuasive stratagems to win the understanding of the present-day cultural consumer. Neither of the two appears true, however in Andrei Pleşu's recent book. Seemingly, journalism appears as serious an enterprise as the other author's editorial achievements on art, morals, theology were. Still, a capital difference tells *Comedii la portile Orientului / Farces at the Orient's Gates* (Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2005), from previous titles.

Claiming to disguise the philosopher and / or the moralist under the mask of an affable ironist, Andrei Pleşu dramatizes events of everyday life, as well as the course of events, including also parts of his biography as a governmental official, in a sort of theatrical representation where transition is the main protagonist. The clash between modernity and tradition, ideals, goals and means in post-communist years, or rather between the modernization and resistance against it, are rendered with the genuine help of an inborn theatrical spirit which seduces the reader, as if he/she were the spectators of a fascinating and at the same time comic political show going on uninterruptedly before their eyes. The short essays of the volume could betray at any moment the philosophical or the moralist vein of their author, yet they are completely free from the author's will to sermonize. They are not intended to parallel the discourse of a long, if not, an agonizing transition, reiterating its leit-motifs. Quite on the contrary, they convey the writer's empathy to the tortuous stories of our "interesting times", in the sense moral reflections or sanctions do not echo the harsh sound of moral excommunications or political sanctions, but they bring a fresh look, seemingly belonging to an outsider. Is the moralist an outsider of the everyday life? Should we look for a moral outside the securing borderlines of our everyday life? Tough questions for which I am sugeesting possible answers in Andrei Pleşu's book.

The observer of the present-day Romanian scene displays in this way a sort of fraternal understanding, unmitigated compassion, a glimmer of hope for every case of complete moral failure, yet without showing any sign of haughtiness. The moralist does not vanish into thin air, neither does he prefer a majestic stance. The pedagogy of laughter provides the writer with a rich palette of nuances, instead of a simple kit of tools, useful to paint, so to say, the grotesque birth of a new world, which anyone could recognize as the world of the post-communist transition. In fact, from the authors' point of view, it is rather ambiguous whether one attends the coming into being of a new world, or whether the "old" world survived under the camouflage of a shabby liberal or democratic garb. The ambiguity of such a choice is but quickly dismissed. Actually, the journalist's hallowed mission, that of conveying to the reader's imagination the newness and often only the

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shock of an event, appears under the penmanship of Andrei Pleşu as a subtle study of manners, characters and intentions mysteriously blended in the atmosphere of a carnival. But carnival is only an ironical frame, as in one Caragiale's plays, where within the tumult of a loud spree, the morality of a "world" is cruelly diagnosed through the rendering of a play within a play.

Laughter does not claim its toll by making us, readers, face a comic situation from the very beginning, since actually few things would make someone living inside the so-called transition period, laugh willingly at oneself or others. Laughter needs not only a safe distance to instill a different outlook in the mind of people who laugh and not simply mock at just to mirror themselves superior to others. Laugher brings along with its theatrical representation a specific use of language, and moreover, as Nicolai Hartmann underscored, an "ethos of laughter". Indeed, a theater stage for the political carnival and the pedagogy of laughter would not work without a more comprehensive philosophical outlook. It is important to mention here that the ethos of laughter reveals itself especially through the unusual richness of language, quite an unprecedented inventory of all registers of Romanian, revived after the long hibernating season of the so called "wooden-language", or the "newspeak" of the communist period. One should perhaps dwell more on the fertility and sumptuousness of the language used by Andrei Pleşu in his subtle and indirect critique of Romanian transition, a critique partly veiled by a good-humored laughter, partly castigating sarcastically what is called "the obscenity" of transition, and realize that the author does not simply win laughter on his side, but counts on the adequacy of words in representing the play between reality and its simulacra in times of transition, so similar, after all, to a carnival.

Stalinism banned, as one knows, freedom of language, not only in everyday language but also, especially, in the cultural discourse. Writing seen as expressing cultural originality, viewed in its variety of forms, from fiction to history, from art criticism, reportage to philosophy underwent under Stalinism and after, and this is the case of Romanian post-stalinism, not only an ideological purgation, but implicitly an irreversible impoverishment of language. "The language of work" as Ceauşescu, Romania's last dictator, liked to refer to linguistic and cultural difference of Romanians in the '80s was following closely the ideas of the Soviet linguist N.I. Marr, who claimed that eventually the working class heroes will communicate only through ideas, renouncing language which was bearing the stigma of the past. The society of command took any precaution to deepen the chasm between the free enrichment of language and its censured use. Needless to say that this reductive usage of language born from a long unsanctioned abuse, continues to resound in the present-day discourse. The relevance of a highly authorial language as a necessary aesthetic frame in portraying Romanian transition consists in refusing ready-made models, clichés and actually a controlled planning of how to refer to transition. The pedagogy of laughter is perhaps a synonym to the way of expressing freedom in one's commitment to journalism.