

ION GRIGORESCU – A WITNESS OF OUR MISERY AND MISERICORDIA

I met the respective witness as an artist – a graphic artist and painter – two decades ago. Everything that followed came as a string of surprises that constantly contradicted this visiting card. His biography is marked by unforeseeable shifts of specialization. The draftsman and the painter are, in turn, shadowed, doubled, and multiplied by the photographer, filmmaker, critic, writer, sculptor and museographer. His studio would slowly take in, in cordial upheaval, all these instruments and techniques of artistic expression. What tied them together was simply the “dearth” of these means. Through a transfer achieved by the very hand of the artist, you discover that sometimes there is more pictorial staff in a film than in a canvass, that there is more critical consciousness in an exhibition of photos than in a critical article about photographer Carol Pop de Szathmary, more drawing in an autobiographical diary than in the drawing made for a certain lithograph.

He embodies the case of the most impossible-to-classify artist in Romania, in point of school, style and artistic technique. It is almost nugatory to try to look for Ion Grigorescu in the area of aesthetic forms and rules. No aesthetic programme has ever governed his moves. His studio has done nothing but obey Reality meekly. From this point of view, Ion Grigorescu is the most realistic Romanian artist that I know. A serf bonded to the soil of the Present. And yet something else than its reporter.

For me, in the '70s, he portrayed the intelligent fatigue of culture in general, and the poverty of means of the Romanian culture, in particular. He was, I think, tacitly allergic to cultural activism and the enthusiasm of optimistic innocents. He epitomized that *taedium culturae* caused by the desperate effort of culture to find saving solutions inside its own history. His chlorotic mannerism was always doubled though by his committed skepticism. At the same period when in some studios there occurred the Great Escape upwards,

unto Jesus, or the Great Escape to the West, Ion Grigorescu set his sights and his vigil on everyday's miseries. He had the genius of attuning himself – in a sort of moral isometry, in a misericordia of harmony – to the drama of our history, to the metastasis of generalized tragedy. When in a few studios of painters there was still floating about the enticing scent of Thalens oils, of Rembrandt varnishes and Le Franc crayons, Ion Grigorescu chose the coolness of ruined churches. And when I was reading about the church, he actually went, and stayed, and painted there.

He is simply one of the most important witnesses of his time as our time, divided into biographies and personal happenings. Any biographer will have trouble distinguishing between his life and his work. I believe one presupposes the other, either in transparency or in their mutual reflexion. His biography is just as expressive as his work for the very reason that it prefaces and explains, without other comments, the object created or simply extracted from reality.

Through the concatenation of the artifacts and gestures signed by Ion Grigorescu, we can readily compare him to everything that happened in European art between 1965 and 1991. Le Gac, Rancillac, Boltanski – some of whom he met personally during his Paris voyage – are some of the possible terms of a comparison that set forth Ion Grigorescu for reasons that pertain to intelligent operation in a hostile environment. The western artist had very often to invent, to invent himself. The Romanian one had only to observe or merely to make an inventory of Reality.

The entire array of simple or mixed techniques, of mundane matters to be found in Ion Grigorescu's studio holds together. It hinges on a trans-stylistic dimension that comes from the moral order of the artist and the metastatic disorder of history. The spirit of his work hovers between two limit terms: the distance the artist takes from the rhetoric of the image, of the object, and the Christian closeness to the soul of the world. His work (just like his life) is anti-rhetoric in form, and caring in substance and meaning. Just like his white voice gets no modulation when scolding a child or sympathizing with an old man forgotten by the good Lord waiting in line for the worries of tomorrow, the same way the tone of his image rejects all accents. In the atemporal spectrum, Ion Grigorescu is an Orphic or Franciscan artist. He chants everything homophonically, he speaks to the flowers or to the political power in the same listless key, from within an overexertion that only an indefinite waiting can cause. "Apatheia" helps him to make himself more clearly heard – even today – amidst the general hubbub of the arts, with the new waves of expression, of life, of neo-Caragiale political chaos. The paucity of the product spares the void unto which he progresses, freed from the spectacle and the artisan astuteness – the idea, the metaphor of human

misery itself. In a created object or in an adjusted ready-made – irrespective of technique and matter – the artist obtains a solid reconciliation between Duchamp’s bike wheel and a Christian Orthodox icon, between a mustachioed Mona Lisa (“L.H.O.O.Q.”) and the face of the Holy Virgin. I cannot stop being amazed at an artist who passes nonchalantly from Dada to Duchamp and to the icon; more than that, I cannot digest without perplexity the idea that an artist can manage to reconcile two so different worlds in a stylistic order. I can admit that only by resorting to mystical experience. No matter what he does, say the great spiritualists, man gives praise to the Lord; or as Meister Eckhart put it, “The more man blasphemes, the more he praises the Maker.”

Ion Grigorescu came back to the gallery – and here gallery means high society – after a decade of spiritual exercises and artistic fasting. A poster meager than all the previous ones briefly informed about a four-stage exhibition: “The Ruin”, “Restoration-Iconographic Resources”, “A Retrospect: 1970–1990”, “The Realogram Group” – *Caminul Artei*, February 5–23, 1991.

I found Ion Grigorescu among the very few whom the miracle occurred between December 16 and 22, 1989 did not turn into somebody or something else. I was led to think that by the very reason that the miracle was not followed by others, and because the “metanoia” of the artist had been consumed on the road to his personal Damascus. I had lost the first stage of the exhibition. The difference was minimal: a destroyed harmonium that the author brought home “where it belongs”; for the rest, nothing. At the end of the stairs, near the banister, under the window, excerpts from his diary, a few pages in a clear, highly readable hand. At first sight, there was more of a protest, a more intense rebellion in that exhibition than in the many protests voiced by various articles or shouted in the street for the defence of a settlement (Bucharest or Craiova or the village). At *Caminul Artei*, Ion Grigorescu displayed “The Plan of the Madonna Dudu Church”, dated 1920, more exactly an elevation of the façade on a paper that felt like a palimpsest, an object with an archaeological aura, and yet, a relic saved from the archives of the abandoned attic of a deserted house, in a derelict town. Under a creased, almost careless black-and-white picture the image of a ruined house, and a brief legend cryptically jotted down by the artist: “House in 1883 near Mihai Vodă, murals in oil by Sava Hentia. The Sunday of the demolition.” Among the pillars of the gallery, between the walls scarred by earthquakes, the provisional air of the display, with works leaning on the walls, highlighted the impression of paucity and improvisation. Silhouettes of dogs or wolves, cut in foil or drawn with the chalk on the blackboard, emblems of a nocturnal fear sniffing at unseen tracks, leered at the debunked emblem of

lupa capitolina. Seducing by its simplicity, a pitcher in fretted clay pointed to an analogy with a skeletonized thorax.

Stylistically alienated, all the objects of Ion Grigorescu seemed (at a first, hurried sight) brought together haphazardly. Gradually, a serious vibration, the wave of a compelling compassion got insinuated in the impression. But the artist himself feared to declare and claim his love for everything surrounding him, for the sign of the white cross under which all those were arranged. So, there he was, catching again topicality on vertical rolls of cheap journal paper. Inside his own silhouette contoured in pencil, rested like in Ilf and Petrov a few texts drawn with more interest than his own shadow: "Grigorescu, you want to make a living from art? Win something from art? Sell art as the public, the merchant want it or switch to another trade and be free to make art only when and how you want?" On another roll, the hybrid silhouette of a present-day Janus, half miner, half leader. On that he wrote, asking himself briefly: "The changeover from a communist, an activist, a militiaman, a *Securitate* man, to a private entrepreneur (real estate, stores, propriétaire, immeuble, shop)". Under the cufflinks of the coat he noted, melancholy and resigned: "*Le passage me paraît impossible*. From member of the Communist Party to management consulting." On the shinbone of the character the last question in this drawing: "Can a scumbag refuse a chance?"

The backbone of the exhibition (in its second stage) was an adobe precincts like the ground sketch of a church. Everything coalesced around it.

The third stage. In such a studio, painting did not legitimize itself as painting. Poverty caught the entire object of the painted canvas, the easel, the ground and the frame. And yet, faith irrupted silently from the Mihai Voda landscape. Instead of colour touches, suggesting the roofs, Ion Grigorescu patiently cut strips from metal and stuck them on the canvass. The painting, beautiful in itself, seemed humiliated by the dedication of the toiling artist. Technical cleverness, that free *savoir faire* of modern art appeared systematically undermined in order to clear a vacant ground and make significances stand out clearly. To prove this was true stood the rare moments when the artist approached painting. On a wooden panel, the sketch of a religious composition. The painter behaved like a patient, enduring illuminist who noted lovingly each and every detail of the composition, angel, cherub, canonicals. He did it with the cool obtained from painting saints in churches.

In the fourth stage of the exhibition, Ion Grigorescu preserved only four iron dogs to which he added four paintings representing infants, as a final concentrated algorithm of the others, a tragic metaphor of an equation cause-effect. On the one hand, the despair, the miserable straying of famished dogs, on the other hand the misericordia for beings that misery can touch, for the

infants threatened by the phantasm of an unseen Herod. Next, the artist's guests, his friends departed in the last decade of the "age of light", in a Diaspora of prodigal sons: Matei Lazarescu, Florina Coulin, Ana & Andrei Gheorghiu, Iulian Mereuta. Their work, discreetly featured by a few samples, drawings, and pictures further stressed the austere touch of the one-man show. Their presence exuded through the refusal to forget friends, an ambience that could be unthinkable were it not for the nostalgia of a lost paradise. This is the paradise of those who endured together, accomplices in the conspiracy of hope.

Coriolan BABEȚI

Dan PERJOVSCHI, *Anthropoteque*
(1990–1992)

