



“Memories of Childhood” by Ion Creangă: Style and Stylistics

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The unrivalled virtue possessed by Ion Creangă is that of revealing and using the creative force of popular words. The writer creates in a popular style, keeping the regional phonetics, the easiness of the colloquial speech, the proverbs and sayings. The “spoken” character of Ion Creangă’s language manifests itself with the greatest strength in idiomatic expressions. Any passage from Ion Creangă’s work – be it a long or a short one – contains such stylistic particularities. The paper attempts to emphasize the relevance of the combination of the two stylistics: the so-called literary stylistics and the linguistic one, for the understanding of Ion Creangă’s way of writing.

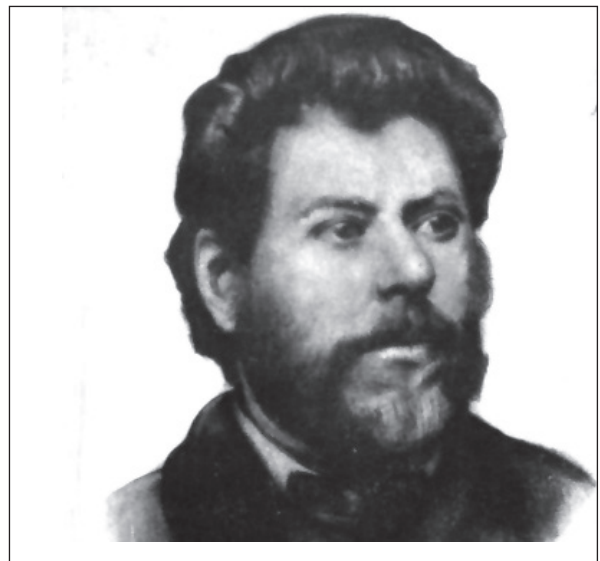
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„Stau câteodată și-mi aduc aminte ce vremi și ce oameni mai erau în părțile noastre pe când începusem și eu drăgălița-Doamne, a mă ridica băiețaș la casa părinților mei, în satul Humuleștii, din târg drept peste apa Neamțului; sat mare și vesel, împărțit în trei părți, care țin tot de una: Vatra Satului, Delenii și Bejenii.

Ș-apoi Humuleștii, și pe vremea aceea, nu era numai așa, un sat de oameni fără căpătăiu, ci un sat vechiu răzășesc, întemeiat în toată puterea cuvântului: cu gospodari tot unul și unul, cu flăcăi voinici și fete mândre, care știau a învăța și hora și suveica, de vuia satul de vatale în toate părțile: cu biserică frumoasă și niște preoți și dascăli și poporeni ca aceia, de făceau mare cinste satului lor.” (Creangă, Ion, *Amintiri din copilărie. Povești și povestiri*. București: ed. Ion Creangă, 1984, pag. 30)

The fragment above is an excerpt from the first chapter of Ion Creangă’s *Memories of Childhood*. From the three dimensions of time, Ion Creangă dwells insistently upon the past, his own biography turning



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into a source for literature. Thus, one can say that the narrative tense used by Ion Creangă in his memories is Past Tense. However, his listeners live under the impression of a continuous epic present. It is the aesthetic tense which appears between the story-teller and the listener, a tense that converts everything into an up-to-dateness, which in its turn becomes a unique reality. The first verb of the fragment – *stau* – stresses this idea. Ion Creangă is still touched by the memory of his native village, Humuleși. Most of the times, the narration (which refers to the personal events from the life and experience of the speaking subject) starts with the Present Tense to continue then with the Past Tense, sometimes in the same sentence, without us being aware of the change.

As I have already mentioned, the paragraph dedicated to the description of the native village begins with the verb *stau* (stop). If in English, the presence of a subject is compulsory, this does not hold true in the Romanian sentence. That is way, the presence of the pronoun *î* (as the logical subject) is not necessary since the inflection of the verb indicates the person the action refers to.

Creangă is, first of all, a narrator. His Memories are poor in descriptions and the characters' portraits are rare. Nature itself does not fit into such a creation since space is entirely blocked by the bustles and the gestures of the heroes and time itself precipitates rapidly and without many pauses. One of the stylistic effects of these features will be the unusual frequency of the temporal determinatives such as the adverb of time *câteodată* (sometimes). This adverb emphasizes the repetitive character of the action performed by the verb *stau*. Even if he is now a grown-up, Ion Creangă cannot help himself recollecting the days of his childhood over and over again. Being a popular writer his work abounds in verbal phrases. They offer a certain fluency, easiness in the manner in which the author describes places, characters or events. Thus, mention should be made with regard to the phrasal verb – *și-mi aduc aminte* (recollect). This is a false reflexive voice because the action expressed by it employs the subject in a way similar to that in the reflexive voice. In fact, such constructions always have a direct object – different from the subject: *și-mi aduc aminte ce vremi și ce oameni* (I...to recollect the times and the people).

Next, we come across the relative pronoun *ce*. Usually, one uses this pronoun to connect a subordinate clause to its main clause. This does not hold true in this case. Words are conditioned, from many points of view, by the context in which they are placed. A minimal form of the context but of primary importance is the determinatives – the part of speech which defines the word. Such context changes the word from a simple notion into a grammaticalized lexical unit. Both *vremi* and *oameni* are polyfunctional and polysemantic

words (*vremi* – temporal dimension, weather, historic period; *oameni* - nation, family, society, etc.). The noun determinative marks not only the “grammatical meanings” but also the lexical ones. In this case, the determinative is not an article (the definite article) but the relative pronoun *ce*. Since the two subjects are not used together with a definite article their qualifying values are brought into prominence. The object is memorized not in its individual, concrete existence but in one of its essential attributes – as a symbol of his childhood. The pronoun *ce* holds a special place. By resorting to it, Ion Creangă stresses a personal involvement; he remembers those days and people with nostalgia, with a feeling of regret. He is still tied to those times which he cannot forget.

The next verb *erau* (used to be) brings those times and people up to the present as if they are in front of our eyes. This could be done by placing the verb into Past Tense (the Romanian Imperfect). I have already mentioned that it is the tense favoured by the author since it gives the action length, increasing its presence in our consciousness. The stylistic value of the Past Tense shows it as the tense proper for the literature of memoirs. The adverbial modifier of place that follows has the role of intensifying and exploiting the dramatic tension, the feelings that overcome the author. From the point of view of syntax, the adverbial modifier is favoured by being placed after the preposition *în* – *în părțile noastre* (in my part of the world). This preposition appears as a means of stressing the visual sensation. The author uses it to restrict the plane: he is not describing the Romanian people or land, but the people from his native region – Moldavia. In this case, the word that carries the adequate semantic load is the personal pronoun *noastre*. By using the plural form, Ion Creangă is no longer a unique individual, but the representative of a whole nation.

Going on with his narration, Creangă establishes several temporal marks. At the level of the phrase, the subordinate clause of time introduced by *când* expresses actions simultaneous or previous to the ones expressed in the main clause. Now that the descriptive plane was briefly drawn, the author turns his attention to the temporal one. He uses this adverb to point out the beginning of the action. This is a voluntary action on the part of the author. He limits the description of time and people to an exact period – childhood. He presents the image of his native village through the eyes of a child that experiences everything for the first time. The verb that follows the adverb, *începusem* (I had just begun), also stresses the beginning, the point of origin. Little by little, almost unnoticed, the author draws our attention to the past, to his childhood. This idea is brought to light by the tenses of the verbs that have been used so far. They stress a descendent journey: the author starts with the Present, continues with a Past



and ends with a Past Perfect.

Further on mention should be made of the conjunction și. Being preceded by the personal pronoun eu, it does not act as a co-ordinate conjunction, but as an emphatic element. Ion Creangă could have decided not to use the personal pronoun since the inflection of the verb indicates the person it refers to. Yet, his aim is to draw attention upon himself. He too has to obey the laws of the circle of life.

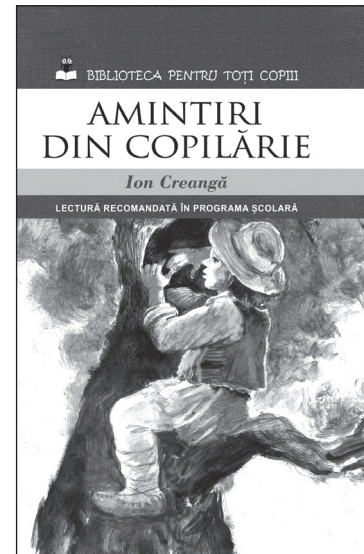
As a popular writer, Creangă invokes very often the Divinity: drăgăliță-Doamne (dear-God). The diminutive drăgăliță underlines a special connection between the author and the supreme Deity. The author feels close to God due to the characteristic innocence of this age – childhood.

A rather strange but yet very effective word choice is the infinitive construction – a mă ridica (to grow up). This verb involves an effort. Moreover, due to its meaning, the action does not connect itself to luck, random, but to the unexpected.

Ion Creangă's strength as a writer resides almost entirely in the narration, the description being almost non-existent. Whenever he wants to show us an interior, a certain scene or atmosphere, the description is confined to the surface converging itself into enumerations: how did the village look like? – satul Humuleștii[...] sat mare și vesel împățit în trei părți... (the village of Humuleștii[...] a large and merry village, divided into three parts...).

The last part of the first paragraph is entirely dedicated to the description of the village. The author starts by mentioning the name of the village: Humulești. In order to get the reader's attention, he resorts once more to a method typical for the popular language: the use of the plural for a singular in words that – from a grammatical point of view – cannot have a plural form, Humuleștii. The popular language employs the plural of a proper name when this ceases to be something unique. His native place comes to resemble all the Moldavian villages. By using the plural, Ion Creangă also increases the intensity of the pronunciation due to the sharpened vowel "i". The same holds true for the proper nouns: Delenii and Bejenii.

The second paragraph continues with the depiction of Humulești and its villagers. In the progress of the narration, the most frequent and striking methods are also borrowed from the popular story-teller. For example, the continuity of the action is underlined through the repetition of the conjunction și. It works as a linking element between the two descriptive paragraphs that present the image of Humulești. Its role is to impel the unfolding of the action. In our literature, the procedure is a very old and familiar one. In order to remove the monotonous effect, an adverbial modifier of time such as apoi is placed after the conjunction. In order to imitate the popular



language, Ion Creangă uses such expression as ș-apoi to introduce main clauses. They are meant to reproduce the naturalness of the spoken language.

Further on, we once more come across the proper noun Humuleștii. This time being the subject of the main clause it anticipates the series of determinatives bearing positive connotations. This idea is carried on by the conjunction și. Together with the noun vremea acts as an emphatic element. Even if the time and the people have changed, Humulești is still the same village of his childhood.

The preposition pe deserves special attention. Usually, it is a preposition that precedes an adverbial modifier of place. And as such, in this particular instance, the logical requirements would have asked for a preposition of time, "in", for example. The preposition pe is a means of connecting the present with the past. This expression pe vremea (in those days) seems to fit best the vernacular character of the novel.

Further on in the economy of the text, the author resorts to the plural form of the first person erau. According to the rules of the concord between the subject and the predicate, the subject Humuleștii asks for a predicate in the plural form. The verb is preceded by a predicative name – numai așa (not just...). The adverbial modifier of manner, asa resumes and sums up an entire context of circumstances. It places the unfolding of the events in the field of the concrete. What follows is the description of the village. We have a second picture of Humulești introduced by the adversative conjunction ci (but). Its role is to stress an opposition. The people from Humulești are not fără căpătăiu (idle people) but un sat vechiu răzășesc (ancient village of freeholders). The preposition fără placed in front of the noun căpătăiu bears some negative connotations. To its opposite side, we have the adjective răzășesc. The only thing they have in common is that they are archaic words. The freeholder (răzeș) is

a person who knows the importance of housework, of owning land.

The sequence of positive determinatives is enriched with the syntagm în toată puterea cuvântului (with a long assured reputation). Both the nouns puterea and its determinative – toată – qualify a certain feature to its highest degree. The archaic term – întemeiat, includes in its basic meaning a relation of determination. Bearing positive connotations it precedes and increases at the same time, the number of the descriptive adjectives that qualify both the village and the villagers.

The extraordinary vitality of the heroes, the enthusiasm and the passion with which they act grants each element hyperbolic dimensions. Whether they play or work – cu flăcăi voinici și fete mândre, care știau a învăța și hora și suveica, de vuia satul de vatale (with robust young men and beautiful girls who knew how to dance but also how to swing the shuttle so that the village would buzz with the sound of the looms on every side) – Ion Creangă's heroes waste a lot of energy identifying themselves with their deeds. On the linguistic level, the consequence of this rather unusual vitality will be the frequency of the ideas in the superlative. This procedure is realized through a range of varied and original ways. We can thus talk about a "superlative of the action". The noun gospodari (farmers) can also be included in this range. This term means someone who is very industrious, someone who runs a prosperous farm. The meaning of the noun is intensified by the determinative unul și unul (hard-working) which acts as an adjective in the superlative. This pronominal phrase resorts to its analytical concrete form of the singular to stress the uniqueness of the people from Humulești.

The next two nouns flăcăi and fete together with their determinatives continue the long list of qualifying adjectives. It is a well-known fact that Ion Creangă's portraits are done in only a few essential lines without paying too much attention to minor details. The above-mentioned syntagm stands testimony to this: we know that the young men (flăcăi) are voinici (robust) and the girls (fetele) are mândre (beautiful). But even so, the picture – as a whole – is a merely graphical one. The words are the best choices under the present circumstances: the noun flăcăi can be applied on the one hand to a handsome man and on the other hand to a young, well-built person. This idea is further carried on by the adjective voinici.

The building of the school in Humulești – a prestigious edifice of Memoirs – is seen in a sonorous environment: de vuia satul de vatale (the village would buzz with the sound of the looms on every side) of an active world, a world open to the future. In order to underline the idea of "intensity" on the one hand and to link the narration, on the other hand, Creangă associates the consecutive conjunction de to the other

ways of expressing the superlative mentioned so far.

Many words in this fragment allow the use of the expressive resources of the speech sounds according to their meaning and the tonality of the text. The verb vuia and the noun vatale are good examples in this respect. Both contain the fricative consonant v which suggests hardness, sonority. They continue to suggest, on the sonorous plane, the image of the play. We also notice the assonance of the open vowel a. It is the most open vowel, maximum opening, which can be emphasized by the length of the duration of pronunciation. Thus, the words are pronounced in a stressed manner gaining nerve and power.

As it can be easily noticed, the two paragraphs abound in enumerations that replace descriptions. Being descriptive passages, there are only a few verbs and they are used mainly in the Past Tense. This tense increases the dynamism of the fragment which – in its essence – is a static one. The picture of the village and its people – as it emerges from the two paragraphs – is remarkable thanks to its dynamic character. The linguistic manifestation is always kept to its highest level of intensity. In order to do this, the author resorts to words with figurative meaning, repetitions, contextual synonymy etc. From a stylistic point of view, we notice the author's preference for long over-elaborate sentences, usually connected by the conjunction "și". As for the figures of speech, they are rather non-existent except for the epithet. All the above-mentioned characteristics make these two paragraphs distinctive piece of writing signed Ion Creangă.

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