A Romanian Disraeli:
Take Ionescu and Fin-de-siècle Aesthetics

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1. Introduction

The relationship between political oratory and literature should be analysed by taking into consideration the wider context of cultural modernisation that took place in Romania during the second part of the 19th century. Concerning this precise period, it is generally admitted that literature, literati and literary things derived their strength from the growing institutionalisation of their practices and, perhaps, from the movement of peripheral aesthetic phenomena to the social limelight. However, the cultural hints surreptitiously embedded into *fin de siècle* political speeches may evince exactly the opposite. But, is it possible that the extension of literary things toward the political message show not the effects of literature-centrism but literature's survival strategy? Is it a sort of disguise that literature perversely assumes in order to divide – into small units or ideologemes – the ideological bulk conveyed throughout the political talk?

On the one hand, *the extension* of the literary domain into commonplace communication emphasizes nothing else but the linguistic channel's "malfunction". Once the conative and phatic functions have melted into reflexivity, the political shows a counter-triumphant disposition. Messages are accelerated or delayed. If we take into account the historical context, one cannot help but notice the infection of political speech with concurrent Decadent aesthetics. On the other, the literary vestiges embedded within the political speech – drifting aesthetic isles, from rhetoric figures to bibliographic references, quotations and illustrative stories that do not have an overt political meaning – should be treated, in a context normally considered as oral, as a pending and burdening textual latency. A play-upon-words with Fredric Jameson's phrase ("political unconscious", applied to literary products) can lead, in the case of explicit political texts, to an analogous, yet oxymoronic, formula. The "aesthetical unconscious", applied to political texts, manifests as a disrupting, perchance anarchic, force. Nevertheless, the same phenomenon can be defined not in terms of Marxist reading – as under-structures or mutinous instinct ("unconscious") – but as an instance of conscious *projection*; indeed, the political

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speech does not cease to project itself into the higher realms of aesthetic autonomy. In spite of its application to current realities and even to strict ideological allegiances, political communication appears to preserve a form of "aesthetic imagination", eventually convertible to what conservative thinkers from Edmund Burke to Russell Kirk (1981) and Leonidas Donskis (2013) have called "moral imagination".

The *extension* (of literary onto politics) and the *projection* (of politics into aesthetics) revert to a triangular conception formed by literature-politics-aesthetics. While the matters still look rather entangled from a theoretical point of view, I tried to find a few examples where the phenomenon of *crossbreeding* or *contamination* (Patraş 2013: 191–201) can illustrate the coexistence of practices specific to oral and written discourses. It is common knowledge that, even though literature usually observes the protocols of written discourse, while the political oratory commits to the rules of oral communication, even though literature has always aspired to aesthetical emancipation (leaving aside referential points), while political oratory has always insisted on the transmission and negotiation of referential reality, both of them share a set of common interests and techniques. First, the main concern of both literature and oratory is to arrest and keep awake the public's attention; second, to create a sense of tradition; third, to give an available, though not always real, image of the world. C. Xeni, a fine commentator of Romanian eloquence, noticed that the great speakers' genius resumes to "the sense of imponderables" or to "the art of possible" (Xeni 1931: 77–78). Like any of the great performances, eloquence is the science of evanescence. When it comes to tropes and figures, literature and oratory share – it goes without saying – the whole list.

2. Eloquence and philanthropy. Andrea Sperelli

Advised by Ion Petrovici, himself an expert on eloquence as attested by his radio conferences (Ion Petrovici 2002, 2008), Eugen Lovinescu assembles an anthology of "occasional writers" (Lovinescu 1943). Incomplete and hasty, this should be considered a collection of literary pieces published by political leaders who, occasionally, committed themselves to noble ineffectuality. Lovinescu proves some intuition on the matter, but he definitely misses Petrovici's point. The orator, says the philosopher, is that person who relies on "spontaneity in phrasing" and "facility of improvisation". This is not far from the 19th century definitions that stress on the "genial" touch of public speaking. However, what the audiences applaud the most in the genial speaker is neither his visionary powers nor his personal talents. Again, Take Ionescu's biographer puts a stress on enthrallment, on arresting magic, on "sorcery" (Xeni 1931: 145), on "apocalyptic diction". Xeni's remark is worth inquiring because it depicts the political orator as an ambiguous Medusa, that is, half-masculine – half-feminine, anyway able to awake what the Decadents used to call the "sacred horror". Thus, the embedment of beauties into the political message represents a stimulus, an activator of attention, which now directs towards the speaker's personality. The orator himself undertakes a process of reification and becomes an "objet d'art".

Indeed, Lovinescu's own view on Take Ionescu rests on a rather dandyish portraiture – long frocks, slim frame, white skin, with hues of French red, graceful

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and almost invertebrate movements, drawing the Romanian states-man near the 13th Lord Derby's appearance (Lovinescu 1943: 111). Also, the politician's most fierce adversaries engross the feminine lines of his character. Nicolae Filipescu says that everything in Take Ionescu follows the logic of the curve: the forehead, the temples, the cheeks, the chin, the head's line, the arch of the moustache. Certainly, the figure of this polymorphic genius attracted, like the mystery of the Medusa, all his contemporaries. But there is still more to this approach. For instance, browsing one of the most informed treatises on graphology – Henri Stahl's publication from the late twenties – one can come upon a fine analysis of Take Ionescu's writing, an almost-scientific disclosure of the psychology/ physical appearance laid beforehand. The reputed expert, who also breveted a method of parliamentary stenography, gives a facsimiled autograph and insists on the writer's feminine writing as well as on a tendency towards dissidence, that is, to "doing everything by himself". The quality grows more explicit when equipped with high-mindedness, fastidiousness, and native intelligence (Stahl n.d.: 99–101).

Being aware that the perceived beauty escapes the square diagnosis, C. Xeni resorts to a craftier solution. He catches Take Ionescu's personality askew, by describing his house. This is a double-decked space, accommodating a Janus Bifrons, a man of as many talents as Hydra's heads or, in Joseph Campbell's terms, a "hero with thousand faces" (Campbell 1949). On the ground floor, the politician lives a bourgeois life, occasionally befallen by the pleasures of philanthropy, surrounded by his burgundy leather armchairs, by his books always bound in burgundy leather, and by his wife's assorted portrait, herself dressed in a burgundy velvet dress. Nevertheless, the first floor breathes another sort of air and houses other sorts of "airs": the high aristocrats, the European most famous diplomats, the trendiest ladies. Take Ionescu's house contains two different worlds (Xeni 1931: 233). Xeni's biographical account ends with the image of the Polar Star – the only one that does not undergo the decline, as the majority of earthly things. Here comes the reference to one of D'Annunzio's heroes from the *Trilogy of the Rose*. The biographer is implying of course Andrea Sperelli, the main character of *The Pleasure*, and excerpts the following fragment: "Omul nu are pe lume decât ceea ce dă"/ "The man has nothing in this world except what he gives" (Xeni 1931: 500). One may feel here the ambiguity between philanthropy and dandyish exposure. Later, Ion Petrovici will also emphasize the Take Ionescu's sensuality, daring to compare the speaker's sentences with Rubens' rosy and rubicund faces (Petrovici, qtd. in Haneş& Solomonovici n.d.: 147).

3. Extension of Literature into Ideological Gallimaufry: From Dissidence and Centrism to pure Take-ism

For a fact, the biographer wants to portray neither the image of a radical democrat nor the portrait of a harsh conservative boyar. On the contrary, the politician re-asserted, from 1884 on, his personal opinion that, in a country dominated by illiteracy and political inexperience, the universal suffrage represents the sure way to dictatorship (Ionescu, qtd. in Xeni 1931: 73). Commentators such as C. Xeni, E. Lovinescu, Nicolae Filipescu, C-tin Dissescu, Henri Stahl, Sterie

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Diamandi, Ion Petrovici, Maude Rea Parkinson, and so forth highlight one and the same personality trait. The moralists would call it "moderation", whereas the political philosophers would name it "centrism". Eventually, this "eloquent dissidence" (Patraş 2015, 35–51) turns into pure "Take-ism", that is, Take Ionescu's own doctrine.

By the end of the 19th century, Take Ionescu stands as the undisputable icon of centripetal political drives. He begins by being a liberal under I.C. Brătianu's flag (1884), then he passes into the dissident liberal fraction (together with C.C. Arion, Al. Djuvara, Caton and Ion Lecca, and Nicolae Fleva), and speaks on behalf of the Joint Opposition (*Opoziţiunea Unită*) for seven years. Afterwards, he enters the Conservative Party in 1891; but he would also split with them in 1908, and eventually form his own party, named in the fashion of Benjamin Disraeli's politics "Conservative-Democratic Party". As in Disraeli's case (Maurois 1930), *political volatility* as well as *the personality cult* define Take Ionescu's tendency to "centrism".

Since I do not aim to enlarge on a strict definition of political "centrism", I would like to draw the attention to the causes and effects of such behaviour. First and foremost, centrism is triggered by the refusal of radical solutions. Second, centrism cannot exist without dissidence and party switching. Third, centrism legitimises itself by appealing to a mild ideological gallimaufry such as "liberal-conservatism", "democrat-conservatism", "conservative socialism", "socialist-liberalism", and "aristocratic-democrat-ism". Fourth, finally yet importantly, centrism cloaks the personality cult, the personality-as-large-as-an-institution, which, in its turn, unveils the sweet temptations of tyranny. Once clarified the nature of centrist allegiances, I have to remark on the fact that the same ideological blend is specific to the Decadent Movement and to Decadent figures, that is to all dandies from Brummel to Disraeli. Scholars have already drawn the attention to a whole cluster of political biases, hidden or apparent within the aesthetes' creed (Swart 1964, Dellamora 1990, Constable, Denisoff & Potolsky 1998), so there is no need to consider that in detail.

Nevertheless, my opinion is that centrism and aestheticism – understood largely, as a way of contemplating life, get along quite well, considering their love of dissidence and a certain thirst for autonomy cultivated by both of them. They share, as Walter Bejamin would put it, a "negative theology" (Benjamin 1936), that is, the absence of a higher, transcendental referent. It is implied that both the political practitioner and the dandy seem to share the same "negative theology" because they are prone to revert everything to themselves. Additionally, Barbey d'Aurevilly points out that Beau Brummel's figure for instance contains the tension between "those Machiavelli of elegance" and "those Machiavelli of politics" (d'Aurevilly 1995: 38–39). Thus, the dandy is nothing but a political product and cannot breathe outside the sphere of political life.

No wonder that Take Ionescu, who publicly celebrated dissidence a score of times and preached on both ambition and tyrants, fits well in the portrait of the perfect "dandy". The way contemporaries stored his memory has something to do with the history of Romanian mores as well as the romantic and highly influent Disraeli model. Take Ionescu's dandy *persona* (betting everything on his eloquence) represents the aestheticized icon of Take Ionescu's political action. Turned into a

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cultural artefact and infused with Machiavelli's ideas and a bit of Mephistopheles posture, "Take"-ism (rapidly turned into a party ideology as such) becomes what the Romanian public would retrieve in terms of "aesthetic imagination".

No later than 1886 – when Take Ionescu was only 28, the gifted lawyer and prospective politician breaks with the Liberal Party, also with I.C. Brătianu, and passes into a faction intimidatingly called "The Dissidence". Although N. Fleva, C.C. Arion, Al. Djuvara and the Lecca brothers had founded the group, it is very significant that Take Ionescu assumes the spokesperson's office; thence, he would repeat on and on "we, the Dissidents", "we, the assassins". Consequently, he is also the one who will later inherit and carry on the part of the typical dissident. The orator builds his dissident speeches on gastronomic figures, which he will reiterate throughout his career: "ospăţ" – *banquet*, "tacâmuri" – *cutlery*, "feluri de mâncare" – *dishes*, and last but not least "pofta legitimă... de putere" – *the legitimate appetite of power* (Ionescu 1897: 95, 176). Besides, he sees the relationship party-members not as one of inclusion, but as one of dissent and personal sacrifice (Ionescu 1897: 96). Even Cervantes' hero, Don Quixote, is now fit to impersonate a genuine dissident, while liberalism sideslips toward individual, perhaps anarchic, liberty.

In 1887, when Take Ionescu tackles with issues such as freedom of assembly, of speech, and of the press, the young dissident pleads, with obvious gusto, for a score of "plotting places", for plotting in general: the Circus, Mazar Paşa's house and garden, "Orpheus" Hall. The informal spaces for talking politics, thus for plotting, where earnest teenagers could listen to the masters of eloquence, also trigger the memory of Take Ionescu's own literary aspirations. One of his speeches on the "Amnesty of Botoşani" calls forth the times when he used to be an industrious contributor of "Revista Junimei". Bitter both on the change of profession and on literature's futility, Ionescu remarks that, in his youth, "young people were sufficiently insane so as to publish their things into literary journals" (Ionescu 1897: 154).

The Liberal Dissidence from 1880 certainly counted on the allegiance of "cultivated and refined classes", while – and the versed dissident understood why – masses looked down on it as a form of *military desertion* (Ionescu 1897: 176). Whatsoever, Take Ionescu will not give up on this *persona*, and will summon the same word ("dissidence") as well as related phrases when, a freshly anointed conservative, he speaks in 1891: "If needed, a dissidence can be accepted, the second dissidence makes one ridiculous, while the third dissidence means committing suicide" (Xeni 1931: 118). Moreover, the orator reflects on being a dissident and finds out that not treason but the waste of energy is the most blameable thing. On other occasions, the dissident hypostasis blends with a breath of ambition and vanity:

> Ambition, Gentlemen, is a strange passion. When one possesses it to an average extent, ambition is a real danger, because it makes one suffer a lot due to unpleasant situations suffered in order to get high honours; but when ambition is really great, then it turns into a shield which makes one pursue the power and not the high honours (Xeni 1931: 81, 125).

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The recipe of political success, Take Ionescu believes, is made of three ingredients, all of them marked out by great ambition: intelligence, instruction, and authority (Ionescu 1897: 148). As we can notice, ambition and the overt plea for tyranny are closely connected. Many times, Take Ionescu reverts to tyrants by using a large span of names and figures, from Caligula, Augustus, and Tiberius (Ionescu 1903: 9) to the Borgia (Ionescu 1897: 95) and the dictators from South America. The word "tyranny" receives richer colours from its determinants: "hypocritical", "violent", "clownish", "anonymous", "earnest/honest/ legitimate" (Ionescu 1902: 115; Ionescu 1897: 355; Ionescu 1904: 6).

One can think that such patchwork of ideas simply belongs to the sphere of political sciences. Nevertheless, Take Ionescu's speeches should win the literary critic's reverence for their discrete literary antecedents: textualising quotations from newspapers, introducing strong political metaphors ("the church of conservatism"; "the flag of liberalism", "the inferno of political solitude"), re-contextualising *obiter dicta* and proverbs, circulating cultural names (Borgia, Cervantes, Cicero, Lamartine, Hugo). For instance, the Romanian proverb "Blood does not turn into water" stands beside the English "Blood is thicker than water" (Ionescu 1897: 41). Or, Barbu Katargiu's saying "totul pentru ţară, nimic pentru noi"/ "everything for our country, nothing for us" turns into the more abstract dictum "pentru dreptate totul, nimic pentru putere"/ "everything for justice, nothing for power/glory" (Ionescu 1902: 27). When political wisdom is implored, sayings by Cicero (Ionescu 1902: 50) and Miron Costin (Ionescu 1904: 12) make a perfect quote. But the most spectacular example of re-signification lies in a speech delivered in 1892 and ended with a paraphrase to I.L. Caragiale's famous line from *O scrisoare pierdută* ("Mai ai puţintică răbdare"/ "Have a little bit of patience!"), a play staged already in 1884 and extremely inspirational for a score of other parliamentary orators: "only then, when you prove that this government is not a good one, only then will you be right. But till then you should have a bit of patience" (Ionescu 1902: 15).

Yet, maybe the strongest attachment to literature rests in Take Ionescu's way of contemplating the world, like an Epicurean seated into a theatre hall, whose harsh and horrid reality lies under the props. At the same time, the experienced tribune-man does not cease a moment to be perfectly aware of himself being watched and read by a public. Which leads – not only in Ionescu's case, but also in others', to a writer' acute awareness and even to a sort of uneasiness and sterility (Ionescu 1902: 3–15). Sometimes he would recall the evanescent beauty of artistic performances (either in theatre/music or in oratory) and would match it with the beauty of an hour's glory:

> let us think of a single thing: no one can be sure of tomorrow. A single hour belongs to the man, and this is the present hour… Let us show ourselves great and strong in this present hour and we will be able to live an entire immortal life in the span of this present hour (Ionescu 1902: 3–15).

Sometimes exhausted by political fights like a mythological creature in-between Sisyphus (Ionescu 1902: 33) and Prometheus (Ionescu 1904: 3–12), the states-man affects the idea of his imperfect political work: "We do not have the vanity to believe that we will do a perfect work" (Ionescu 1904: 3–12).

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The recurrence of "evanescence" tropes emphasizes the secret and morbid fluid that binds Decadent art and the myths about eloquence. For instance, Take Ionescu considers that Alexandru Lahovary could shine "like no other, by practising the most ungrateful of all arts":

> Eloquence – says he as if for his case only – does not count on the words as such, but on their movement, on the voice and, especially, on the mysterious bond between the one who speaks and those who listen, which gives the orator the most precious command; the command of souls, even if only for an instant (Ionescu, qtd. in Lahovary 1905: XXXVIII–XLVIII).

Also, it seems that fierce "passion" represents the secret key for attaining excellent eloquence skills. Oratory is not only an evanescent, if not defective, art, but also a way to free the political man from the chains of present pressures, whether ideological or factual. While putting his mind into words, the speaker becomes a scene where passion is "staged"; he embodies an autonomous world, severed from history, like Leibniz's monad. At the end of 19th century, the autonomy given by one's own talent and ability to freeze present issues into aesthetical frames becomes a strong point of speeches on the very topic of political oration. It is noteworthy that Take Ionescu himself enjoyed, on John Chrysostom's model, the reputation of a "golden-mouth". His own perception of his nickname (*Tăchiţă Gură-de-aur*/ *Little Take Golden-Mouth*) does not rely on the discourse's polemical power, but on its power to abstract and declutch from polemics. Consequently, once abstracted from reality and history, the voice that utters the golden words can claim its own political autonomy, if not its sovereign right to cross the floor, to switch sides and create dissident factions.

4. Projections of Political Talk: Utopian Thinking, Alpinist Practices, and a Couple of Souvenirs

Not only Take Ionescu himself, but also literary historians counted his figure in the gallery of literati who made a career in the field of letters before 1900 (*Dicţionarul* 1979: 451). Under the pseudonyms Juanera and Tya, the young Demetru G. Ionnescu publishes poetry (*Contemplare/* "Contemplation", *Refren de toamnă*/ "Autumn Refrain", *La lună*/ "To the Moon"), short prose (*Roze albe şi roşie*/ "White and Red Roses", *Ută pagină din viaţa unui visător*/ "A Page from a Dreamer's Life", *Ută lacrimă*/ "A Teardrop", *Spiritele anului 3000*/ "The Spirits of Year 3000"), and literary criticism. One of his prose pieces quotes one of Mihai Eminescu's lines from *Mortua est*. Perpessicius, the editor of Eminescu's complete works, is pleased to discover in Ionescu's youth writings not only references to Gerard de Nerval and Edgar Allan Poe (in Baudelaire's translation), but also a complete and up-to-date knowledge of the Romanian literature (Eminescu 1943: 222–223). The mature Take Ionescu continued, though, to indulge himself into this futile occupation by approaching the very popular form of memoirs (*Souvenirs*), nature/ travel account (*In the Carpathians*) and evocation/ panegyric (funeral orations).

One of the most startling writings Take Ionescu ever published is a utopian or SF story entitled *The Spirits of Year 3000*, inspired by Louis Sébastien Mercier's *The Spirits of Year 2440*. Ion Hobana holds that what the daring Romanian teenager

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wrote in 1875 can stand a matching with H. G. Wells' prose (Hobana 1968: 18). If both Perpessicius and C. Xeni were struck by the author's culture and by what might be reasonably called a "Borgesian" setting (the theme of the world-as-library, the list of favourite books and authors, the labyrinthine vision), Ion Hobana notices the author's bold imagination. Take Ionescu narrates how the frame of our descendants will change in the future, how the clime will get milder, how the deserts will turn into seas, how the endless prairie will be used for agriculture, how the old forests will be explored, how people will manage to create an artificial island, where the city named Liberty, that is, the Capital of the whole Planet Earth, will be seated. With a bit of effort, all these may be found in Ionescu's own legislative projects. The introduction is worth quoting for its morbid and decadent trails:

> I had died. A cold and heavy stone had been pressing my feeble frame for over a thousand years, and, in the small room that the coffin (which now had been only wrecks and pieces) would allow me, I could hardly take a breath from the damp and thick air. A thousand years or so passed since I had left the world and I still could not fancy getting out from my bleak, yet peaceful, dwelling, so as to find out what the humankind had made over eleven centuries. In the date of August 13th, however, I was stricken *by such unbearable spleen, that all my nerves were tensed with an extraordinary force* [emphasis added]. So I decided to get out (Ionescu qtd. in Hobana 1968: 20–21).

Surely, getting out of the grave and entering into politics is the handiest way to heal these tensed nerves and spleen.

The first observation on humankind is that Aru (the guide to the world of year 3000), even though dwarfed and somehow dimorphic, wears a Greek costume, which shows that fashion, in spite of its ebbs and flows, finally returns to original cuts. Then, the time-traveller finds out the following: all nations are united into the Kingdom of Frankness/ "Regatul Sincerităţii"; they are truly dedicated to the Religion of Reason/ "Religia Raţiunii"; there is no other God but Consciousness. When passing thorough the gallery of historical personalities, the pilgrim remarks that there are no decorations. Such stuff is considered the "seals of treason" (Ionescu qtd. in Hobana 1968: 38). The cityscape of Bucharest resembles now that of Venice. The houses are surrounded by Oriental gardens, the tableware is made of pure silver, and rooms are decorated with red velvet and flimsy whites. Anyway, what the traveller finally discovers is the fact that he is the primogenitor of a noble lineage, that he is a "Don" and a blazon owner! Being an aristocrat ensures highlife standards, visits to respectable families, meetings with fine ladies (Ionescu qtd. in Hobana 1968: 43). Even if Take Ionescu's utopia seems to be radically democratic (by insisting on liberal principles such as honesty, frankness), its deeper strata already announce both the aristocratic mystifications from *Souvenirs* and the "twists" from later political talk. Truth is that utopias are the ones which actually shelter ideals and personal ambitions. In this case, what is the most cautiously sheltered is young Demetru G. Ionnescu's dream of dining with kings, noblemen and classy people. Perhaps, his early, most dandyish, mystification of identity, in the vein of Disraeli's characters, from Vivian Grey and Contarini Fleming to Conigsby and Endymion.

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In his anthology of "occasional writers", E. Lovinescu believes to have chosen the most representative item from the Romanian statesman's literature. However, the text is not a written piece, but a conference as well, delivered at "Ateneu" Society in 1902. Nonetheless, this seems a sort of literature, because it is a speech on a non-political topic, resting on the beautiful and oxygenated views of the Carpathians. Coming forward to the tribune and being followed by a quasi-academic public, Take Ionescu would repent his position of "prodigal son" and confess his former literary posture (Ionescu qtd. in Lovinescu 1943: 115). Moreover, the experienced dissident makes use of a literary trick. The figure of the "lost manuscript" transfers, when convoked into the space of oration, into the figure of the "lost topic". This time, the speaker's lost topic is Ibsen's drama *Emperor and Galilean*, more precisely, as he himself explains, "a genius' attempt to permeate the mind of another genius". Quickly discarded, the few impressions on Ibsen's theatre are exchanged with a subject quite unknown to classical eloquence, be it Roman or Greek. Nevertheless, a practical and original subject.

Take Ionescu endeavours to give a description and a new word, a view on the mountains and a commutation of "alpinism" (coming from the Alps) into "carpathianism" (coming from the Carpathians). Those already familiarized with Blaga's theories on "the Mioritic Space" (a hillside landscape, gently curved, in the fashion of transhumance rhythms) will certainly recognize the impetus of regional patriotism and the haste in giving a proper definition of the Romanian identity. Anyway, for the orator, nature represents a provider of aesthetical emotions that could tame the greedy beast hidden in each and every of us (Ionescu qtd. in Lovinescu 1943: 119). More than that, nature awakens the free man within the conventional *zoon politikon* and, of no lesser importance, it also brings out "the unutterable beauty of freedom" (Ionescu qtd. in Lovinescu 1943: 121).

What strikes the eye is Take Ionescu's melancholic, tiresome mood. From the very beginning, the man who has climbed at the "Ateneu" tribune points at the emptiness and uselessness of our worldly life. The speech does not stop on the Ecclesiastes' well-known image, but it is growing from the idea, perfectly opposed to his novel's visions, that life on this planet will extinguish some day; and not only will the life on earth cease, but also the planet itself will vanish into the great and dark universe (Ionescu qtd. in Lovinescu 1943: 119). Even though one might imagine the apocalyptic view comes from 19th century science, what Take Ionescu names "a world of thoughts" drives back, perhaps, to Mihai Eminescu's way of figuring civilisation in *Memento mori*.

Still more useful for our case here is Ionescu's own way to develop the *ubi sunt* trope. He styles himself as a Roman emperor (Trajan) and imagines, while looking at the ruins of Dacia's old capital (*Sarmisegethusa*), the clamorous fights between gladiators and lions, the elegant matrons and dignified patricians seated on the stone benches (Ionescu qtd. in Lovinescu 1943: 137). Beyond any geographical information and travel impressions, the speech called *In the Carpathians* leaves a paradoxical, if not uncanny, feeling; speaking about courage, mountaineering, taking risks and, consequently, about the necessity of upward mobility on the social scale – better said, the necessity of opportunism and of social "Alpinism"/ "Carpathianism", Take Ionescu's construction spreads a species of dim, crepuscular halo. Following to

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the Romantics' infatuation for oneiric landscapes and ruins, this sight on the Carpathians presents "the mountains covered in snow under the twilight sky" (Ionescu qtd. in Lovinescu 1943: 130). Once the light fades away, the aesthetical miracle, much like the transient glory derived from eloquence, passes into darkness:

> As the light was fading away, climbing up to the mountains and throwing reality into imagination, we started to live a future history for which nobody should blame us because it was nothing else but a dream (Ionescu qtd. in Lovinescu 1943:142).

Otherwise, guilt, blame and usefulness – all of them derived from the literate's posture – do not stop Take Ionescu to publish, two decades after, a collection of memories and anecdotes about the world of European diplomacy around the World War I. Few are those who have noticed the highly projective character of Ionescu's *souvenirs*. Whereas historians have looked for real facts provided by the Romanian diplomat, the literary eye remains really impressed by the fresco of an aristocratic assembly gathered in such small editorial space. The names and ranks belong chiefly to the Austrian, Hungarian or Prussian nations, but they also come from France, England or Romania.

At first sight, the statesman's memoirs look like a sort of trendy publication, in the fashion of Claymoor's *La vie à Bucharest*. It is not the geostrategic issues that catch the interest here. On the contrary, we learn that Prince of Lichnowsky did not make a successful career because he was a slow goer and an indolent, like the people in Constantinople, where he was an ambassador for a couple of years (Ionescu 1921: 9). Count Berchtold seems to be very polished, but in actual terms, he lacks coherence and logic, so the memorialist suspects him of sheer stupidity (Ionescu 1921: 17-21). Then, even if an intelligent and maybe fascinating person, Marquis Pallavicinni is nothing but an ugly brute with a Mephistopheles grin (Ionescu 1921: 23). Even if a great lord, Count Gloutchowsky has the tasteless idea to display his decorations in an ordinary Viennese café (Ionescu 1921: 40–43). Count Czernin represents a mere sample of dirty language and vulgarity, mixed with natural cunning (Ionescu 1921: 74–81). All in all, Take Ionescu's account drives to a single point, which actually reminds us of the thesis embedded in *The Spirits of Year 3000*; that the old aristocracy should be dismissed and replaced by meritocratic leagues.

5. Conclusions

Among other things, Take Ionescu was endowed with a talent for panegyric oration. C. Xeni remarks that the orator would read his speeches only at funerals (Xeni 1931: 153). Put in different contexts, the speaker counts on his easy improvisation on no more than three or four ideas. But not speaking at funerals made Take Ionescu discover his particular reverence for death! As detailed above, death is thematised through the predilection for burials/ mortuary settings and through the transposition of dead people's sensations (*The Spirits…*), then through the crepuscular image of beauty and a sense of evanescence/ imperfection (*In the Carpathians*), and last but not least, through a special understanding for the philosophy of clothes and for all things superficial. Actually, they build up the image of a dandy, who liked to contemplate life at great distance. A master of

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eloquence, Take Ionescu used to perplex his contemporaries in the same way as the figure of Medusa.

It is obvious now that the reputed Romanian politician did not lose his grip on literary effects by any means, and finally turned aesthetic autonomy into the hailed principle of political dissidence. Not really derived from a strict calculus, his dissidences always burst from his temper's inclination toward dissent. Nevertheless, they also burst from frustrated literary talent. Extended to political talk and projected into the public's aesthetic imagination, this is how the idea of literature eventually managed to survive even in hard times of "Realpolitik".

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Abstract

The present paper reflects on the relationship between political oratory and literature by taking into consideration the wider context of Romania's cultural modernisation (second half of the 19th century). The analysis builds on the hypothesis that, during this period, there is an *extension* of literature into politics and a *projection* of political action/speech into aesthetics and applies this frame on Take Ionescu's youth speeches, as well as on his fictions (poetry, novels, short-stories, memoirs). Taking into consideration his intellectual biography and other circumstances, my conclusion is that – much like Benjamin Disraeli – Take Ionescu embodies the political dandy, an autonomous figure, a personality-as-large-as-an-institution, who can also act as a catalyst of *dissidence*.

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