A FORGOTTEN ACCENT

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Abstract:

Unlike its European sisters, French, Italian or Spanish, the Romanian language remains the only Romance language in which the graphic accent is not marked. Of course there are studies attempting to establish accentuation rules on a series of words - but the rules are few, the exceptions many - and the words of a language ... are very, very many, of the hundreds of thousands order. Romanian remains in the situation of English or Russian, where the accent is a matter of habit - or it can simply shift out of the speakers' desire / ignorance.

We are talking about Romanian words which have different meanings according to where we put the accent. As it concerns the verse 84 from *Epigonii* ("Epigones') by M. Eminescu, where the Present form */voi/ mergeţi* is considered by certain editors as an Imperfect form*: /voi/ mergeaţi*, we compare the Imperfect forms stressed by M. Eminescu himself with the same forms unstressed by the poet, and we conclude that the poet stressed only under rhythm, with a prosodic aim, generating what he called "the ethic accent", i.e. the word is not stressed so as to underline its relevance in the context. To sum up, the accentual forms must be kept different from the unstressed ones, as it is the author's personal writing system, which has its poetic meaning, and must be understood.

Key-words:

Accent, Eminescu, *Epigones*, Perpessicius, text editing, pale, visionary.

As far back as 1962 Romulus Vulpescu wrote, in the „Limba română" ("The Romanian Language") Magazine (No.2, p.188-189): "... if the graphic accentuation will not be considered by linguists as a necessity and will not therefore be transformed into a spelling rule, I suggest (...) that a paragraph should be inserted in which to record that any writer (not in a narrow, professional sense, but in the broad one of the man who writes) has the liberty to use the graphic accent whenever and wherever he deems it necessary". The illustrious writer particularly envisaged the emphasis with a stylistic role, indicating the origin of a character from a certain social class, his desire to climb the ladder by using unassimilated words, etc. – but he also addressed the current accentual doublets in the language, accepted by rules: each should mark them according to the form chosen or cultivated. Under the conditions of the rather entropic years before 1989, when communication had language limits, that certainly remained an internal matter. After 1989, however, along with the journalism boom, the diversification of communication, the lack of concern for the graphic

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aspect of writing is increasingly felt ... how should I say? - more uncomfortable. In a Europe of nuances, in a Europe in which most languages carefully mark the accent, Romania continues to behave as in the 60s of last century. Before those years, however, the interwar years lapsed, then the years of our literary classics followed - when the accent used to be marked within the limits of common sense.

... We are not saying that the Romanian language is learned from the classics, but we insist that one can understand it better by studying their works. We are not talking only about the spoken, but also about the written language. Classical literature can also offer solutions in this case. Let's take the accent as an example. Its marking in writing, especially when relevant, is compliant exactly with the phonetic principle of writing, i.e. with the imperative: "Let's write as we speak." We know very well that the accent is movable (variable) in Romanian. The more recent norms accept easily even the accent doublets (*edítor* and *editór*, etc.), but they overlook much too easily the numerous cases when the meaning of the word changes according to the accent. The difference between *cópii (copies) / copíi (children)* is rarely noted in writing (since it is obvious!), but, usually, the text is left without diacritical signs, at the reader's discretion. It is true that the great writers used to make puns based on the unmarked accent. Marin Preda said somewhere about one of his characters that he used to stress the name of *Stalin* as he would the name of „Mărin". As the author could not write with an accent, he suggested it by using another word, with a different accentuation. Somewhere else, he said that Nicolae Moromete used to spell the word *umanism (humanism)* as split in two, with a long *u*: he wanted to make a cult pun on the title of the work written by Thomas Morus, *Utopia* (originating from *ou, ouk*, negation in Greek, and *topos*, "place", the meaning being "the inexistent place", as humanism was unknown to the young son of Moromete ...). These are the artist's possibilities/availabilities to use the given writing system. When Titu Maiorescu' work was studied in more detail in our schools, we knew that the title of his critical study, "În lături", although not bearing a graphical accent, was to be spelled with a stressed *u* (which translates *"In Slops')*, according to the author's will, whereas the spelling with a stressed *a* translates *"Aside"*. In the 1960s of the past century (when the novel "Morometţii" was first published), Romulus Vulpescu published in *Limba Română* magazine of the Institute of Linguistics of the Romanian Academy a list, in fact a real dictionary of Romanian words whose meanings differ according to the accent, so as to signal to the linguists the necessity to introduce the actual graphical sign in writing. His attempt was in vain. Romulus Vulpescu's dictionary deserves to be published as a good example of Sisyphus' work, both properly, and

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figuratively. There is at least one field where the accentuation should be compulsory: that of proper names (people, places, waters, etc.). In Bucharest, for example, everybody spells *Mânăstirea Caşín (monastery)*, but in Oneşti, where I graduated from high-school, they spell *Râul Cáşin (river).* Valentin Talpalaru reminded me in this context our debate, at a literary soiree somewhere near Galaţi, around the name of Calistrat Hogaş. Although the writer himself repeatedly pointed out that his name was to be spelled *Hogáş,* as it came from *hogaş, făgaş (route), Hógaş*, with the shifted accent, finally gained the upper hand (the need of censure between the three-syllable *Ca-li-strát* and the disyllabic *Hogaş* may explain that option). It could be compared to *Hogaşu,* with a final syllabic *–u*, where the stress would naturally, almost compulsorily, fall on *-a*.

An older linguistic incident makes me insist on this. Some time ago, I was teaching at Târgovişte and, together with other professors, we commuted in the car of the institute. To kill the time, we would make comments about the road signs, one of which stood at kilometre 60: "Matraca 3 km". The second or the third time when we passed by it, a distinguished professor of French told us that he noticed a very peculiar resemblance between that word and the French term "matraque", a word probably of Gaelic origin, meaning "cudgel, club, mace", and that it might be an indication of how closely related we are to the French, even by toponymy. Time passed, but the information lingered in my mind. After an year or so, I was accompanied by other persons, on the same road, and the car stopped near the road sign "To Matraca". (I think we had a puncture ... or we stopped for some cigarettes, near a kiosk). There, I asked a local if the village of Matraca was far away from where we were standing. He did not seem to understand my question, so I repeated it, pointing at the road sign. "Ah, *Matracà* !? No, it's not very far from here, around 3 kilometres", he replied looking at the same road sign. How could I possibly ask him about *club, cudgel, mace,* or if they used any words similar to *matraque*! The man had pointed out to me that the word was differently stressed, the name of the village Matraca from Dâmboviţa county counting in the accentual series of *macarà, tuslamà, ciulamà* etc. Thus, *Matracà* has nothing to do with the Gaelic cudgel. It comes more probably from *matracúcă, matracúc, matracà (vulgar, immoral and unpleasant woman)*. It derives from the old *mătrăgună (belladonna)*, associated by Haşdeu with the Spanish *mandragora.*

Then, what can a scientist or a simple fan of etymologies and similitudes do in such cases? The graphical accent is necessary for clarifications. I am thinking of a foreigner: how does he/she spell *Vâlcea*, for example? We still have to discuss whether we should use a

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single kind of accent, the sharp accent, for example, or two, or all three accents used in French and Greek. But it is one thing to have "l'embarras du choix", and another thing not to be able to choose at all, just because you have no idea which to choose ... Put between two hayricks and not knowing which one to choose, Buridan's donkey may starve to death. I think these examples are just enough for me to return to Eminescu, in search of accents. I will start the discussion with a line which has concerned me for many years. I am talking about line 84 of *Epigonii* (*The Epigones*). In the present editions, after Perpessicius, the context is the following (vv. 82-84):

"*Voi urmaţi cu răpejune cugetările regine, / Când plutind pe aripi sânte printre stelele senine, /Pe-a lor urme luminoase voi asemene mergéţi*."

("You follow with tumultuous flight the mounted glory of your thought / And in among the gleaming stars on sky-born wings you lightly sport, / While up the comets' blazing track your spirit in its swiftness soars").

This sharp accent on *mergéţi* gives me great trouble, so to say (I was left with the image of the club from Matraca in mind ...). Until 1939, when Perpessicius' edition appeared, the previous editions (the 11 editions of Maiorescu, the editions of G. Bogdan-Duică, G. Ibrăileanu, G. Călinescu, C. Botez etc.) spelled *mergeţi*, the Present, with an accent at the end, rhyming with *îngheţ* in line 81. Again without an accent, the text also appears in *Convorbiri literare*, on August 15th, 1870, the first printing of the poem. But after reading a handwritten draft of Eminescu - manuscript 2257.84 (in fact, an almost finished form of the poem, of which the facsimile he published) - Perpessicius commented:

"As we can infer from the context, where the other verbs are in the imperfect, and as we can also notice from the pattern on page 34, Plutéţi, mergéţi are in the imperfect and represent two successful cases of visual rhymes." (I, p. 296, note).

The facsimiled manuscript spells "Pe-a lor urme luminóse voi asemine plutéţi mergéţi" (deleted *plutéţi*), and the stressed vowel marks, in the traditional writing of the Romanian language, the diphthong: *luminoase, pluteaţi, mergeaţi.* In his second edition *Opere alese (Selected Works)*, 1966 - I work with the 1973 edition - Perpessicius maintained that view and explained in a note:

"...as two lines above: "Voi urmaţi cu repejune." These three verbs are, as the logic requires it, in the imperfect. The dialectal spelling (with an open *e* instead of the diphthong *ea*: *plutéţi*, *mergéţi*) offers two perfect visual rhymes (*îngheţ-mergéţi*)" (p. 279)

I do not know if this argument convinces anybody, but the text froze in this form after Perpessicius, in the editions published by D.

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Murărașu, Petru Creţia (MLR), Alexandru Spânu (Minerva Publishing House, 2003, the BPT series, which copies identically the MLR Edition), and Dumitru Irimia (all three editions). A forgotten accent, in an orthographical system where the accent cannot find its place, i.e. it is refused ostentatiously ... Forgotten and unexplained. Only Petru Zugun, in his edition of 2002 risked a stressed imperfect: *mergeaţi* (vol. II, p.77). Why cannot Perpessicius persuade me here? First of all, because I cannot accept the rhyme "*îngheţ-mergeaţi*" in Eminescu, no matter how openly the diphthong were be spelled. Then, what kind of visual rhyme could this be? You see *marea de îngheţ* ("the frozen sea"), and you associate *mergerea* ("walking") with it, as some kind of sliding/skating? But it is all about soaring among stars and thoughts ... Then, Perpessicius does not persuade me also because he amends a text belonging to Eminescu, published during the author's life, after manuscript forms, a method for which he himself criticized Ioan Scurtu (who used to change words from the printed text with others from the manuscript, saying that it was more beautiful, etc.). Any manuscript belonging to Eminescu is previous to the final form, i.e. the printable form, and in any variant, version, draft etc., the author is entitled to experiment with forms, punctuation, etc. But his final option is that which goes to print. Any comments related to possible changes made by the editors should be based on that text. And, of course, Perpessicius never mentions the differences in the previous editions – in the *Convorbiri literare* magazine, Titu Maiorescu's edition, etc. In this sense, any debate around the manuscripts is like inspecting dismantled scaffoldings: in that case, it is obviously necessary to compare the accents in the spoken language: *a pluti (to soar)*, verb of the 4th conjugation, in the 2nd person plural of the indicative is *voi plutiţi* and, in the imperfect, *voi pluteaţi*, and *a merge (to go)*, the 3rd conjugation, *mergeţi / mergeaţi*, with the observation that the accent tends to fall on the verbal theme throughout the paradigm: *voi mérgeţi*. Of course, the variant *voi mergéţi*, was in use at that time, and persists even today. However, it is easier to discuss about the poetic licence *mergéţi*, than to tackle the complicated problems of the sequence of tenses: when the author stressed equally *plutéţi*, *mergéţi* in the flow of writing, he may have thought of the imperfect, but when later he cut *plutéţi*, he must have been thinking only of preserving the accent in the same position for the other verb, the selected one. But again: these are the debates around dismantled scaffoldings, around forms prior to the publication).

I would rather say that Perpessicius had another Eminescian context in mind when he amended lines 246 and 250 from "Strigoii" ("The Ghosts").In the text published in *Convorbiri literare* magazine, for the sake of rhyme (and meaning), these lines are:

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"*Miroase-adormitoare văzduhul îl îngrèun' /.../ Când gurile'nsetate în sărutări se 'mprèun'*."
("A soft and soothing scent is in the air dispersed, /.../ While do in tender kiss unite their lips athirst.").
Titu Maiorescu did not agree with the editors of the magazine and took over the lines without accents, changed words, changed the rhythm, and even the meaning:
"*Miroase-adormitoare văzduhul îl îngreun /.../Când gurele 'nsetate 'n sărutări se 'mpreun'*."
(He kept this form in all his editions, forcing the accents to make reciting easier:
" *'n sărùtări se 'mpreùn'* ", a vulgar, even licencious, meaning, which the author had probably tried to avoid by using elegant accents). Finding such final accents even in the works of Eminescu, Perpessicius considered himself entitled to use that method. But he should have warned us.

There is one more reason for which I cannot be persuaded by this amendment: the comma after line 83. The text from *Convorbiri literare* magazine is as follows:
82*. Voi urmaţi cu răpejune cugetările regine,*
83*. Când plutind pe aripi sânte pintre stelele senine*
84. *Pe-a lor urme luminoase voi asemene mergeţi.*

As we can see, in *Convorbiri literare* there is a comma only after the verse 82. The other comma, after *senine*, line 83*,* appeared in Titu Maiorescu and was kept in all the editions to date (including in Perpessicius who, most of the times, took over the punctuation inertially from previous editions, without discussing it, although he looked sometimes for the consensus of the previous editors, but, again, only by comparing the editions does one realize that there is a consensus, but it is not mentioned anywhere as such). The meaning in *Convorbiri* is clear: (voi) ***plutind mergeţi*** - the present participle keeps the action in a continuous present, which irradiates back to ***urmaţi*** two lines above. Only by interrupting the movement with a comma, *mergeţi* remains rather suspended, and suspicion arises that it might be an imperfect. But this is not the case, as the punctuation makes everything clear.

But then whose are the *urmele ("blazing")*? The stars' or the thinkers'? With a comma, the text connects with line 83, so… 'you follow the thoughts and you follow their blazing. The comma introduced by Maiorescu helps the meaning here, but at what price?! Without comma, the following actions are simultaneous (*plutind mergeţi: mergeţi plutind*)whereas, separated by comma, they become successive or in causal co-ordination (*plutiţi şi mergeţi; pentru că plutiţi mergeţi*,etc.). As far as the light is concerned, the explanation follows immediately:

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"Cu-a ei candelă de aur palida înţelepciune / Cu zâmbirea ei regală, ca o stea ce nu apune / Luminà a vieţei voastre drum de rose semănat.”" ("Pale wisdom, understanding's child, her sacred taper burning gold, / Her royal smile as of a star that never sets, that grows not old, / Unshades her light to guide your path, to make secure your flowery road."

Here is another Eminescian accent, taken over from *Convorbiri* in all the editions, and removed by C. Botez and, of course, by Perpessicius in 1939, on the grounds (sic!), that the imperfect can be recognized without the final grave accent. Maybe this is how he got the idea for the *mergéţi* in the line above, but it is strange that he did not use the grave accent in the 1939 edition: *mergèţi*; he follows the manuscript, as we can see from the facsimile, but we can infer that in Eminescu's time, the imperfect was stressed with a *grave accent* , and the diphthong with a sharp accent. But *mergéţi* in the manuscript, is spelled in both ways, in the sense that the i*mperfect* is also expressed by a *diphthong.* I think it wiser to consider that, in this handwritten draft, the sharp accent marks only the pronunciation accent. The poet could not divide his attention in his rush to writing. Maintaining the form in 1966, the editor may have inserted the sharp accent, so as not to complicate things any more... Maiorescu also introduces a comma after *nu apune,* kept scrupulously by the editors, creating an apposition (the pale wisdom is a star which never sets) T*he mea*ning is that this star *luminà* (was the guiding light of life), it is the agent. The lights (*pe-a lor urme luminoase*) of the thoughts are thus shed by the golden candle of pale wisdom. "Palida" (pale) cannot be but a pun on the name of the Goddess of Wisdom, *Pallas* Athena (the Greek genitive: Pallados; with *Vergil, Palladium* is the statue of the goddess for the Trojans) combined with the Latin *pallidus,-a,-um* (pale, frightened, etc.). The manuscript 2257.72 quotes *pallidă înţelepciunea*, with a double ‘l’ and, if we should amend it, we would restore its original form.

There is the imperfect again, this time stressed in the magazine and in the old editions. Beside the common uses of the imperfect, Eminescu introduces the imperfect of realization, for example in *Luceafărul (The Morning Star),* in the speech of the Demiurge: "Tu *vreai* un om să te socoţi..." ("Thou wantest to count among men"), meaning: I now realize that you have long sought to count among the humans. The form is refused by the editions, but its presence in *Almanahul România junǎ* is a perfect clue for the author's intention. In *Epigonii (The Epigones)*, there are such forms, in lines such as: "Şi de aceea scrisa voastră erà sântă şi frumoasă / Căci din minţi erà gândită, căci din inimi erà scoasă,/ Inimi mari, tinere încă, deşi voi sunteţi bătrâni." ("'And therefore sacred are your words and destined to eternity, / For in your

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minds were they conceived and by your flooded hearts set free; / Great souls have you, and ever fresh you keep your youth though you grow old"). The present dull forms (flat, without accent) give a conclusive value: "Şi, de-aceea, scrisa voastră era sântă şi frumoasă..." ("And, therefore, sacred are your words and destined to eternity"). I inserted commas so that the present meaning is made clear. But it is precisely in the repeated accents and in the connected form used by Eminescu that the imperfect of realization lies: as he is writing, the author realizes the cause, that is why he emphasizes *erà* rather than *sântă*, *gândită, scoasă (holy, thought, taken out)*. There are many other examples where the imperfect is not stressed graphically by Eminescu, as in *Rugăciunea unui dac (A Dacian's Prayer)* : "Pe când nu era moarte..." ("When death did not exist ..") etc. But one could argue that *Rugăciunea unui dac* was printed in 1879, and *Epigonii* in 1870, 9 years earlier. *Venere şi Madonă (Venus and Madonna)*, published in 1870 could also be mentioned, line 35: "O fecioar' a cărei suflet era sânt ca rugăciunea"("Holy was the Virgin's spirit, prayer's very counterpart"). To compare: scrisa voastră erà sântă – a cărui suflet era sânt ca rugăciunea: At first, *era* is powerfully stressed under rhythm - an ethical accent - while the second time, *sânt* is stressed, as the quality of the soul is important, and therefore the imperfect is not stressed graphically. We find even in *Epigonii (The Epigones)* an unstressed imperfect, in line 9o: "Ochiul vostru vedea'n lume de icoane un palat." ("And to your eyes the earth is built, an icon hanging kings' abode.") Here, as in *Rugăciunea unui dac (A Dacian's Prayer"*) and *Venere şi Madonă* (Venus and Madonna), the imperfect is not rhythm-conditioned. This is why it is not stressed graphically.

Another observation worth mentioning here is that the "voi" ("plural you") from *Epigonii* (*The Epigones*) speaks of the present. It does not refer only to the living forerunners (Alecsandri, Helliade), but it is also a general conclusion: all the forerunners are called, shown in the present, with this imperfect, which shows realization. Why is it then impossible to see two present forms in the opening passage, as in *Covorbiri literare*, instead of the two imperfect forms suggested by those editions? You are following now the glorious thoughts and you are treading in their footsteps. The author evokes the flight of saint wings among the blue stars: even more, he speaks about the immortal soul, flying in the cosmos of wisdom, in the world of ideas, of the thoughts. These "inimi mari" ("great souls") are doing two things at the same time: they follow the rules of the goddess of wisdom, and follow these precepts, i.e. they look for them swiftly and put them to practice. The *ars poetica* of the forerunners is more clearly explained when Costache Negruzzi is characterized:

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" ... şterge colbul de pe cronice bătrâne (...)/Moaie pana în coloarea unor vremi de mult trecute / Zugrăveşte din nou iarăşi pânzele posomorâte / Ce-arătau faptele crude..."
("Negruzzi wipes away the dust from parchment that the past records (...) Dipping his brush in the secret well of the hues of history's days gone past, / He takes those times' canvasses and touches them to life at last / Portraying perhaps some prince who ruled the land in ages dark...").

Repetition is more important here. In the previous poem, *Venere şi Madonă* ("Venus and Madonna") (C.L. April 15th, 1870), Rafael was taking from the old statues of Rome the face of Venus and transformed it into Madonna by his art, i.e. he added the crown of stars, the Christian Heaven, etc. to a pagan face. In the same way, the poet makes a saint out of a whore. But realizing that he had committed an impiety, he brings the saint he created back to the condition of a bacchante, by art. Moreover, he understands that he could change the situation again. Such a creator is an epigone, an "apostate", who changes good into evil and evil into good every time he wants, and who can change himself etc. The art (painting, poetry) can do these things, and the author has a great responsibility. Unlike *Venere şi Madonă (Venus and Madonna),* in *Epigonii (Epigones),* Costache Negruzzi goes back in time without changing a thing: "zugrăveşte din nou iarăşi pânzele posomorâte" ("He takes those times' canvasses and touches them to life at last"). It is an apparent pleonasm. In fact, *iarăşi* ("again") must be understood as "iarăşi pânzele posomorâte" (just the same canvasses). The forerunners do not change the past. They just revive the past as it was. They do so by *eponymy*: apparently, they do the same thing twice, going back in time and bringing it to the present, reviving what seems dead, but without changing the essence. They all look for thought, and go towards it. They do not only name it, define it, show it, etc. This is the difference between existence and affirmation: therefore "your writing was sacred" *(erá)* but the people of today "Numesc sânt, frumos şi bine ce nimic nu însemnează" ("They call saint, beautiful or good that which counts for nothing"). The ideal *kalos kai agathos kai dikaios* exists, or it is just affirmed, it is cited, without true meaning.

The contemporaries, the epigones, also affirm that "Privim reci la lumea asta – vă numim visionari." ("We call you poets mystic fools and fitting subjects for our mirth.") In the present context, being a visionary is an important quality of genius. Professor Florea Fugariu, to whom I thanked several times, but never enough, pointed out to me that, in Eminescu's time, that word had magical, negative connotations, maintained until the 20th century, if we are to cite only the definition in *Candrea's Dictionary* of 1931: "someone who believes that he/she has visions,

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strange, extravagant ideas.” For the epigones, the forerunners are only "eccentrics". This poem rehabilitates them in a memorable expression: "Rămâneţi dară cu bine sânte firi vizionare". ("I bid farewell to all you poets dreaming fanciful fantastic dreams.") Could we put here the vocative comma as the editions did, against *Convorbirilor literare* magazine? It is better to leave it without commas, as direct objects (or predicative name): Remain as you are. The text needs explaining, both for the meaning of the words, and for their form, even for the punctuation or the diacritical signs initially used. But, first of all, in order to keep it unchanged.

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