

# Minding Literature's Business: Cultivating a Sense of Evanescence Within Political Affairs\*

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**Abstract:** The paper investigates the relationship between political oratory and literature in Romania during the second part of the 19th century. Extending the theories of Jacques Rancière, Fredric Jameson, Slavoj Žižec, and Leonidas Donskis, I analyze the relationship between politics and literature by comparing a set of illustrative speeches delivered by Take Ionescu and P. P. Carp, who distinguished themselves as brilliant political orators and also as personalities who gave up literature in order to assume a political career. My main goal is to determine how much of one's appetite for aesthetic autonomy turns into mere appetite for political autonomy, and thus for *dissent* and *dissidence*. Both examples chosen for illustration brought me to the conclusion that prior literary habits and practices into a politician's public career can determine his/her ways of legitimizing party-switches or volatile doctrinarian attitudes.

**Keywords:** dissidence, dissent, aestheticism, decay/decadence, androgynous orator

## 1. Introduction

The present paper reflects on the relationship between political oratory and literature by taking into consideration the wider context of cultural modernisation that occurred in Romania during the second part of the 19th century. The case of Romania is particularly interesting for research because it illustrates one of the political exceptions from the South-Eastern Europe. Even though a small national state, Romania secured its right of self-government and could afford to discuss on equal terms with the empires that disputed their interests in the region. After Serbia, The Kingdom of Romania becomes the second constitutional monarchy, which therefore reinforces not only a tradition of autonomy in foreign affairs, but also a tradition of free individual choice, free public speaking, and deliberative democracy. Extending the theories launched by Jacques Rancière (2006), Fredric Jameson (1981, 2010), Slavoj Žižec (1989), and Leonidas Donskis (2005, 2008), I shall analyse the relationship between politics and literature by comparing a set of illustrative speeches delivered by Take

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Ionescu and P. P. Carp, who distinguished themselves as brilliant political orators at the turn of the century. They are also perfect examples – along with many others from the same age – of personalities who gave up literature in order to assume a political career. First, the research will follow the extension of the statesman's literature into politics and the projection of the statesman's politics onto the larger frame of aesthetics/ morals. The analysis will proceed by determining what are the rhetorical, ideological and imaginary transfers occurred in these two processes. Second, my aim is to determine how much of one's appetite for aesthetic autonomy turns into mere appetite for political autonomy, and thus for dissent and dissidence. Nevertheless, a former literate's political speech retains his original mind-habits and rests permeable to the surrounding aesthetic paradigm (in this case, Decadence or what Matthew Potolsky (1999) calls "perennial decay"). I am particularly interested in the relationship established between aestheticism and political oratory, both of them styling themselves throughout the tropes of evanescence. Hence, the tribune man does not manifest as preacher anymore, but as a multifarious dandy, who freights the attention of the public. Both examples under scrutiny act as autonomous figures, as personalities-as-large-as-institutions, who are not able anymore to stick to a political creed for much time and, eventually, turn into real catalysts of dissidence. Developed from a tradition of "charismatic authority" and hero-worship, these orators – literates and politicians at the same time – are definitely the vouchers of liberty values, sometimes brought close to anarchy. Given their mission onto the public domain and perhaps their frustrated literary resources, the political speeches belonging to this period unveil themselves as cultural artefacts, reinforcing both the state's authority and the orator's personal reaction to it. This way, the speeches produced now by the Romanian masters of political oratory are not only fabrics of signifiers (rhetorical, ideological, imaginary, cultural), but also large basins where individual styles of political talk can be related to their pragmatic conditions.

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The political oratory delivered within the Romanian Parliament and its premises (political clubs, electoral meetings) in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reflects not only the process of institutional modernization, but also a particular transition from **political thinking** to **political talk**. Modernization comes with great challenges that convulse the Phanariote memories of the Romanian society and launches it in search for a new political identity. Connected to these new problems, political modernity localizes in the small South-Eastern European state either as revolutionary radicalism (ruptures and convulsions of the old tribal structure of authority) or as import of Democratic practices from the most successful government models: the French Republic, the British Commonwealth, the German Reich. As a matter of fact, it has been already pointed out that the process of modernization imposed gradually, in two stages:

first came admiration for Western culture and imitation, then differentiation and affirmation of local identity.

Here, I have to make a short introductory comment. It is well-known that, due to its cultural legacy, France used to nurture the Romanian intellectuals both with an ideal of public action and with an over-emphasized rhetoric. Yet, this happened until around 1877, when the local politicians drive their attention towards the British Empire and its own way of sorting out the disputes between centralization and decentralization, absolute monarchy and constitutional monarchy, State order and individual freedom under one single label: *the commonwealth*. Since the two Principalities, Moldavia and Wallachia, did not succeed in harmonizing entirely their administrations and their regional claims, it is natural that some of the Romanian politicians try to assume and theorize such a far-fetched government model. For a nation that wanted to be congruous inside and independent outside, the only solution was to come with a "partisan fabrication:" to exchange national history with structures from other nations' past (Schlanger 2010, 132), to import the political memory of the best state institutions. Therefore, some of the political orators invest the young Romanian Parliament with the features of an archetypal structure, in the sense that it should be able to re-enact the original principles and protocols of Westminster Parliament. Similarly, the king, who had been adopted by the Romanian nation through popular consent, was conceived of not only as an embodiment of authority, but also as a redemptive authority, as a savior.

Alongside with the process of institutional modernization, one may also notice the speakers' growth into adulthood, that is to say, a refinement of political thinking through means of political talk. While at the beginning of Charles I's reign (in 1866), statesmen were mainly concerned with the preservation of a broad "constitutional" frame, at the end of the century, their polemics gain in focalization and some of the political speakers become professionalized parliamentary orators. Actually, scholars such as Sorin Adam Matei (Matei 2004, 76-114) and Sorin Alexandrescu (Alexandrescu 1999, 47-91) have shown that, at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Romanian intellectuals used to rally into political factions such as the "Junimea" circle of Iasi, which did not carry the message of a specific social class, be it the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, the working class or the peasants. Nevertheless, the doctrinarian amassment of intellectual forces introduces a critical distance, that is to say, an "aesthetic" way of making politics. Generally, political talk grows into self-awareness. It is conscious of its strong and weak points. It forms a system of aesthetical appreciation/ valorization. Moreover, it can even propose a gallery of canonical figures who consecrate themselves in the following order: C.A. Rosetti, Mikhail Kogălniceanu, Barbu Katargiu and I.C. Brătianu until 1866; P.P. Carp, Titu Maiorescu, Alexandru Lahovary, N. Flea and P. P. Grădișteanu until 1888; G. Panu, Alexandru Marghiloman, C. Dissescu, C. C. Arion, Take Ionescu, Barbu Ștefănescu Delavrancea, N. Filipescu during the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and after. All

in all, there are three generations of tribune-heroes that bear witness for dramatic historical shifts such as the 1848 Revolution, the Union of the two Danube's Principalities (1857), Romania's independence (1877).

The phenomenon reinforces what was happening within the literary field. During what has been coined as Romanian Biedermeyer (Nemoianu 1998, Cornea 2008) or Decadence as such (Mitchievici 2011), Romanian writers develop a sense of shared interests coming along with the awareness of their profession's singularity and full autonomy. Romanticism makes possible the equation between "political freedom" and "aesthetic freedom," between social change and aesthetic revolution. If artists can treat any subject, no matter its lack of greatness, then art in general functions according to an aesthetic or democratic regime, which destroys the barrier that used to separate artistic rules from the order of social occupations (Rancière 2006, 23). The trespassing of this barrier leads to the fact that the paradigm of aesthetic autonomy turns into the paradigm of revolution. As Laurent Jenny points out, while the metaphor of "revolution" silently permeates the older definitions of "literature," any literary innovation will be taken from now on as a species of political emancipation (Jenny 2008, 5). Yet, this comes with the acknowledgement that literature has become a "skeptical art," which internalized its own refutation: "*Le propre de la littérature deviant alors le rapport négatif à soi, le mouvement qui la pousse à se supprimer au profit de sa propre question*" (Rancière 1998, 170).

## 2. Literature and Doctrinarian Appetite

Such being the case with arts (both literature and political oratory included) and their own way of turning out a negotiable, and thus, a political meaning, we must investigate now a pair of commonplace considerations, shared by both historians and testimonies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian life: 1. The Romanians are inborn poets (Vasile Alecsandri); 2. The Romanians have no doctrinarian appetite (C. Bacalbașa, R. Rosetti, N. Suțu, I. Bulei). Is there any determination between the two clichés that brand Romanian literature, on the one hand, and Romanian politics, on the other? During the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century, individualism, freedom and even anarchy are among the main drawbacks of the Conservative Party (Bulei 1987, 19). However, they actually describe an all-consuming passion for politics on both sides, as much for the Liberals' as for the Conservatives', a diffuse and dissolutive force, which is specific to modern Romania. Knowing that doctrines and ideological affiliations really articulate only at the end of the century, when the two so-called 'historical' parties are founded (1875, 1880), we must ask what conditions bear responsibility for such a delay. Is this a shadow-effect of slow cultural development? Or we should rather look for something which is apt to inhibit and slow down the doctrinarian aggregation? Has the slow doctrinarian aggregation anything to do with the fact that Romanians are inborn poets? For the first question, the answer comes right away from the theorists of Romanian civilization such as Titu Maiorescu, Eugen Lovinescu and G. Ibrăileanu. Even

though their overall views might differ, all of them share a common point on the fact that Romanians are pretty good at mimicking great cultures and quite fast at taking in foreign forms of civilization. We must return then to the second question and look for something that functions as an inhibiting drive, a delayer in the process of doctrinarian amassment.

First thing that comes to mind pertains to the domain of *political subjectivization*. Any political subject, as Ranciere notices, is an

*empty operator* that produces cases of political dispute by challenging the established framework of identification and classification (Ranciere 2006, 90).

Since the "empty operators" can take essentially opposed meanings, political subjectivization is responsible for anarchy, fragmentation, individualism and dissidence. Even though they should not be taken as pernicious phenomena, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, dissidence and fragmentation are harshly judged among the political practitioners as the worst enemies of public morals and healthy political thinking. To be a "dissident" means to practice a "discourse of the heart," to dismiss the mind's advice, to be the victim of endless political rambling, eventually, to perpetuate, within the manly world of politics, a feminine behavior, which packs together with idle talk and with unchecked, unpredictable reactions.

Truth is that, over the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Romania's most relevant debate, a sort of sum of all debates, can be downsized to the augmented "politicizing" of all public and private sectors. *The legal admission of minorities, the assimilation of the foreign dynasty, the reformation of education, the independence of justice, the efficiency of state administration, the regulation of private and public property*, everything goes round the discovery that Romanians would rather talk than do things. As a matter of fact, politicians accuse each other to have lost the sense of 'simple morality' and to have skidded to mind sophistry. Once corrupted the political thinking, political talk enters into a stage of "perennial decay." Thus, not only literature experiences now a "decadent" turn; the harsh words "corruption" or "decadence" are thrown upon the entire Romanian society by orators such as P. P. Carp, Take Ionescu, Nicolae Filipescu and Barbu Ștefănescu Delavrancea. Turned into topics of parliamentary debate, *volatile loyalty, party-switching and dissidence* gather under the umbrella of generalized "decadence."

Among the most praised political speakers of this period (1877-1899), the Conservative P. P. Carp and the Democrat-Conservative Take Ionescu provide us with the best cases of delayed doctrinarian aggregation. Fully aware of their talents' powers and limits, the two establish not only as canonical figures of Romanian oratory, but also as commentators, testimonies and judges of their day's public discourse. Irrespective of ideological biases, P. P. Carp's and Take Ionescu's tribune interventions unveil the paradoxical coexistence of subjection and domination within the same political practice: even though committed to a form of art consecrated as "democratic," that is to say, to oratory, they undertake the excellent speech as an attribute of the supreme power. Certainly, they know

that their talents can virtually dis-crown kings and open their own way to the highest form of authority. Consequently, they engage a problematized relationship with their own tribune deliveries, as long as both of them would rather prepare speeches *mentally* (Duca qtd in Carp 2000, Xeni 1930). Moreover, they appear to refuse the very act of taking ideas down on paper. As if the written word were a more fragile deposit for thinking than the spoken word; as if the written word could block the mind's tendency towards looking ahead; as if the written word would contain a self-implied sense of revolution, felt as a disruptive force for the orator's mental focalization.

So, did P. P. Carp and Take Ionescu hate written words? Did they hate modern literature's way of being skeptical, of turning former intentions into latter refutations? Did they refuse a poet's mind and sensibility, inscribed in both their natural talents and in their very Romanian-ness? As a matter of fact, they didn't. Not always have they shown such distrustful attitude towards the world of letters. Their cases become more and more intriguing once one discovers substantial literary aspirations conveyed throughout translations, literary criticism, essays, memoirs, short-stories and poetry. P. P. Carp is a fine essayist, an acute critic of dramatic art and a brave translator of Shakespeare. I say "brave" because he undertakes Shakespearian plays such as *Macbeth* and *Othello* directly from English and not from French as his Romanian fellow-translators used to do. Take Ionescu, in his turn, launches himself under the pseudonyms Juanera and Tya and publishes poetry (*Contemplation, Autumn Refrain, To the Moon*), short prose (*White and Red Roses, A Page from a Dreamer's Life, A Teardrop, The Spirits of Year 3000*) and literary criticism. Both orators seem to be pretty warned on the time's literary dynamics and it is not seldom that they take sides. Even though he comes in the open rather occasionally, P. P. Carp proves to be the most intuitive critic of Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu's historical plays. Likewise, Take Ionescu's *The Spirits of Year 3000* proves a complete and up-to-date knowledge of the young writer's literary environment (Eminescu 1943, 222-223). One must notice, though, that while P. P. Carp gave up completely the business of literature, the mature Take Ionescu continued to indulge himself into this futile occupation by approaching lately the very popular form of memoirs (*Souvenirs*) and nature/ travel account (*In the Carpathians*).

Yet, for the long-run politician P. P. Carp, the contact with literature must have awakened his great political themes and his diffident view on the political world in general. It is interesting that his attention gets caught by *Macbeth* and *Othello*, two plays that topicalize double talk, honor and honesty, which will also become his recurrent political themes in speeches such as *The Social Order* (1881), *The New Era* (1884), *King Charles I and the Romanian Soldier* (1886), *The Political Justice vs. the Moral Justice* (1889-1890), and so on. His theory, slowly turned into a doctrine, is that morality and strong beliefs should keep away the Romanians from politicizing everything; they should also solve Romania's dispute between centralization and decentralization and build the new

institutions on the scheme of state-order. Whereas political order mirrors higher universal order, decadence comes from the democratic regime of words having power to act garrulously or silently, from "empty operators" that can be Conservative and Liberals, Liberals and Socialists, Conservative and Socialists or the whole set of doctrines at the same time. As early as 1879, P. P. Carp was admitting that Romania had "a Liberal Constitution," yet still needed "a Conservative social organization" (Carp 2000, 95). Five years after, he would say that the differences between the so-called "historical" parties are only "psychological," wherefore Carp's distance and diffident attitude in all doctrinarian concerns:

... one called himself a Conservative, other, a National-Liberal or a Sincere-Liberal, while a third declared himself free and independent ..., and when I'm picking my brains to say which one is my flag, I just find that all paths have been already taken by individualities more or less grouped around our long-run politicians... Even the public opinion is pretty confused, and, driven by despair, named us 'Junimists,' a label which can weigh rather much for certain people... for [some], the 'Junimists' are the purports of cosmopolitanism and I do not know what else; [for others] instead, it represents a Conservative machination. Yet, among consecrated political terms, the word 'Junimism' does not stand for anything at all (Carp 2000, 185).

In Take Ionescu's case, the inner circuits of ideological transcoding function according to the same path: literature's *extension* to the sphere of politics and political talk's *projection* to the sphere of aesthetics. One of the most startling writings Take Ionescu has ever published is a utopian SF story entitled *The Spirits of Year 3000*, inspired by Louis Sébastien Mercier's *The Spirits of Year 2440*. The young prose-writer narrates how the clime, the geography and the inhabitants of our planet will change, how people will manage to create an artificial island and the city called Liberty right in the centre of this future world. A character named Aru guides the narrator to the utopian world; he is a somehow dwarfed creature and wears a Greek costume. He tells the time-traveller that all nations have united into the Kingdom of Frankness, and that they are now devoted to the Religion of Reason. There is no other God but Consciousness. What the time-traveller finally discovers is the fact that he is the primogenitor of a noble lineage, that he is a blazon owner! It is time that his feeble frame and his spleen were disaffirmed by his aristocratic blood, which will ensure highlife standards, visits to respectable families, meetings with fine ladies. Even if Take Ionescu's utopia seems to stem from a socialist core, its deeper strata already announce both the aristocratic mystifications and conservative fits from *Souvenirs* as well as from his twisted political talk. Anyway, on doctrinarian matters, Take Ionescu shares P. P. Carp's diffident view:

they would try, by playing upon the words such as 'Conservatives,' 'Liberal-Conservatives,' 'The Great Conservative Family,' 'Conservative Elements' ... 'Conservative concentration,' 'New Conservatives' and so on and so forth, to pass as parties, as definite formations, what had been nothing else but

transitory and mismatched marriages; to hide under the same word both the government and the opposition, eventually, to create such a confusion that, unable to find its place in the midst of all these confusions, the public opinion ended by not understanding anything at all (Ionescu 1897, 364-365).

### 3. Strong and Shallow Characters in Politics: Blank Pages

On a superficial examination, P. P. Carp and Take Ionescu appear to illustrate cases of former literati who throw away literature for the higher calling of politics. Excellence in the art of oratory comes somewhere between literary talents and the fascination of authority. But can this renunciation to literature be reverted back only to frustrated talents, anxiety of influence or fascination of absolute power? Of course not, since literary pursuits are not completely exchanged with political interests and both orators provide us, from the beginning to the end of their political careers, with a detached and diffident vision on their professed ideas. In the first case, P. P. Carp's experience as a Shakespearian helps him to develop a theory of strong characters in politics: a feeble person (too hesitant or too nervous), says Carp, cannot turn into a dramatic subject, whereas only someone who actualizes the universal core of human passions can give the true measure of power. In Carp's view, politics is conceived as a theatre of great passions, as a Shakespearian tragedy. It follows that not only is the political orator an actor, but he is also the embodied voice of passions, the medium of unconscious drives. The same goes for Take Ionescu, who is described by his biographers as a sort of "sorcerer," shaman with an "apocalyptic diction" that takes out from the seas of unconscious passions what the public has been expecting for a very long time (Xeni 1930, 145). One of Take Ionescu's oratorical models is provided by Alexandru Lahovary, whose personality is celebrated for acting upon the inspiration of a mysterious force. This supernatural force, Take Ionescu believes, can take the orator out of the world and carry him away where

the horizon confounds with infinity and where one enters into the universal harmony (Ionescu 1903, 647-651).

However, whereas P. P. Carp addresses a symptomatology of unconscious drives on strong personalities (theorized in the ethos on morality and order), Take Ionescu describes the unconscious imprints on shallow personalities (theorized in the ethos of ambition and modularity). In Carp's case, we can speak about methodical diffidence, about philosophical distance, applied to his own literary talents, to the powers of literature and to the potential of political talk in general. In Take Ionescu's case instead, it is not only about being diffident on what words can say or do. For him, "dissidence," that is to say putting oneself at the disposal of circumstances, turns into method of preserving one's feeble powers. Far from being the only political swinger at the end of 19th century, Take Ionescu should be attached to the issue of dissidence because it is a matter on which he returns over and over again. Indeed, he begins by being a liberal

under I. C. Brătianu's flag (1884), then he passes into the dissident liberal fraction (rallied against Brătianu's authoritarian regime, called by contemporaries "Caesarism," "Vizierate," "Personal Regime" or "Omnipotence"), and speaks on behalf of the joint opposition 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 English politics "Conservative-Democratic Party." Both volatility and personality cult blend into Take Ionescu's public actions. Hence, upon the models provided by Charles Fox, William Pitt the Younger, Benjamin Disraeli, William Gladstone and Joseph Chamberlain, he will patent "dissidence" and theorize it as a desirable political behavior.

This portrait of the political orator as a "blank" and "modular" creature, able to freight the audience's attention, able to awake what the Decadent artists used to call "sacred horror," drives us to the figures of ancient oracles. Tiresias, the legendary prophet in Oedipus, was opened toward both blindness and insight, toward both conscious and unconscious. We all know that Tiresias is a hermaphrodite, whose gender lies between manhood and womanhood, whose speech lies between sense and nonsense. The orator as an oracle is a hypostasis that, by and large, corresponds to the new regime of literature, the aesthetic regime, and to its skeptical turn.

Take Ionescu and P. P. Carp are quite aware that they are the agents of a power that is beyond their complete command. Eventually, they realize that not only literature, but also the art of oratory is built on "words" that contain their own silence. The orator is an interface, a blank page that cannot help but convey two opposed ideas simultaneously. For Take Ionescu *diffidence* in his own art turns into theorized *dissidence*. In the same manner, Benjamin Disraeli, who himself was one of the most exquisite political orators of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and a model to both P. P. Carp and Take Ionescu, used to define his identity as a blank page: "Madam, I am the blank page between the Old Testament and the New."

#### 4. Conclusion

Drawing near to an end, I might say that, in both cases I have just analyzed, the transition from political thinking to political talk is delayed by a diffident attitude concerning literature. For the two Romanian orators consecrated in the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, literary remnants are something that swerve political thinking from its progressive, linear direction and prevents it from focalization and, thus, from doctrinarian aggregation. Altogether, literature gives political talk the speed and easiness of nonsense and turns it into mere "politicizing." Even if related to both oratory and politics, Take Ionescu and P. P. Carp tried to pluck out literary business from the circuit formed by political thinking and political talk. They had probably discovered that, in those times, literature could corrupt not only a farmer's daughter such as Emma Bovary, but also hardened politicians.

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