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DOCTORAL THESIS  
Summary:  
**Morals and Religion in Decadentism**

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## Summary

The **objective** of the doctoral thesis entitled “Morals and Religion in Decadentism” is to study how the apparently paradoxical combination of naturalism with belief and of the positivist philosophy with the revealed religion developed in such a spectacular manner; this is not because writers such Huysmans and Wilde, in the western space or Macedonski and M. Caragiale, in the Romanian culture would have been an absolute exception in their times, but because the two seemingly opposing trends coexisted and involuntarily supported each other in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Immediately after the term *decadent* started to be accepted by the public, the next step was represented by the exaltation of decadence, its endowment with all the attributes of higher culture. Thus, the gradual idolatry of the notion and its reconstruction into a sort of secular religion followed. Elevated at the position of a supreme value, art started to mean more than what it had ever meant ever since Aristotle’s *Poetics* throughout the centuries to the end of the nineteenth century.

Before approaching the core of the issue of this thesis, it is necessary to summarise its terminological and chronological aspects. If we will study “decadence” at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, we should not overlook the fact that the notion of decadence is extremely old and had know a history of regular recurrence in discussions. It appeared in the European culture ever since the Greek and Roman Antiquity. As in so may other circumstances, Plato was the first thinker to have conceived decadence in articulate terms. Borrowing a much older outlook of a mythical nature, Plato wrote the so-called “Golden Age” – an uncertain and distant era in human history where people would live peaceful and serene times, without having to labour for their daily needs. Unfortunately, this Eden-like universe, resembling, like two drops of water, to the Christian Eden, was abandoned by the creating gods, and humankind started to fall. After the “Golden Age,” there was the “Silver Age,” and then the “Iron Age”, all representing decadence, the fall from the original state. Nonetheless, the god did not abandon completely the world that began to tread the decadence path, but they infiltrate it with divine energy, representing the capacity of humankind to recover.

In the Platonic understanding of the universe, the philosopher introduced for the first time – in a canonical text – the idea of decadence. It seems obvious that to Plato, humankind entering the “Silver Age” and then the “Iron Age” meant man's fall in history, that is to say the beginning of unhappiness which humankind would experience throughout its existence. The transition from the “Golden Age” to the other ages means exiting myth and entering history.

Christianity borrowed instinctively the Platonic the view of decadence represented by history, proving one more time the profound connection between Plato and Christianity. If with Plato, the only consolation for decadence was the recourse to the “world of ideas”, meaning that higher, divine entity that actually leads to existence, Christianity proclaims a future ending of time when the unhappiness called “history” will find its end.

From the Greek Antiquity until the seventeenth century, all thinkers who approached decadence conceived history in a cyclic manner, made up of two stages – the creation stage, of ascent, and the descending one. The Roman Empire remained for many centuries the paradigm of this cyclic time. The most renowned civilising entity of the Ancient World trod a long self-assertive stage whereby the Romans reached the position of masters of the known world, then its climax, when

the Roman Empire was in a blaze of glory, and finally a descent stage that lingered over several centuries and ended with the collapse of the empire.

Beginning mainly with the Renaissance, thinkers analysed mostly the model of the Roman world and tried to draw conclusions regarding the development of the history of humankind starting from the actual history of the Roman Empire.

Once history became a somewhat articulate science, which has its own rules, meaning that since the seventeenth century, the modern idea of progress emerged which would entangle from that time on with the idea of rise and fall. The modern idea of the existence of progress, of an ascending path in history matched perfectly the idea of rise and fall, with the idea that man advances by means of successive achievements failures. Later on, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Hegel's philosophy would provide a brilliant form to such vision, including it in a general evolution framework. However, even before Hegel, scores of other thinkers noticed the cyclic character of history and foresaw the idea of an inherent general progress. The French philosophers of the Enlightenment, headed by Condorcet and Montesquieu, tried to describe the general progress of humankind, especially under the species of the alternating advance and decline. It was not by chance that Montesquieu resorted to the same example of the Roman Empire when he formulated the idea of decadence and tried to see to what extent the history of the Roman Empire represented a sort of paradigm for the world history.

This is how the idea of “decadence” became permanent in the European thinking despite the fact that it represented the prerogative of only a few outstanding thinkers. Since the nineteenth century, the notion of decadence started to preoccupy the European thought increasingly and the issue of the rise and the fall of civilisation became a commonplace. It is beyond doubt that this pervasion of the European thought by the idea of decadence was also due to the specific circumstances of the nineteenth century. Romanticism, the prevalent movement of this century acquainted humankind with the thought that the world was in a stage of fall and that European civilisation, at least, could face the end of a cycle.

“The ideas of modernity and progress, on the one hand, and the idea of decadence, on the other, are mutually exclusive only at the most superficial level of understanding. Once we consider how they were actually used in different stages of their history, we become aware of the complexity of the dialectical relationship between them. The famous comparison of Bernard of Chartres is a suitable example to analogy between the dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of the giants and are thus able to see further progress and decadence are so closely interrelated that, if we were to make general considerations, we would reach the paradoxical conclusion that progress is decadence and, conversely, that decay is progress.”<sup>1</sup>

The history of Romanian literature has thus provided a synthetic form of how decay began to be regarded in the nineteenth century and of the profound, inextricable connection between the ideas of progress and of decadence.

The second half of nineteenth century formalized in some way the **notion of decadence**, as a basic notion of European civilisation. From the historical point of view, the world started to become aware that Europe was witnessing visible phenomena of decadence. Everyone seemed to agree that the Austro-Hungarian Empire, this artificial, multinational political entity, was on its

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<sup>1</sup>Matei Călinescu, *Cinci fețe ale modernității*, translated in Romanian by Tatiana Pătrulescu and Radu Țurcanu, Editura Univers, Bucharest, p. 135.

decay course and Vienna, the capital of the empire, became, in the second half of the nineteenth century, a kind of “capital of decadence.” Everyone seemed to agree that the Ottoman Empire, once a serious threat to Europe, was undergoing its stage of decomposition facing a sharp decadence. In the very same Europe, to a greater or lesser extent, rumours circulated with respect to the decadence of the Iberian peoples, the decadence of Spain and Portugal; these empires, which had once occupied a good part of the world, in the second half of the nineteenth century came to be regarded as a kind of the “sick of Europe”. After the Crimean Wars, the world noticed that even the Russian Empire, the Tsarist Empire, became extremely vulnerable, a sort of a *clay-footed giant*.

From history, economics and politics, the idea of decadence easily permeated culture. The history of culture would continue to be regarded in terms of rise and fall. Thinkers began to consider periods such as the Greek – Roman Antiquity, the Renaissance, Shakespeare's era or the French Classicism under the reign of the Sun King as stages of the victorious assertion of culture; accordingly, all that followed these happy moments in the history of culture would be considered fall, descent, mimicry, epigonism. The idea that modernity stands for an obvious epigonism as compared to the classical culture was deeply rooted throughout Romanticism, especially in the German one. This explains the transformation of the word **epigone** into a sort of a keyword of the Romantic culture; this also explains the feeling of “inferiority” the Romantics felt in relation to previous eras. A final echo of this wave of pessimism, specific mainly to the German literature, can be found in the famous poem of Eminescu, “The Epigones.”

The second half of the nineteenth century glorifies the notion of decadence. Everyone was aware that European literature went through a stage of tremendous development and that a large number of brilliant poets and prose writers were writing within the same period. This was reflected in the very change of the decadence-related connotations. If the Romantics had the feeling that their literature had been somewhat epigonic as compared to the literature of the past, the writers after 1850, in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, capitalised the notion of decadence, exalted it, and considered it beneficial from all points of view. The term “decadent” started to sound like praise. Baudelaire was undoubtedly the writer who personified this change of mentality in the most successful manner, especially in his writings on art. In his meditations on aesthetic themes, modernity was more and more connected to decadence; in Baudelaire's spirit, decadence began to mean subtlety, connecting deeply all arts, connecting poetry to music and painting. Very soon, an increasing number of scholars, poets, and critics shared Baudelaire's ideal of beauty. The entire French literature in the second half of the nineteenth century would recognise in Baudelaire a theorist and a symbol: the Symbolists and the Parnassians will recognize Baudelaire as a master, a supreme literary figure. Highly interesting is the fact that Baudelaire's spirit, after having conquered the French literature, began to spread in other European countries. Hence, it is not a surprise that Romanian Symbolism and Modernism in general held Baudelaire as a kind of guiding beacon. This change of perspective on decadence personified by Baudelaire may be traced best in one of his friend's assertions, Théophile Gautier, made immediately after the Baudelaire's death, when the poet's innovation was in its infancy. Although T. Gautier had written a Parnassian poem, quite different from Baudelaire's poetics, he did not hesitate to rally to Baudelaire's movement and to explain the essence of the remarkable reform brought by the poet of *Les Fleurs du mal* (*Flowers of Evil*).

“His gestures, little primitive, speak for themselves and should be understood as a coming from a poet of decadence.”

This text, dating from 1868, is Théophile Gautier's preface to the second edition of the volume *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The text also shows that, within only a decade, Baudelaire's type of Decadentism conquered the consciousness and was transformed into a commonly shared, extremely widespread mood.

In line with Baudelaire's poetic reform, there were other European literary movements, all imbued with the idea that decadence (i.e., extreme stylisation, aestheticism, worshipping women) represented higher values. England was perhaps the first European territory where the new mood pervaded. Since 1848, a group of English poets, Dante Gabriel Rossetti had the initiative of a new way to make literature and understanding art. This method proposed they proposed entirely Baudelairean, even if emerged independently. The term that British literati found to name this new aesthetics was the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

Emerging spontaneously in 1848, as mentioned before, the new style of making literature (especially poetry) gained consistency and glow at around the same time Baudelaire's poetry and aesthetics spread across Europe. At the time the Pre-Raphaelite movement reached its full bloom, to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's name other names had to be added such as John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and William Morris.

The picture of the authors of this new spirit would not be complete without mentioning Edgar Allan Poe, the strange American poet, translated and commented in French by Baudelaire, and who, maybe unwillingly, contributed greatly to the revival of European poetry. The greatest French modernists of Baudelaire's school fostered a true cult for Poe's poetry. They regarded Poe as the great master of all, to such an extent that Verlaine, Maeterlinck, and Mallarmé always pronounced Poe's name enthusiastically and contributed to keeping his name among the great innovators of literature. An important character of this thesis, the well-known *des Esseintes*, in Huysmans' novel, has a constant cult for the American poet. They all may have been attracted by Edgar A. Poe's life and personality was the mystical aura of a tragic life, the Romantic ideal of the misunderstood genius, crashed by the society he unfortunately had to live amongst; but beyond the anecdotal biography that accompanied Poe, much more important for the Baudelairean school was Poe's aesthetic vision, his vision of poetry. Explaining the almost strictly rational, almost mathematical way in which Poe composed the famous ballad "The Raven," but especially looking for his ideal poetry in spirit and obscurity, Poe actually exemplifies what Baudelaire preached in his writings. With Poe, the idea that literature means harmony and equilibrium begins to be forgotten and is replaced by images of asymmetry, restlessness, the proximity of death. The entire manifesto of the French modernist school was thus engraved, in anticipation, in the brilliant work of the American poet.

This positive mood of positive valuation of decadence will be even a theoretical variant; a mediocre author but an interesting theorist, the French Paul Bourget, has even devised a theoretical framework to defend decadence. In a volume entitled *Essays of contemporary psychology* and published in 1881, Paul Bourget even built a "theory of decadence" and dedicated an entire chapter to the poet Baudelaire dedicates. His conclusion with respect to Baudelaire represented the official rehabilitation of a concept until then construed as informal, not recommended:

"Baudelaire realised he reached a society which had grown old. Rather than bemoaning his late arrival late, like La Bruyère and Musset, he rejoiced, and even felt honoured. He was a man of decadence and made himself a theorist of decadence."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, Paris, 1887, pp. 23-24.

The post-Baudelaire atmosphere encompassed the entire Paris of the 1870s and gained a special aspect during the last decades of the nineteenth century. The relationship between the cult of art for art's sake and the transformation of this cult in a sort of secular religion can be seen on various plans but most outstandingly in literature, which, at the time, represented a sort of avant-garde art.

This kind of literature literary grouped around some magazines, which, when they were launched, were the subject of the public laughter and the literati's ridicule. Their very strange or provocative names would warn the reader to expect a kind of literature completely different from what they had been familiar with. The most popular magazines for their post-Baudelairian literature were called "Lutèce" (1883) already suggesting that the centre of the new movement was none other than Paris itself. Other magazines have intentionally bizarre name – "Chat Noir", ("The Black Cat"), or the "Tâches d'encre" 1884, ("The Ink Spots"). This blooming of magazines culminated with a publication that asserted directly its ideal, i.e., "Le Décadent" (1886).

Although at the time when they were launched, these magazines were considered marginal, opposed to the "serious" literary publications, under today's scrutiny, they offer a very different picture. The literary press, regarded until then implicitly marginalised, authors such as Paul Verlaine, Jean Moréas, Maurice Barrés, Emile Verhaeren, and others wrote. Later on, their name entered the history of French literature, especially the Symbolist literature history, and some time later, these names began to be regarded as benchmarks for the entire European literature.

No wonder that even the Romanian literature – which, at the time, was merely in anticipation of Symbolism, without having actually entered symbolism – was influenced by some of the leaders of post-Baudelairian movement despite the fact that they did not enjoy, at the time, consideration not even in France.

Immediately after 1880, the ambience created by Alexandru Macedonski by means of the magazine "Literatorul" and via the literary club with the same name, the name of poets quoted above became known to Romanian public through more or less successful translations. Alexandru Macedonski and the young Romanians in his school grouped in the literary club "Literatorul" signed translations from Baudelaire, but also from Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, Verhaeren, and others.

After Baudelaire's parting with this world, the leader of the French modernist school was Verlaine, the author who had naturally followed as a direct heir of the poet of *Les Fleurs du mal*. He is the author who assumed directly, without any complex, the "decadent" label, and who, boasting with such label started consciously to make the apology of "decadence."

Perhaps one of the most explicit eulogies written by Verlaine, dedicated to the decadent and decadence is contained in the following words, which became famous ever since:

"I love the word decadence, glowing purple and gold. I object, of course, to any connotation involving offensive allegations and the idea of fall. This word implies equally refined thoughts, resulting from the highest degree of civilisation, a great literary culture, a soul capable of intense voluptuousness."

Under various forms, this credo of Verlaine's was to be found in most of the theoretical and polemical articles the poet wrote during the 1880s.

In the memory of his contemporaries, but mainly in the memory of posterity, Decadentism endowed with the finest virtues took the form of synthetic and impressive lines of the same Verlaine: *Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la Decadence, / Qui regarde passer les grands Barbares blancs.*

One can note that the farthest model of decadence we identified at the beginning with the model of the Roman Empire, which underwent the three stages of evolution, retains full actuality even at the height of Symbolism. When Verlaine wanted to use an example, unanimously recognised as the supreme example of decadence, he resorted, maybe unconsciously, to the example of the Roman Empire.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, French literature spontaneously split into “normal” and “decadent” literature. There is no doubt that the “normal” literature, at the time, meant traditional literature, a direct descendant of Classicism and Romanticism, whereas “decadent” literature started to mean the symbolist literature and the entire experimental literature revolving around Symbolism.

Moreover, Decadence rehabilitated, among other things, weird moods and elements of the surrounding world, which, until then, had been obscured or easily overlooked by public consciousness.

Thus, substances causing hallucinations or non-natural moods, hitherto considered harmful and despicable, came to the forefront and became the brand of decadent culture. In the atmosphere of Baudelaire and Verlaine’s literature, alcohol and drug consumption began to certify the superior man, the one who decidedly parts with the common people. Not only such hallucinogenic substances deemed enemies of health now go to the forefront, but even those substances deemed clearly harmful such as poisons. Decadent authors started to exalt poisons (obviously in small amounts) as triggering extraordinary states that may prove beneficial to the artistic creation.

Trying to create art, non-natural by definition, namely an art opposed to the everyday experience, it is no wonder that decadence fosters a territory hitherto little explored, namely the oneiric territory, the dreams. To the romantics, dreams had represented a privileged field wherefrom the great writers (especially the German one) extracted their inspiration, but this time, Decadentism would cultivate the dream by definition opposing reality, an anti-reality dream, a determined enemy of the world around. In order to reach the dream, i.e., hallucination, any method was good and the decadents were not longer willing to choose from the means at their disposal.

Eloquently enough seems the fact that, as soon as Paris became the model as soon as the “Paris became the capital of the world in the nineteenth century” (Walter Benjamin), the major European cities began to follow the model of decadent Paris. There is perhaps no accident that it was in this atmosphere that the founder of psychoanalysis, Freud, wrote his *Interpretation of Dreams*, a book that appeared at the turn of century, in 1900.

The decadents’ consecration of art actually began with Baudelaire, but grew with his followers until it was transformed into a religion competing with the revealed one. Baudelaire’s dream was no longer to write books, no matter how successful they may have been, but to write the “ultimate book,” the unique, supreme book that would replace all other books. This ultimate book ought to have fully “encompassed both the object and the subject, the outside world of the artist and the artist himself.” (Baudelaire)

The consecration of art started with Baudelaire from the idea that art would not be merely anti-nature, but it would decidedly be superior to nature:

“I’ve heard it said in thousands of ways: Are you copying nature? I find it useless and disgusting to portray what there is, as I’m discontented with everything there is. Nature is ugly, whereas I prefer monsters of my imagination to the triteness of actuality”<sup>33</sup> (Baudelaire)

Following the line drawn Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde’s essential paradoxes were easily reached. He said in earnest that art is superior to life, and that exploring art is far more interesting than exploring nature. Oscar Wilde’s famous joke, published in an article, said, “for some time now, nature has begun to resemble the Mr Whistler’s canvases.” There is no doubt in Wilde’s mind superiority belonged to art and not to nature, to the renowned painter’s canvases and not to landscapes around London. Obviously, pursuing this line of thought one would reach the programmatic demonstration of the superiority of art in his famous novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which will be dealt with extensively.

In our work, we tried to capture this moment of the transformation into religion by means of two illustrious examples. They were contemporaries, they were related by idolising art, but they were equally related by keeping a profoundly religious dimension in their consciousness. We considered, in the work of the same author, the situation of the coexistence of the religion of art and of the true religion as the perfect example for demonstration. Thus, we stopped at J. K Huysmans and Oscar Wilde, one of the great French and one of the great English decadents, respectively. In Huysmans’ work the “bible of aestheticism”, represented by the novel *À rebours*, coexists with the deeply religious writings such as novel *La Cathedrale* and *Là-bas*. Oscar Wilde asserted that Huysmans’ novel made his hero, Dorian Gray, “ill”, setting thus a direct lineage between his work and the work of the French writer. In addition, Oscar Wilde, after having made the eulogy of the superiority of art and the absolute Decadentism, reverts slightly toward religion, by the end of his life, after a dramatic experience, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol.”

We have attached, in our thesis, to the two canonical examples of decadence, two Romanian examples, which show that the Romanian literature was acquainted to the European Decadentism early on. A. Macedonski was a contemporary of Verlaine and Mallarmé, though he survived them. Mateiu Caragiale was relatively contemporary with Oscar Wilde, but the former also survived the English author. There is one a decade between them, since M. Caragiale began to write the novel *Craii de Curtea Veche* in 1910-1911.

In our thesis, the European model and its Romanian reflex will show how fast Decadentism spread across the continent as well as the original way in Romanian literature managed to create an original variant, finding inspiration in the Western-European literature.

As updated critical literature on Huysmans and Wilde was difficult to access, therefore our work is incomplete in this respect. There have been volumes written in Romania on Macedonski and Mateiu Caragiale, especially over the latest decades; we addressed the critical comments we deemed the most important.

The theoretical details related to the terms of *decadence*, *dandy* or *life as art* encountered in Huysmans’ writings are discussed the **Second Chapter of the thesis**.

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes from Baudelaire were taken from *L’art romantique*, originally published in Romanian under various titles such as *Baudelaire, despre artă* or *Baudelaire, scrieri artistice*.



Without remaking the history of the idea of decadence, without clarifying the nuances of the concept of **decadentism**, we will only highlight the relationship of Des Esseintes, the, decadent, with the critique of the time, *life as art* and its receivers.

*Dandyism* and *decadentism* are most certainly two correlative concepts, with the help of which, were we to review the characters in the specialised literature, we would find almost all *eternal* traits: excessive aestheticization effeminacy, ostentation, cult of self, etc. All these traits emerge mainly in the age of decadence, at the end of historical cycles, when the strong values relax and lose strength. The effects of this general axiological crisis have an enormous spectrum: disappearance of confidence in the virtues of reason and science, the “anxiety” philosophies, the explosion of adventure, despair, and isolation, amorality, breaking essence from existence, the exaltation of individualism, the disappearance of moral enthusiasm, the growth of apathy, of nervous exhaustion, the fascination with the morbid, with all forms of agony.<sup>4</sup> The characters<sup>5</sup> populating this world “truly fascinated by the spectrum of the culture demise, by the display of collapses, with affinities and predilections, sometimes bizarre, for the states of exhaustion, degeneration, and agony. Their ultimate voluptuousness is to feel and proclaim drained, overwhelmed by history, consumed in their entire being. The paralysing consciousness of the abnormal states dominates them: their drained vitality throws them into the artificial, sensualist and hedonism; the exacerbated individualism transforms them into cerebral dilettanti, anarchic, destructive, and cynical.”<sup>6</sup> The clinical chart of this phenomenon, compiled by Adrian Marino from a psychological – moralising perspective, seems to us completely eloquent.

Joris-Karl Huysmans would have been today a negligible writer, whose merits, gradually vanished into the common grave of a literary tradition, would not have sparked much interest, had there been no place, in the eighteen volumes of his complete works<sup>7</sup>, for the novels *A rebours*, *Là-bas*, and *La Cathédrale*.

The dark glow of these curious books that have sparked great excitement upon their release<sup>8</sup> continues to fascinate and to provide a venomous charm, whereas everything he wrote after that<sup>9</sup> faded into an impenetrable darkness. These three were miraculously saved and continued to sail victoriously on the waters of time, but not *à rebours*, but along the current.

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<sup>4</sup> Adrian Marino, *Dictionar de idei literare*, I, Bucharest, Editura Eminescu, 1973, pp. 508-509.

<sup>5</sup> The one who started to attract the young decadents like a magnet, “king of the Symbolists” and embodiment of the new elitist spirit is Stéphane Mallarmé. In fact, the emergence of des Esseintes is due to the great poet as he mediates the meeting of Montesquiou with Huysmans, determining the latter to compose his famous character, whose shoes all the decadents strived to wear. At the time he makes the acquaintance of the Earl of Fezensac, at Mallarmé’s, the Parisian by adoption, Huysmans is already a well-renowned writer, accepted in the literary milieu. The meeting with Montesquiou troubles the modest civil servant at the Ministry of Interior, a zealous servant of the French government. He stands before a man from another world. Day after day, the image of the future character des Esseintes becomes clearer and clearer, and the novel *A rebours* is about to see the daylight. *It will strange, I think, the more so as one can find within the drained refinement of all things, of literature, of art, of the flower, of the perfumes, of furniture, of stones, etc.* These are Huysmans’ thoughts in a letter addressed to his friend Descaves. Everything the melancholic civil servant – tormented by his liver, his gall bladder, stomach, by a precarious and colourless life - cannot experience is transferred onto his hero. The impact of the novel upon its release is beyond imagination. There is almost no young man in Paris that would not fancy himself as a Jean Floressas des Esseintes, the introverted aristocrat, living amidst the glamour of artifice.

<sup>6</sup> Adrian Marino, *Ibid.*, p. 509;

<sup>7</sup> Cared for by Lucien Descaves – a disciple of the Goncourt brothers.

<sup>8</sup> *À rebours*, Paris, 1884, Edition Stock; *Là-bas*, Paris, 1891, Edition Stock; *La Cathédrale*, Paris, 1898, Edition Stock.

<sup>9</sup> In 1903, the novel *L’Oblat* is published and, in 1905, two years before his his demise, he publishes the volume *Trois Primitifs*.

What the author has conceived across or backwards in relation to the times he lived oriented almost by itself toward progress. Unwillingly, we read today the “backwards” the novel giving birth to a movement of reintegration of the drama of des Esseintes, the main and unique character. Clarified by the waters of time, the intellectual impasse of Huysmans’ hero who, according to the author, is the impasse of society and, ultimately, the unfathomable human dilemma in general does not necessarily lead us toward the writer’s regressive historical ideal, but rather attaches us to the progressive movement of demystification and of the regeneration of the human spirit.<sup>10</sup> Such a rebalancing also inevitably occurs during the posterity of a work that structures from an aesthetic viewpoint a living phenomenon of their contemporary times as with Huysmans. The historical feeling accompanying our reading today backwards (*în răspăr*) places des Esseintes in the perspective of an ongoing effort to recreate and to remodel the human type. The unique experience of this duke, the last survivor of the family Floressas, despite illustrating the complete pessimism of the author, however, joins by the force of art a progressive order, meaning in the aspiration of the evolution of humankind, always dissatisfied with their own creation. The self-critical movement of history ruins the myth of a past golden age of humanity, while at the same time, its own discontent with the present fuels it incessantly; thus, Jean des Esseintes isolates himself inside his house, protecting himself from reality by means of an accumulation of artistic artefacts and living imaginary journeys. He remembers beings and things he had never met personally and the time comes when he escapes unrestrained from the prison of his century and wanders fully free through an era to which he feels, in a last illusion, closer.”<sup>11</sup>

The historical feeling accompanying our reading of the novel *A rebours* today awakes at the same time its current artistic valences, in any case active for as long as the human aspiration to invent and to make himself achieve something in the spirit of the needs of the species, in the spirit of the demands of humankind, remains active. Des Esseintes thinks he deciphers precisely this aspiration by trying to reach the status, away from his bourgeois century, of *homo aestheticus*. He is mistaken, of course, but not entirely. His failure cannot be construed as a decisive proof of the integral incorrectness of the premises chosen.

The aesthetic refinement of which des Esseintes wants to make a way of living does fall in a general trend, characteristic<sup>12</sup> to the restlessness of the human spirit – especially at the end of the nineteenth century. His failure is the failure of humanity at that historical time, as far as any aesthetic reality is also an image that can be dated. Yet, this failure, final and inevitable, to des Esseintes is not historically final as his drama always remains possible, otherwise, under a different form, in different

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<sup>10</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *În răspăr*, Editura Minerva, Bucharest, 1974, translated by Raul Joil, preface by G. Horodincă, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>12</sup> We know that the writers around the magazine *La Décadence*, launched in 1886, claim Baudelaire and Gautier as their forerunners. Thus, Huysmans, in his fascinating decadent pages will mark the new aesthetic stage in the troubled history of the French *fin de siècle*. The anathema that they all lifted against classicism, realism or naturalism does not stir the same response in all pages. For example, a neoclassical shadow wafts through the work of many. The theorists of Decadentism, in our case Joris-Karl Huysmans, meet on the same side of the barricade at the moment when we make an inventory of the keywords in their arsenals: hyper-aestheticism, the cult of form, individualism, narcissism, anti-bourgeois spirit, extensive negativity, innovative taste with a shock force, but with a blasé attitude, stylised living, predilection for the artificial, effeminacy, devitalisation, fascination for the morbid, agonizing blow. In France, the euphoria of the decadents lasts no more than a decade. Maybe less. In the late 1880s, most authors around *Le Décadent* leave Anatole Baju’s magazine and, led by Paul Verlaine, change sides to the team of the “Symbolists.”

circumstances, but always possible: a trap of the fate, always laid before the human spirit in search of this true Proteus – the beauty, difficult to recognize under its whimsical metamorphosis.

We could explain today the lamentable defeat des Esseintes suffers by the singularity of his effort: the imposing asceticism, which excluded all other coordinates, e.g., ethical, moral, social and natural be they natural to the human being, for the benefit of the hypertrophy of the aesthetic sense. Thus, we call *des Esseintes* ***homo aestheticus-religiosus***. This unique faculty grows monstrously and to the detriment of everyone, therefore, instead of acting as a factor of harmony, it becomes a parasite giant suffocating the enfeebled – physically and morally – trunk. Consequently, in stead of achieving a model of humanity saved from the triviality of a detestable, mediocre social environment, Huysmans' hero falls into the species of a clinical case, illustrating a kind of illness which, in the nineteenth century felt, both the naturalists and the decadent symbolists felt, described or sang as a true disease of the century: *neurosis and degeneration*.<sup>13</sup> The experience des Esseintes willingly undertakes by withdrawing from society in the first ivory tower<sup>14</sup> physically not merely figuratively built in order to devote himself exclusively to cultivating aesthetic emotions, summarises in a significant form a process that occurs at the same time on the social ladder.<sup>15</sup> The climax of these experiences of des Esseintes is undoubtedly, the incredible turtle he buys and whose shell he gilds, on a whim, and has a sophisticated Japanese drawing engraved on made of various precious stones. The impulse toward such an expensive and somewhat unnatural activity is “the result of a fantasy that came to Esseintes some time before his departure from Paris. One day, while looking at the oriental carpet [...] he said to himself: it would be good to put something on the floor that moves and whose dark tone to make its shades brighter.”<sup>16</sup> Des Esseintes' strolls through the streets of Paris with a turtle on a leash remained memorable.

Des Esseintes attempt could not remain without an echo. Mallarmé himself responded immediately (i.e., within less than a year, which for his slow working style and intensive bordering sterility, was a record) with one of his most famous poems, “Prose pour des Esseintes” (1885). The poetic art which Thibaudet thought of as a culmination of unintelligibility, “Prose pour des Esseintes” is equally a eulogy (the word *prose* here is used in its religious meaning of *hymn*) and a resumption in his own terms of the ideal Huysmans' hero aimed at. The alternate game of imagination which, rising, moves away from reality, yet comes back to materialize in a book, suggests to the poet the idea that the land of beauty has no place on the map, but under the skies of eternity. *Prose pour des Esseintes* is a consolation in the ideal plan for the failure Huysmans' exquisite hero suffered in the earthly order.<sup>17</sup> In addition, it is, of course, the poetic art of the most difficult beauty, by thinning to the extreme the materiality of the object as well as of the subject of poetry, by completely pulverising the idea of audience.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, it may be an encoded though polemical response to des Esseintes himself, who still tried to materialise beauty too much by

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<sup>13</sup> Max Nordau, *Dégénération*, Lausanne, 2010, Editions *Age d'Homme*, p. 17, (t.n.).

<sup>14</sup> He would dream of a refine Tebaidă, of a welcoming desert, of a firm and warm ark *where he could* to flee away from the endless deluge of human stupidity. Joris-Karl Huysmans, op. cit, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Adriana Babeți, *Dandysmul. O istorie*, Editura *Polirom*, Iași, p. 305.

<sup>16</sup> In the preface to Joris-Karl Huysmans, *În răspăr*, cited edition, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> His experience is known to have ended in failure: his parting with the world weakens both des Esseintes; capacity to find again the aesthetic emotion, his senses growing blase faster than under normal living circumstances, and within his own body who threatens to pass to eternity.

<sup>18</sup> Mallarmé's poems published for the first time in a graphically exquisite edition, had a print run of 47 copies.

using what was to remain for ever a mere creation and a nostalgia of the spirit.<sup>19</sup> Anyway, des Esseintes was the literary character inhabited by an entire aestheticising mythology of the era. In contrast to the idea of progress emphasized by the development of science, technology, and the historical research method, but of which the political life took advantage to turn it into a true myth of glorification of bourgeois domination, poets did not cease to dissociate in any way they could faces from the optimism of that self-contented bourgeoisie.

The opening conceived by Macedonski, and the magazine under his leadership, in the Romanian environment, to the innovative literary ideas of the late nineteenth century, religion as art and the aesthetic decadentism, despite the significant impact on the modernisation of Romanian literature, it constantly remained within a balanced approach, a classical approach of art and of the creative act; these ideas build the **third chapter of our thesis**.

As Adrian Marino noted in the monograph dedicated to the writer's work, Macedonski's delineation from the critical ideas of the Junimea, an instance that generated countless controversies at the time, it is not justified in terms of aesthetic design: "[...] Macedonski places himself on this standpoint on a rigorously identical position to Junimea and Titu's, "purist" and even "autonomist" in aesthetics. [...] in the most exact spirit of Macedonski's aesthetics, "the uncompromising standard of pure art" does not mean anything other than art and "high literature," the concepts being constantly and intimately associated. And what does "high" literature mean after all? None other than "return and a new climb toward beauty, a triumph of the poetry of senses, fantasy, and thought." That means elevation, inspiration, enthusiasm, dematerialization, as will require all romantics and how Macedonski, by means of organic affinities, will repeat all his life, following them."<sup>20</sup>

Since the first year of publication of „Literatorul”, Macedonski could see in the contemporary literature the signs of decadence, which gathers under the label of „descriptivism”: “[...] we will see what genuine genius lacks so as to merit the name of poetry so we will recognize immediately that the occurrence of this genre is the character and the most reliable sign of literary decadence.”<sup>21</sup>

Poetry, in Macedonski's aesthetic vision, should express a “feeling,” and descriptive poetry “has no feeling.” In his attempt to analyse the deeper rationale of the decadence of a literature, Macedonski reached the conclusions of the French critic Désiré Nisard, whereby decadent authors, no longer having the creative energy to tackle major literary themes, border merely on formally improving derisory [minor] topics: “Purely descriptive poetry does move away from the great sources of poetry, from feeling, to close within trifle. It lacks the source of life and under its influence, literature withers, languishes and dies.

But how can a literature reach such a degree of numbness that it no longer finds a feeling to express? It only reaches this state by corrupting day by day the taste of the public and authors through the hidden though unavoidable power of things. [...] Authors seek strange feelings, and the common sense of the public soon becomes weary of such things. There's nothing left to say; what will authors do? descriptions, meaning that they will talk to say nothing, and we will have poems about different times of the year.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In the preface to Joris-Karl Huysmans, *În răspăr*, cited edition, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Adrian Marino, *Opera lui Alexandru Macedonski*, Bucharest, Editura pentru Literatură, 1967, pp. 570 – 571.

<sup>21</sup> Alexandru Macedonski, B. Florescu, *Despre poezia descriptivă*, “Literatorul”, Year I, No 2, of 27 January 1880, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, No 27.

Decadentism is a form of literary “pedantry,” where authors express “strange feelings,” a sign of aesthetic “fatigue.” The modernist, poetic and Baudelairian definition beauty – *There is no perfect beauty*, says Edgar A. Poe – *without a touch of strangeness in proportions*. – was unknown to the young Macedonski; moreover, he who is accused of having corrupting the contemporary French literature is none other than one of the founders of decadentism, Théophile Gautier, whose influence was, according to the Romanian poet, “disastrous effects.”<sup>23</sup>

The decadent cult of form at the expense of the content is the wrong path, and, at the same time, it suggests a certain weakness, an effeminacy of literature which authors should have the “manhood” to remove: The form should not be ignored, of course, but it should not be cultivated for its sake: in this case, it kills the content, and if authors are not men enough to crush that dead form, or at least bringing it to life by introducing new ideas, true feelings, they condemn letters to perish of starvation.”<sup>24</sup>

Macedonski’s poetry, surprising if we consider its role in spreading the modernist European ideas, is a consequence of his conception of beauty, whose the key concepts are those of Classicism – harmony and symmetry. “Absolute beauty is [...] an absolute relationship of harmony.”<sup>25</sup> At the time when Nietzsche questioned the very foundations of metaphysics, Macedonski was a convinced follower of Hegelianism: “... harmony is order, [...], order is symmetry or the correspondence and, all of them together remain one and the same thing, remain the idea itself, the absolute idea.”<sup>26</sup> Order is, in the vision of the Romanian writer, the fundamental law of the universe that man cannot escape; asymmetry is something impossible:

“The reality of this order transpires from everything: the ice flowers vegetating in winter on the windowpanes, and that are wonders of corresponding orders, in other words, correspondences of lines and colors; [...] it also transpires from the colours that are not but the effect of symmetric groups and specific groups of atoms; it transpires from the very fact that man who is only a synthesis of the laws of the universe, cannot escape from symmetry, the achieved geometry, to design inconsistent forms or lines – asymmetrical or misshapen lines and which still have no form.”<sup>27</sup>

With Macedonski, the defining difference between classicism and decadentism is one pertaining to style: toward “simplicity” and “harmonious symmetry” of the classical style, in other words, colours or sounds observe mathematical laws of proportion, the style of decadentism looks “loaded” with epithets, abundant and complex. The feelings stirred within the reader are also contrasting: ascension, serenity and majesty with classical works, “fall” with the decadent ones. Nevertheless, the decadent style has – and here we can see the shift in perspective from the critical opinions of his youth – aesthetic advantages inaccessible to classicism: “Surely, style, both in prose and in verse, won in colour, grace, harmony, flexibility, and both the rhythm of poetry and the periods of prose the became more flexible. A lot of shades, of feelings could be thus expressed and the monotony of a style leaning only on certain rules was removed.”<sup>28</sup>

However, Macedonski tends to delineate himself from decadentism, proving, if proof were needed, that his poetic experiments are rather the effect of momentary excitement than the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28.

<sup>25</sup> Al. Macedonski, “Despre frumos,” in *Opere*, volume IV, Bucharest, Editura Fundatiilor Regale, 1946, p. 135.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

result of deep adhesions. Thus, Decadentism is accused with synesthesia, the attempt to unite the different arts in a “total text,” that is exactly what he had argued fervently only ten years before. The mixture of arts results in the loss of essential purity of the artistic fields considered separately: “Prose writers and poets have increasingly trespassed the realm of painting, and when painters would lose colour and would earn ideas, those who handled the pen would earn colour and lose ideas. Since Théophile Gautier, prose and verse, except Hugo and others, were nothing but paintings after Verlaine and Mallarmé in particular, it was nothing but musical assonance.

In the latter period, decadentism proper of contemporary literature can be located.”<sup>29</sup>

Wilde's spiritual journey becomes for us the research topic of the **fourth chapter**.

The cultural layers were settled with Wilde in such a complex manner that our intentions to identify them “go from art to criticism, from criticism to contemplation, from contemplation to [...] asceticism, and the writer does not stop at any of them.”<sup>30</sup>

The Greek – Roman Classicism, the admiration for Shakespeare, the innovative ideas of the Pre-Raphaelites, the French Symbolism reveal polyvalent aesthetic concerns, ranging from obvious nonconformity underlying his aesthetic studies, such as, *The Decay of lying, the Critic as Artist. With some remarks on the importance of doing nothing (I), the Critic-artist. With some remarks on the importance of talking about everything (II), The Truth of masks. A note on illusion,* etc.

Wilde's critical discourse seduces with novel structures, for he leads a fierce battle with the prejudice, with the theories that had turned the English literature and even the European one a faithful mirror of reality, relying solely on plausibility. Wilde did not seek to impose its own truths, he refused the obviously moralizing tone, and his definitions cease to be definitions. Speculation, paradox demanded the attention of the reader subjected to inciting spiritual exercise, while performing multiple functions: psychological, artistic, and epistemological.

At 34, he published *The Decay of Lying*, an unprecedented work, written after Wilde's discussions with Robert Ross, his close friend in Oxford. “Lying for the sake of lies” is an aesthetic ideal as well as a solution to save the literature of an era from banality: “The purpose of lying is to enchant, to entertain, to produce pleasure,”<sup>31</sup> Vivian would say, one of the protagonists of the dialogue, Wilde's alter-ego, after having glanced on the Victorian or French literature.

The English writer rejects the concept of human nature, and condemns realistic trends; according to him, the modern novelist merely “offers the boring event under the guise of fiction.”<sup>32</sup> The principles defended by Wilde do not cover any “restrictive aesthetic or any graceful “jeu d'esprit,”<sup>33</sup> as Mircea Mihăieş remarked, but they reveal the receiver's discrete and profound knowledge of psychology. Wilde infers the reality – aspiration dilemma underlying man's torment, man's belief that he is conceived for ideals which are not his. There is a supreme illusion that always pushes man toward the impossible, there is honesty of the day-dream. Literature is meant to fill the

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Doralina Selea, *Oscar Wilde si estetismul contemporan*, University of Timisoara, Faculty of Philology, 1978, p.23: “The only way to understand correctly the meanings of the work and personality of the English writer remains the socio-historical conditioning. If it refers to the times, then the convention on the morals ought to be removed. If it refers to a current perspective, then the entire convention – Wilde ought to be removed, even if one considers only two aspects of his theory: the autonomy of art and human perfection together with the improvable human nature.”

<sup>31</sup> Oscar Wilde, *Decăderea minciunii*, cited edition, p. 43.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 32.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

void left by the shattered illusion and drives the overwhelming reality away, therefore Wilde dreams, without saying it explicitly, the “therapeutic” role of lying, of fiction: “Lying and poetry are arts – arts as Plato saw, not unrelated to each other – and they require a very careful study, an utterly selfless devotion (...) for the purpose of lying is to enchant, to entertain, to produce pleasure.”<sup>34</sup> Foreshadowing the concept of Bovarism exists, but Wilde ignores the tragic aspect of the phenomenon, something that will be tackled by Jules de Gaultier in his work entitled *Bovarism* and published only fourteen years after Wilde’s study.

The Socratic-type formula of dialogue of the discourse in *The Decay of Lying* is extended to the following two studies dedicated to the Critic as Artist. Starting from Aristotle’s assumption that the foundation of life, energy, is an essential desire of expression and that art has different forms that expression can achieve, Wilde makes his well-known theory of the autonomy the aesthetic, placing art at the forefront in relation to life and prioritizing form over content. Thus, art becomes an over-reality that transmits impulses to reality, for it is built to reflect itself.

Self-referentiality is a significant gain that Wilde achieved on behalf of a break with determinism and mimesis. The second principle is that life imitates art far more than art imitates life. As Mircea Mihăieș finds, the main problem is “an utterance that refers us to an eternal dilemma: what was first Life or Art?”<sup>35</sup>

It is certain that an object becomes aesthetic only when we think it within the scope of the respective value. Aesthetic recovery also includes a volitional element, the decision to behave aesthetically. The person preparing for the meeting with art should operate catharsis itself, that purification of passions, which is an effect of art as well as a condition thereof.

Wilde refers rather to the role of art in “modelling” the perception of reality. Mists, for example, exist only if we contemplate them or not, but art helps us to draw artistic beauty near natural beauty that most aestheticians consider infinite. Undoubtedly, there is a cult of beauty with Oscar Wilde; his ideas may be called pretext ideas for yet other ideas.

Creating such an aesthetic basis, Wilde managed to rise above formulated principles and generated a literary work whose echoes are still alive to this day. The troubled waters of the late nineteenth century European literature have influenced the spiritual destiny of Wilde the writer only in terms of provoking him. The fierce encounter between impressionism and naturalism allowed the insertion of another trend that promised a close competition, i.e. decadentism. Symbolists and decadents were approximately on the same line of resistance, within both the French and the English group, aspiring to the liberation of literature from the tyranny of materialistic concerns in an industrial society. The current was born in Paris but its echoes were strong in the English literary world. The poets of the 1890’s such as Arthur Symonds (“the blond angel”), Ernest Dowson were members of the “The Rhymers’ Club” or collaborators of the famous “The Yellow Book”.

Oscar Wilde, well known for his artistic sophistication and pretentiousness, exploited the new decadent and non-conformist consciousness. Decadent writers regarded themselves as descendants of Baudelaire and aspired to the pale colours of sunset and the famous verse of Verlaine, “Je suis l’Empire à la fin de la decadence”, became the motto and crest of this school.

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<sup>34</sup> Oscar Wilde, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

The Wildian character experiences revelation but refuses to return toward self, throwing himself voluptuously into the abyss of sin; his eyes are trying to capture the flow of life where urges, instinct, define a specific typology:

“After twenty-five years elapsed, some strange stories appeared and circulated on his account. It was rumoured that he had been seen making trouble together with foreign sailors in the remote areas of Whitechapel, that thieves and money forgers accompanied him and that he knew the secrets of their trade. His extraordinary absences became notorious and then he would make his appearance in society, men would whisper on the corners or would go past staring sarcastically at him or watching him carefully as if they were determined to discover the secret.”<sup>36</sup>

Wilde’s *amorality*, like that of the entire *decadent* generation, is merely the graceful, slightly irresponsible, game of the artist who dreams of himself, for a moment, away from the time pressure and existence. Rejecting ugliness, Wilde rejects any form of art incapable of carrying its assumptions through to the last consequences: “The aversion of the nineteenth century to Realism is the rage of Caliban when he sees his face in the mirror,” on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the “Aversion of the nineteenth century to Romanticism is the rage of Caliban when he does not see his face in the mirror,” (in the preface), charts the two poles between which Wilde tries to position its aesthetic, and possibly literary, discourse. In these sentences, we would like to draw the attention to the word “rage” against which Wilde directs his arrows: his own standing should be searched in the artist’s indifference, in the absence of the desire to “prove” anything. Not even when that thing is true as “even the things that are true can be proved!”<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, underlining the difference between *morality* and *morbidity* is more important.

Neither entirely realistic, nor completely seduced by the “black” Romanticism, illustrated by William Blake, and partly by “neo-medievalists” such as Swinburne and Tennyson, Wilde tries to establish a privileged place for the artist – i.e., for his self, “No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express anything.” Here, *anything* has no qualitative value, but an aesthetic one. Morality art, which Wilde puts between parentheses, reveals itself as just another form of ethicism: one that has underwent aestheticism.

Integrated in the **fifth chapter**, Mateiu Caragiale’s attempt to update the decadent behaviour, lives his dandyism in an almost exclusively imaginary way as all his efforts to live up to the role do not take him too far. Dandyism is in fact Mateiu’s bovarism and the result is the “character” in the letters to N. A. Boicescu. Interestingly, the model overtly expressed is the hero of the novel *L’Arriviste* by Félicien Champsaur. Somewhat naively, Mateiu Caragiale feels at some point tempted to write a similar novel, a “modern, thrilling and immoral one in French.” However, the modest French writer offered him a role model, not a literary one, and will not write the novel Caragiale Mateiu announced, but will play against N.A. Boicescu and Mateiu Caragiale will not write the novel he announced, but will play the role of the “arriviste” for N. A. Boicescu and other acquaintances. There is something from Proust in the story Mateiu Caragiale tells us about these years, with modern adventures and a huge interest in noble families. Was it not then that Proust would write mundane critics in “Le Figaro”? Finally, Mateiu Caragiale plays his character energetically: cynical, intelligent, adventurous, hedonistic, and in a constant search of money (at

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<sup>36</sup> Oscar Wilde, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.



least gold Lei 300,000 as annual income), addressing the committal crown in defiance and wearing a monocle, a cane, and gloves. But such an eye he lays on this noble and immoral world! Earl of Karabey signs their letters, which does not stop him from mocking at his “Byzantine-Slavic-Latin-Scythian” blood. The dream of this histrion is to be a great “hooligan” and a “leaker” for the thieves and to enter “un petit mariage, avec une petite dotte” or to become “l’amant en titre” of a certain not-so-young woman Saleme Efraim of the sort of Madame Cockshell, “a grotesque monster who would have anyway laid before me 1,200 – 1,500 marks per month, as she does this very day for a swindler tenor who speculates her shamelessly.”<sup>38</sup> To a certain Fernande de Bondy he sends letters, finely-dirty, via Boicescu, asked to post them at Trouville or on the Emerald Coast so that the poor woman does not know what to believe. The “hooligan’s” recipe for conquest is extremely cruel from a lexical point of view. Moreover, his French-Romanian language is typical: ‘cu un toupet de *balamuc*, el dorește să *flambeze o milioneră bătrână*, iar în așteptare să consacră *chiuloului* cu fete pe care le *enfilează*, le *gobează* și “alte sadisme aristocratice”, jucând *banana* lui contra *caisei* lor sau punând mâna *au jardin d’amour* a iubitei; pe lângă asta, are mereu un *béguin* sau o *toquadă* pentru câte o *demoazelă* care se nimereste să fie *colată* cu un *bogumil* și, oricum ar fi, grija lui cea mai mare este să evite *tipesele* sărace, față de care adoptă în cel mai bun caz tonul *goguenerd*. [avec un toupet of a *madhouse*, he wants to *flamber* an old *millionaire*, and while waiting he devotes himself to the *Quilou* of girls whom he *enfile*, *gobe* and [does] “other aristocratic sadistic things”, playing his banana against their apricot or putting his hand on the mistress’ *jardin d’amour*; besides, he always has a *Béguin* or a *toquade* for a damsel who happens to be collated with a *bogumil* and, either way, his greatest concern is to avoid the poor *petticoats*, to which he adopts – at best – the *goguenerd* [‘quietly ironic, mocking’] tone. A few years later, his letters will have a completely different style even when they are written in French, like the one to Rudolf Uhrynowsky in 1930, parodying country gentry’s life or another letter in Romanian, in 1928, addressed to Marica, full of obsolete twists in the phrases, dawdling and orderly as if written by boyar Dinu Murguleț. There is no need to dwell on the fact that the style is character in all this and that the Mateiu of his letters is only rarely the Mateiu in life.

A novel of imagination<sup>39</sup>, *Craii* finds its roots in that aesthetics which Edmund Wilson places in *Axel’s Castle* under the sign of Symbolism. Axel is, just like Dufrene, one of Villiers’ heroes, where the great American critic sees the moral prototype of the entire French literature at the turn of the century, i.e., 1900, called by others decadence. Axel is a rich young man generously gifted by nature who lives isolated in his parents’ castle in the Black Forest, where he will commit suicide, together with his girlfriend, of his own will, though he lacks nothing except for the desire to live. “He is the prototype of all symbolists” says Edmund Wilson<sup>40</sup>, even of those of their heroes who had been created before, e.g., Pater’s Marius the Epicurean, Laforgue’s Lohengrin and Salome, Mallarmé’s Hamlet and, “above all” Huysmans’ Des Esseintes. They all live in towers or solitary castles, practice occult sciences, the philosophical hermeticism or astrology, briefly, they turn their back on life, just like the Proustian novel hero (but just like his author, who shuts himself in the famous cork-cushioned room) or like the philosopher, the furthest from pragmatism ever, Valéry’s Monsieur Teste. Edmund Wilson confirms Gide’s thesis on Symbolism, which would have been built by rejecting life for art’s sake and would have never suggested ethics, but aesthetics only. Axel’s

<sup>38</sup> Mateiu Caragiale, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>39</sup> We make this assertion in all meanings: desire, dream, bovarism, transfiguration.

<sup>40</sup> Nicolae Manolescu, *Teme*, Editura Polirom, Bucharest, 2011, p. 35.

wife is somewhat extreme. In Mateiu Caragiale's case, the example of Alexis Dufrene is clearly more suitable. He does not refuse life as such, but only life in its immediate, prosaic reality. An entire mythology of the imaginary becomes possible in the latter. Heroes like him, such as those of Mateiu Caragiale, are not suicidal, vainglorious to be able to prove that life is not worth living: life is worth living, in their opinion, but in the dream, the imagination. The authors oppose realism and naturalism: their heroes are some belated romantics (e.g., Edmund Wilson is right) outraged by a pragmatic era. Is Master Pied, the intrepid lawyer in one of Villiers' other short story, not a Pirgu, and is the attitude of the two writers toward this too down to earth specimen of an individual not similar? In the same decade that appears Hermann Hesse's *Remember* is released, the author will regard in similar way, in *Der Steppenwolf (Lupul de stepă)*, "le bourgeoisisme" and will create in Hanry Haller a Mateiu Caragiale-type of hero. Where realists would search for the ordinary, writers such as Mateiu Caragiale, Villiers de L'Isle Adam or Barbey d'Aureville sought the unusual. They were interested in morals and manners only to the extent that they were out of the ordinary, colourful or bizarre: and it is not morals the god they worship, but art. Their contempt for the objective *bourgeois* leads them towards a noble artistic goal: the artistic is their crest of spiritual aristocrats.

Like any controversy, this is unfair too. However, it does not remain less significant. While Ion Luca was a classicist, Mateiu is a "decadent" and aesthete. The *fin de siècle* style – sometimes bizarre, some other times morbid, the oneiric aspect, the artificial, amorality (aestheticism in ethics), the purism – comes from the Symbolists' literature. As a Symbolist, in line with Edmund Wilson, Mateiu Caragiale was often seen as a master of symbols and ciphers of all kinds.<sup>41</sup> We think it is an exaggeration of the exegetes. Mateiu Caragiale's symbolism was much inflated. The pleasure given by *Craii* does not come from the alleged unfathomable trait of some symbols or from the mysteries that cannot be explained. In *Remember*, or in the last unfinished prose pieces, known under the title *Sub pecetea tainei (Under the Seal of Secrets)*, secrets are due without exception to omissions, which entitled Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu<sup>42</sup> to find in them a perfect "technique of the secret." Critics, however, have extended it to *Craii*, where the element of mystery no longer plays the same role. Genuinely secret, unexplainable, transfiguring in the novel is only imagination, whereby the heroes and the Narrator construct their chimeras; and in any case, the most important mystery remains in *Craii* that of art itself. Of the four journeys to sacred lands, the last, to art, is the deepest. The other three – to geography, history, luxury – large provide great descriptive splendours, lavish visions, and exquisite language in a double register, pathetic and ironic. To dwell endlessly on deciphering some meanings is to invent an almost nonexistent hermeticism. The values Mateiu Caragiale's prose should be regarded as plane, not deep though equally ineffable; they pertain to the art of horizontality and of style. Mateiu Caragiale's novel pursues neither a realistic authenticity nor a symbolic one: as in *Craii* authenticity is of an aesthetic nature, starting with the language, the novel is under the sign of art.<sup>43</sup>

The transcendence of life through art substitutes ethics with aesthetics. Beauty remains a sensitive form perceived acutely through one's senses. Having become the ultimate principle, beauty favours, as in Hofmannsthal's *Death of Titian*, an escape from the contingent "Of beauty boundless gates / Opportunities for a magical getaway...".<sup>44</sup> However, he hides a devastating duality within

<sup>41</sup> He was deeply interested in emblems and heraldry, as all his kinship.

<sup>42</sup>\*\*\**Literatura română între cele două războaie mondiale*, Editura Minerva, 1967-1975.

<sup>43</sup> Nicolae Manolescu, *Teme, cited edition*, p. 47.

<sup>44</sup> cf. Adriana Babeți, *Dandyismul, O istorie*, Editura Polirom, 2004, Chapter *Dandygrafii*, p. 221.

himself, leaving degradation to be seen through. Dmitri Karamazov has the revelation of this ambivalence that includes both “ideal of the Madonna” and “the ideal of Sodom.” Incarnations of this beauty with two faces are either Rosalba, “Mesalina-Virgin” Rafael’s courtesan character of Barbey d’Aurevilly or the biblical Salome, “grand fleur venerienne”, that “Beauté maudite” who pursues Huysmans’s hero, or Mima in the work of Mateiu Caragiale.

The qualitative and comparative **methods** have proven the most adequate for discovering the multiple meanings of the theme explored in the complex process of combining religion and morality with naturalism, Christian beliefs or philosophical positivism.

The **bibliographic sources** and the entire critical apparatus consulted could be classified as both monographs and trans-disciplinary studies.

The critical bibliography updated on Huysmans and Wilde was less accessible to us and as such, our work is lacunary. A tremendous amount has been written on Macedonski and Mateiu Caragiale especially in recent decades; we addressed the critical comments that seemed most important to us.

The selection of texts analyzed, unavoidably arbitrary and subjective, was made according to the peculiarities that brought an integrative picture of Decadentism in the European culture at the end of the nineteenth century. We followed a unifying direction and able to emphasize the plurality of multiple meanings radiating from the same nucleus, from a decadent perspective.

The novelty elements in this research are represented by uniqueness of the theme dealing, for the first time in the Romanian environment, with aspects of Christian beliefs and morals against the nineteenth century religion of beauty and decadence.

Without any hope, as with des Esseintes and Dorian, the discourse of this century ends its circularity on itself, in impasse and silently. It is an affected impasse, of course, since despair is like a picture. We showed that at the end of decadent passion there is no other option, as Barbey d’Aurevilly said relative to Huysmans, than “choose between the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the cross.” However, the spirit of *fin de siècle* does not remain faithful to itself other than its endless rejection of this alternative, keeping inside its perpetual tension of hesitating between death and salvation. Between these two exit ways, the decadent refuses to make a choice; he is forced to live on the edge of a discourse that arises from the continual contemplation of oneself.

The decadent speech decadent extends up to the present day within each of us and echoes down to the smallest of our words.

“Turns of century resemble each other. All of them are invaded by tremor and disorder”, wrote Huysmans in his novel *Down There*.

Very close to the nineteenth century, our time seems to have lost the taste for the natural and authentic and finds in lies - because it is more subtle - the highest form of truth. Sophistication is the seduction of our time, and when the natural subsists within, it is like an element others in a more complex game – a game that no longer expresses anything but a systematic desire of refinement, a confusion of all meanings in a guaranteed loss and total expense.

In this disorder, like a century ago, the spiritual comes back to its place. With great fairness, Huysmans had remarked: “When materialism is haunting, magic makes its appearance.” What better summary than this formula which combines growing consumer society our time and spreading waves of what Freud once called the “black tide of mud of occultism”, the God that decadent societies are looking for is that of aesthetics, not ethics; thus, the hero becomes martyr.

In the flow of history, decadence is like a kind of pause for reflection, an analysis parenthesis; it is the critical obverse of a century which, more than the others, it will be believed in progress.

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