

(Re)Politicizing the “National Poet”. Methodology and ideology in Eminescu’s readings after 1990

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Our study focuses on the analysis of the relationship between methodology and ideology occupying the rereading of Mihai Eminescu’s work, after 1990. For this purpose, after a brief review of the historical-literary context (marked, during the ‘80s, by the attachment of Eminescu’s personality to the national-communism characteristic to the last stage of Ceaușescu’s regime and, during the first years of the following decade, by the challenging of Eminescu’s legacy by certain Romanian intellectuals in the Diaspora), our approach centres on the “*Dilema scandal*” (1998) and on the alleged consequences that this event carried on the Romanian literary research after the year 2000. Our conclusion, founded on the examination of works written by Ioan Stanomir, Ioana Bot, Caius Dobrescu, Iulian Costache, Nicolae Manolescu and Dan C. Mihăilescu, is a reserved one, since we believe it early to assess whether the diversity of qualifiers and classifications of Eminescu’s work, during these recent years, actually signals a moment of grace of the exegesis or a mere attempt of overcoming, at any price, the reception crisis generated by the suspension in the Romantic cliché of the “national poet”.

Keywords: Mihai Eminescu, revisionism, contextualism, ideology, critical methodology, nationalism

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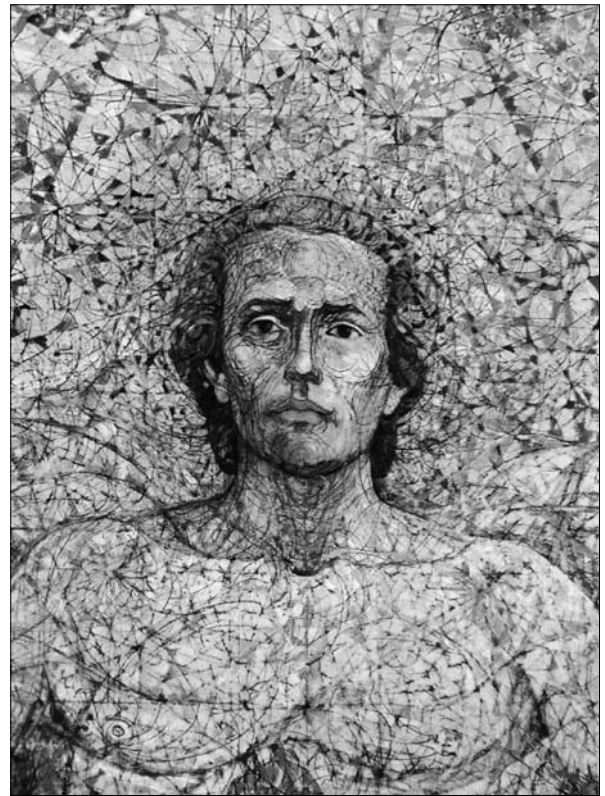
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Affirmed callously in the articles published in the conservative newspaper *Timpul* (1877-1883) and carved in the public starting with the issue of *Scrieri politice și literare (Political and Literary Works)* edited by I. Scurtu in 1905, Eminescu’s markedly xenophobic and anti-Semite nationalism represented one of the most important sources of Romanian reactionary ideologies prior to the Second World War. Among others, Eminescu’s political approach effected a powerful influence on Corneliu Zelea-Codreanu, the leader (“captain”) of the Legionary Movement, an extreme right organization that terrorized the Romanian political life during the ‘30s. As a matter of fact, precisely such a nationalist-chauvinistic element was the reason why Eminescu’s journalistic writing was proscribed and frequently anathematized during the Stalinist phase of Romanian communism (1948-1965). However, the regime’s approach will undergo changes once Nicolae Ceaușescu becomes leader, cutting progressively a nationalist direction in the official

ideology. Not only will such politics allow the complete reprinting of the poet’s journalistic “prose”, but it will focus on its very incorporation among the canonical texts of the regime. The phenomenon had become noticeable since 1980, when volume IX of the academic series of Eminescu’s *Opere (Works)* was published, comprising numerous anti-Semite references. The event set off Moses Rosen’s protest, Chief Rabbi of the Romanian Jewish Community, who, in a letter addressed to the political and cultural authorities of the time, demanded the volume be withdrawn from the bookstores (Solomovici 2004: 461-464). Admittedly, the Rabbi’s exploit resulted in blocking the release of the following volume of *Works* for almost a decade; however, in response, national-communist authorities ordered a series of acts meant to neutralize the anti-Semitism thesis. Notably, one such act, namely a letter written by the politruk Pompiliu Marcea, was co-signed by Z. Ornea, a respectable Romanian literary historian of Jewish origin (*idem*: 479-483).

This is why the critical examination of Eminescu's nationalism could take place in Romania only after 1989. In a first stage, this emerged from certain intellectuals in the Diaspora who invoked Eminescu's detrimental role as the herald of the Romanian extreme right during the inter-war period. Thus, Ioan Petru Culianu would call to mind the fact that the journalist of *Timpul* was a "sick" and "perilous" mind, "constantly lurked around by the error of totalitarianism and cornered by the passion for chauvinism" (Culianu 1989/2009: 170), Virgil Nemoianu would call attention to a "separation from Eminescu's approach" given that "one of the foundations of the Legionary Movement was formed from the political legacy of Eminescu's approach" (Nemoianu 1990/2000: 44), whereas I. Negoïtescu would label Eminescu as a "proto-legionary" and "an utterly execrable political figure" (Negoïtescu 1991: 12). The three scholars' actions would lead to fuming reactions amongst the Romanian ultranationalists. For instance, in a gross pamphlet published several months following Ioan Petru Culianu's mysterious assassination in a restroom of the University in Chicago (the murder was committed on May 21st 1991 and remained unsolved to the present day), Leonard Gavrilu would imply that the murder of "such excrement not sufficiently flushed away in the lethal *Water Closet* ostensibly prepared to him by destiny" represented an established and well-deserved punishment for his own "crime": "the crime of lèse-Eminescu" (Gavrilu 1992: 8). Nonetheless, despite such isolated break-outs, the cultural-political context at the beginning of the 1990s, when the Romanian *intelligentsia* would focus on the management of the communist legacy rather than on that of the fascist one, rendered the actions of the exiled ones barely influential on the public opinion and on the Romanian academic community.

On the other hand, the publication of issue 265 of the periodical *Dilema* (February 24th, 1998) would unleash a vast media scandal. The thematic file *Eminescu* opened with an "Argument" signed by the coordinator of the issue, the young prose writer Cezar-Paul Bădescu, who would caution on Eminescu having become for the Romanians "the object of a monstrous personality cult" (Bădescu 1999: 9). The solution necessary to overcome such impasse would have been, according to the literary historian Nicolae Manolescu, "that we have [...] the courage to separate from Eminescu" precisely for turning him again into "our contemporary" (*idem*: 13), and, in the opinion of the critic Ion Bogdan Lefter, that we build a "new" image of the poet, i.e. "a plural, contradictory, fascinating, «alive» Eminescu" (*idem*: 16). At any rate, almost all those who responded to the study file rejected the cliché of the "national poet", which they identify with a sign of the "inferiority complex specific to minor



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cultures (and nations)" (Radu Pavel Gheo, *idem*: 27), and even "with actual fatality" for literary criticism (Z. Ornea, *idem*: 39). Younger authors did not hesitate to minimize the value of Eminescu's work. For instance, Eminescu's poetry and prose are "a matter of indifference" to the writer Răzvan Rădulescu (*idem*: 19-20), whereas the political specialist Cristian Preda considers that "the national poet" is "null" insofar as political theorist (*idem*: 43). Other contributors to the file approach Eminescu's myth from a debunking perspective. Thus, in an article blankly titled *Fapte (Facts)*, the writer Mircea Cărtărescu puts together, from an apparently neutral position, various biographical accounts in which the "great" and ethereal poet would be recalled as "a rather short [...] and particularly hirsute man" (*idem*: 29). In a similar approach, T. O. Bobe zooms in on the statue in front of the Romanian Athenaeum in Bucharest, rendering an almost nude Eminescu, covered only by "an excessively imprecise encomiastic towel beneath which the literature bigots nourish" (*idem*: 35).

The public opinion's reaction equalled the challenge; it did not involve only writers and literary critics, but also teachers of literature, politicians or simple citizens. The *Dilema* issue profoundly disturbed the Romanians' nationalist idiosyncrasies, reactivating former identity *topoi* such as chauvinism, anti-Semitism or the theory of external conspiracy. During the first

months following the publishing of *Eminescu* discussion file, the contributors to *Dilema* were blamed and insulted in all possible manners: a hand of “mangy souls” (*idem*: 82), executing “a firm order, coming from a certain direction, the antinational one” (*idem*: 102); “snakes”, “whose hearts beat steadily only for Budapest, Vienna, Tel-Aviv, [and] Paris” (*idem*: 145); “lackeys” of “the Jewish masonry” who “dictates the ‘circumcision’ of Romanian literature” (*idem*: 148-149) etc. Furthermore, in a speech held in the plenum of the Chamber of Deputies, the poet Leonida Lari, speaking on behalf of the ultranationalist Greater Romania Party, would name the contributors to *Dilema* “a pack of hyenas” united in a “Philo-Semitism commando including gipsy elements” with the purpose of “undermining the Romanian People’s political and cultural grounds” (*idem*: 66-67). Even the critic Eugen Simion, president at that time of the Romanian Academy, would deem the issue of *Dilema* “a derision of the national myth Eminescu” and, as such, an example of “national disgrace” (Simion 1999: 370).

The 1998 file did not put forward “a new Eminescu”, but contributed considerably to the gradual modification of the public view and even of the critical discourse on the “national poet”. In 2001, the new system of “alternative” textbooks is implemented for the XI grade (during which, according to the Romanian high school education curriculum, Eminescu’s works are studied), amongst which many provide a less idolized image of the poet’s personality and creation. During the same year, a compendium of studies is edited by Ioana Bot, analyzing detachedly the genesis, metamorphoses, significations and functions of the myth of the “national poet” in the Romanian culture (Bot 2001), an operation that will be further pursued by Iulian Costache (2008). It was more difficult to reassess Eminescu’s actual political thinking, considering also that two deeply rooted preconceptions were (and still are) attached to it. The first one – endorsed by G. Călinescu (1936) and retained even by some of the most reasonable exegetes of the journalist, such as Monica Spiridon (2003) and Nicolae Manolescu (2008) – was that Eminescu’s journalistic work should be analyzed from its “literary” perspective rather than from its ideological discourse view. However, such a pursuit would be the same with disregarding arbitrarily the factual (and not fictional) regime of Eminescu’s journalistic creations, not aiming at providing to his readers delightful stories, but concrete solutions to the social, political and economic issues of Romania during his time.

The other thing hindering the revision would pertain to the belief that Eminescu should be related to the “ideas of his time” and not “examined *politically correct*” (Manolescu 2008: 407). The argument in itself

is not erroneous, but it is erroneously oriented. For, on the one hand, the *historic(ised)* nature of Eminescu’s political views is an issue not rejected by the supporters of postmodern multiculturalism (who, on the contrary, accept it in its conspicuousness), but by the nationalists who still believe that Eminescu’s chauvinistic ideology could provide any observable suggestion for a society quickly advancing toward postmodern multiculturalism. On the other hand, when interpreted inflexibly, contextualism is at the tricky risk of transforming a state of things into an implicit value: the fact that Eminescu was ultra-nationalist during an age of ultra-nationalisms is a mere extenuating circumstance and not a criterion that should recommend him automatically as a factor of progress; otherwise, we would arrive to the absurd situation of justifying fascism by the simple fact that a great part of the European intellectuality was drawn during the inter-war period by this ideology. This is why we cannot relate Eminescu exclusively to the “ideas of this time” (which, incidentally, are not presented as a homogenous paradigm, but rather as a heterogeneous and, in many ways, antinomic spiritual conglomerate), but to the entire history of the modern political doctrines. As a matter of fact, the most important reviews of Eminescu’s ideology during the last decade tackled such an aspect. For example, Ioan Stanomir confronted and, even more, dissociated the “national poet’s” reactionary actions with/ from the great tradition of European Conservatism, indicating furthermore that Eminescu’s political thinking is “at least for the predictable future, terribly ineffectual intellectually” (Stanomir 2000: 319). From a more reconciliatory position, Caius Dobrescu identified in the *Timpu* journalist’s views a “project of Occidentalization (Europeanization) without modernization”, one for which “the insertion in a process, in a duration, in a cultural memory rather than the adoption of the pattern of radical and complete rationalization of institutions and parliamentary democracy” are important (Dobrescu 2004: 273).

Equally intricate were the attempts of constructing a “new” image of the poet. Optimism with respect to this emerged in 2000, when a book of 93 personal original letters written by Eminescu to Veronica Micle was published. Of course, the letters showed the “Morning Star’s” “human” side, emphasized particularly by Emilia Stere (2000) and Dan C. Mihăilescu, who compare the two with the characters in I. L. Caragiale’s comedies (Mihăilescu 2009: 68-78). However, the letters could not form a sufficiently potent argument for a complete rereading of Eminescu’s work, considering that in these texts the poet is a lover as sublime and as ridiculous as the next one. Only a few years later will researchers attack the canonical core of his works. Perhaps the most important exegetic approach during post-communism



is owed to Caius Dobrescu, who tried to prove that, with Eminescu, the fusion between the High-Romanticism sensitivity and the Biedermeier one leads to the generation of a certain “post-romantic [...] originality” (Dobrescu 2004: 128), leaving room for naturalist, decadent or aestheticist interpretations. The idea of the “post-romanticism” (or, from another angle, of the “pre-modernity”) of Eminescu’s poetry will be adopted and developed by Nicolae Manolescu, who will advance the author in the proximity of “the modernists’ soul displacements” (Manolescu 2008: 389) and who will even describe as “postmodern” (*idem*: 388) several of the poet’s verses. Or, considering such an overabundance of labels, it is difficult to estimate whether the current research of Eminescu’s work is indeed under a winning star or merely attempting to overcome at any costs the crisis of reception triggered during the last decades by the romantic cliché of the “national poet”.

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