

## MIHAI EMINESCU'S GENIUS IN LITERARY CRITICISM

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### Abstract

The work of a writer, representative of the culture of a nation, is always likely to prompt quite a few varied analytic and interpretative studies since his artistic writings “say” something essential and inexhaustible. Mihai Eminescu’s genius proved to be an inexhaustible ferment of questioning and reflection. He is surrounded by a large number of points of view, including the distinctive and integrative-generalizing approaches as well as unilateral, schematic and declarative rather than truly demonstrative ones. After a brief history of numerous efforts to define the notion of genius (from the Antiquity until the modern times), limiting it to the field of literary theory and critics, this study discusses the critical assessment by T. Maiorescu, C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea, C. Topovici, Edgar Papu, T. Vianu and George Munteanu. A special attention is fairly given to the ample critical summary by G. Călinescu (Works by Mihai Eminescu, vol. I, II), the highest level of assessment as far as the interpretative and argumentative structure is concerned; it manages to penetrate into the depths of the unique aesthetic identity seen as a confession of the spiritual and artistic vocation of the Romanian people.

**Keywords:** *genius, identity, critic formula, bohemian spirit, rusticity, analytic substantiality, interpretation.*

Mihai Eminescu entered in the national and universal self-consciousness as a personality of a paramount importance. His creative effort and enormous sacrifice in order to obtain an authentic artistic value provide him a place among the geniuses of the world.

From the days of his life until now, as any exceptional personality, Eminescu has always awakened the interest of his admirers and the curiosity of scholars in the literary field; they were overwhelmed by the idea of deciphering his work and his mysterious soul. He has been studied through the prism of various theories and concepts for more than a century. The poet’s work and personality, recognized as the supreme embodiment of a creative spirit, was analyzed from the point of view of various theories on *genius*.

The word *genius* comes from the Latin *genius* which means “generator, creator”. Initially, the

term was understood as “the spiritual principle of a body”; thus, the man was supposed to be living under the protection of his own genius. In old texts the notion is also used with the meanings of “a spirit of places” and “a tamer of bad influences”. According to Horace (“Epistles”), the difference between two brothers is conditioned by the difference of their geniuses. Thus, the notion is meant to be a distinctive feature of a person. Cicero stated that the genius is a gift; due to it the man is related to gods. In the case of mythical Orpheus the notion acquires the meaning of “a divine poetic talent”. The Greek culture also produced a notion close to that of the genius – a polysemantic word *daimon* with the meaning of a special spiritual entity, like an interior voice of conscience, presupposing “fate” and “destiny”. Let us adduce Eminescu’s verse from “Satire V”<sup>1</sup>.

Here the manly love is an expression of a dramatic anxiety of the interior demon which provokes desires and passions.

Another notion appearing in antiquity is that of inspiration – a supernatural state of spirit. Plato calls it “poetic enthusiasm” which occurs due to the active presence of a god in the process of creation. In his theory on poetic inspiration Plato associates it with a kind of delirium which is provoked by muses when they capture poets’ souls and create the state of enthusiasm.

The Middle Ages, hostile to individuality, could not encourage the flourishing of personality. Plato’s idea of genius remains the dominant one; however, the spirit which captures a poet acquires negative connotations.

The Renaissance – the epoch of the awakening of human personality and the affirmation of its capacities – offers the type of a universal man with a vast knowledge in various fields. The superior man is a complex personality gifted by

nature. The personality of Leonardo da Vinci enriches the notion of genius with new characteristics. Those formulated by Plato are amplified with the power of observation (Leonardo da Vinci creates by studying nature rather than by imitating the Antiquity), technical inventiveness, capability, novelty and uniqueness.

Instead of the Hellenic enthusiasm and the Latin inspiration, Giordano Bruno introduces the notion of poetic fury (*furor poeticus*). Bruno's superior man has quite a few aspects in common with Eminescu's concept of man. His lyrical hero is disgusted by anything; it is a rebel spirit which rises with the help of the poetic fury above human mediocrity and evil. In one of his sonnets, G. Bruno reveals the idea of the sacrifice of a thinker who suffers because of his own mighty gift. There is also a curious prediction of the poet and philosopher's fate which lead him to the fire; the same motives can be found in Mihai Eminescu's "Satire I" and "Satire IV"<sup>2</sup>.

The decline of the Renaissance and the period of French classicism laid the concept of genius aside for some time. The precepts of Aristotle are revived. As for the poetic creation, the spirit is considered to be directed by human mind rather than by genius. The poetic creation is identified with skillful application of rules. It goes without saying that these concepts could hardly be consonant with Eminescu's ideals.

As far as the modern epoch is concerned, it is characterized by subjective idealism, the philosophy of the universal spirit by Kant, Fichte and Hegel, the model of a superior man suggested by Schlegel brothers, Novalis etc., the model of the Romantic genius defined, first and foremost, by the visionary power of fantasy. The contents of the Romantic art is regarded by Hegel as a reaction to the classicist strictness, whereas at the social level it is a reaction to the consolidation of the bourgeois regime.

As far as romantic aesthetics is concerned, true poetry is a product of genius and poetic inspiration. Such an artist cannot follow narrow aesthetic rules and social conventions of the time; this causes a discord with the world. In the atmosphere of egoism and horrible customs of the developing capitalism the genius appears to be totally disinterested – a dreamer aspiring only

to ideals. Thus, the impression of indifference, the lack of practical sense, the detachment and the solitude generate the myth of an unhappy "young genius" that appears in Germany. The artist with a superior vocation cannot have another fate than a tragic one in this world. The reminiscences of these theories occur both in Eminescu's works and in studies on the poet's creations. In the article "Eminescu and his poems" T. Maiorescu presents him as an illustration of Schopenhauer's theses, discussing a typical portrait of the "impersonal rise" of a poet.

According to the study mentioned above, the features of a genius include contradiction between the poet and the conventional world, melancholy, childish naivety, predestination, indifference, pessimism etc. Captured by the ideal world, being in love with the eternal prototypes, he rejects the imperfect reality trying to find refuge "in a world which is more suitable for him, the world of reflections and poetry" (translation by L. Branîște) (Maiorescu, 1889).

Analyzing love lyrics and poems about nature, C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea demonstrates that the foundation of Eminescu's character consists in optimism and realism rather than pessimism (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1967), thus imposing another image of the poet's personality. The relation between optimism and pessimism with the dominance of one of the two attitudes, together with their reconciliation or opposition, which gave birth to the largely discussed contradictions typical of the poet's works and personality, was perpetuated in the majority of the interpretations of Eminescu's writings.

The post-Eminescu period is characterized by a great admiration for the poet that can be accounted for by both his tragic and untimely death and his original works. Even though they were understood partially and superficially, they produced a strong impression upon the majority of the contemporaries, first and foremost, due to their sonority, musicality and rhythm. A number of contemporaries judged him by appearance and accidental manifestations that in some interpretations were considered to be dominant in the poet's spirituality. This leads to the elimination of the individual traits, the creation of a mysterious atmosphere around the poet and, finally, the falsification of his moral profile.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Eminescu's spirituality was considered in new decadent theories by C. Lombroso and S. Freud presenting dubious arguments as far as genius is concerned. According to C. Lombroso's theory, genius is a sign of mental disorders, or, if referred to a person, a "superior degenerate". Following these ideas, C. Vlad, N. Zaharia etc. attempted to show the hereditary character of Eminescu's illness and to equalize "madness" and "its product" – a work of art. The authors under discussion arrive at an absurd conclusion: Eminescu was a genius due to an illness which ruined him. These tendentious and discreditable interpretations were completely and eloquently disproved by further studies. The works by T. Vianu ("Eminescu's poetry") and G. Călinescu ("Mihai Eminescu's life", "Mihai Eminescu's works") took part in the process of the demystification of Eminescu's personality, as well as that of an objective scholarly research on the poet's works.

G. Călinescu's study focuses upon the presentation of a true living poet, energetically rejecting some offensively exaggerating legends according to which Eminescu became the prototype of all human talents and virtues after his death. G. Călinescu managed to impose a grand Eminescu as a universal genius dominated by the romantic and naturist vision, a giant in comparison to Maiorescu's model, on both his contemporaries and the posterity by means of a detailed study of the works published both during Eminescu's life and after his death, with the research based upon numerous documents. A sometimes spontaneous and intuitive way of interpretation could hardly enable the scholar to eliminate the idealist appreciations which had appeared earlier. A congenial bohemian spirit and the exaggeration of the so-called naturist principle form the basis of Eminescu's biography published in 1932. A new edition of the poet's biography, improved due to a supplementary documentation and reevaluation of some attitudes, came out in 1964; this time it manages to clarify quite a number of moments related to the interior world of the genius.

In G. Călinescu's opinion, "genius is a person who is distracted from the everyday life and lives his symbolic existence" (translation by L. Braniște) (Călinescu, 1978). The idea under

discussion can partially be distinguished, as we see it, from the theory of the "impersonal rise" by T. Maiorescu. Even though the poet lived in concrete circumstances, he still remains within the parameters of the notion of genius which is referred to by the famous biographer. The image of a "healthy idler" whose agitation will result in "his talent and imagination later revealing in him a great poet of nature" (translation by L. Braniște) (Călinescu, 1973) appears at the very beginning of this new edition. At first, the rusticity of the adolescent Mihai does not rise questions; he facilitates the biographer's intentions to remake the image of a "precocious madman" and a "pallid lonely troubadour". However, later on these two qualities are even more stressed: Eminescu's genius is declared and illustrated by his works, whereas the rusticity is sometimes rather far-fetched. The difficult situation which Eminescu faced in Blaj – the poet ate what he could and slept where he managed to – is explained, for example, by the fact that the poet was "a young man accustomed to the elements of nature; a healthy and primitive rustic" (translation by L. Braniște) (Călinescu, 1973), thus avoiding the real cause of the situation revealed by Augustin Z. N. Pop by means of documentary evidence.

The poet's rusticity, instinct and predilection for all that is natural can hardly be denied. However, the biographer's intentions to substitute any kind of determinism with these three characteristics (thus leaving room for intuitive interpretations) is unacceptable. As for the external aspect of Eminescu's biography, Călinescu's interpretation allows us to follow the poet's movement in time and space; at the same time, the analysis of the internal life of the poet, according to O. Crohmălniceanu's statement, "always remains the history of a genius condemned to fulfill his tragic destiny in the "narrow circle" of the contemporary world" (translation by L. Braniște) (Crohmălniceanu, 1964).

By analyzing M. Eminescu's works, G. Călinescu demonstrates why *Lucașfărul* is a masterpiece of our poetry and how much it contributed to the enrichment of the thesaurus of the national and world literature. The critic brings to the limelight the poet's aspirations to

grandeur, his great power of imagination and an unusual way to see nature. In V. Popović's opinion "life unfolds within an intellectual game, in a world created by the mind where things are different from those in real life" (translation by L. Braniște) (Popović, 2014). On the other hand, the naturalist principle provides G. Călinescu with the idea of regress, union with nature and Everything, by means of sleeping, self-discipline and dreams which "embody the last stage of the conversion towards the absolute Spirit" (translation by L. Braniște) (Călinescu, 1969). Somnolence is considered to be the essence of Eminescu's works. Such interpretation leads to regarding quite a few Eminescu's symbols (such as island, lake, sky, moon etc.) as the symbols of narrowing the cosmic consciousness and disappearing in nonexistence. The sense of futility, ataraxia and disindividualization reaching total indifference that are based upon the aspiration towards the universal reintegration present another coordinate of Eminescu's writings – death. Between these two coordinates of the instinctive nature – birth and death – G. Călinescu places the third one – love.

In what follows G. Călinescu regards Eminescu as "the fundamental poet of birth and death. There is the only elementary way of existence between these two – it is love. However, Eminescu is a philosopher of nature and instinct; it is only natural that he will not go down to social love relations – he will always preserve his cosmic top-down view looking for an Eros of automatic coupling, that of promoting a world of illusions between two vain points" (translation by L. Braniște) (Călinescu, 1970). Finally, according to G. Călinescu, Eminescu is a romantic genius who "in general lives under the moon" (translation by L. Braniște) (Călinescu, 1970).

Yet another aspect of Eminescu's character – his real earthly life – was discussed by C. Popovici, I. Kojevnikov and other soviet scholars. In their research they admit social determinism. These interpretations present M. Eminescu as a romantic poet who "reflected the life of the people oppressed by an unjust order" (Popovici, 2001). I. Kojevnikov states that "it does not matter how abstract Eminescu's thinking was, his poetry was always connected with earthly life" (Kojevnikov, 1979). Thus, Eminescu is linked to

a certain concrete reality without rejecting other aspects of his spirituality.

Engaging himself into the analysis of Eminescu's creation through the prism of aesthetic categories, M. Cimpoi does not avoid the poet's relations with the society, a concrete social milieu in which he lived. The reputable critic affirms that "even though Eminescu touched upon so many philosophic themes and motives.... the starting point of his poetry always was his native land, as well as some concrete social relations by which he was surrounded" (translation by L. Braniște) (Cimpoi, 1986). As for the relation between the real and the imaginary, M. Cimpoi finds "both metaphysical and social roots of Eminescu's spirit" (translation by L. Braniște) (Cimpoi, 1986).

The decline of Eminescu's opinions based on the civic enthusiasm (C. Popovici) and undifferentiated patriotism (I. Kojevnikov) is determined by some real and concrete factors (the defeat of the Paris Commune, social injustice, miserable living conditions, and noxious moral and philosophic influences). In M. Cimpoi's essay "Narcis and Hyperion" which brings to the limelight the idea of "reflecting yourself in your own thinking" (Cimpoi, 1986) Eminescu initially shares the beauty of reflection; later on his "magic mirror" gradually turns into "a black bruise" in which "thinking crushed by the social mechanism" is tempted to be also mechanized. In course of time the poet "has nothing to do but to sharpen his eye, guess the true identity and prudently keep himself at a distance" (translation by L. Braniște) (Cimpoi, 1986), thus alienating and secluding himself to the Hyperionian ataraxia and spiritual inspirations, breaking himself off from "the world machine" and "the reel of eternity" (translation by L. Braniște) (Cimpoi, 1986).

All that has just been said demonstrates that, without rejecting the real causes which determined the decline of the poet's spiritual state, M. Cimpoi stresses the metaphysic aspect of his thinking mentioning the fever of searching for the absolute – the fact that alienated him from the "present lacking values" (translation by L. Braniște) (Cimpoi, 1986).

A new point of view is also expressed by G. Munteanu. His interpretation presents a

reflection upon the position of a genius and of his Hyperionian way of life. The biographer's preoccupation is "to diachronically follow the appearance of some inclinations of a hero which remain unchanged to a certain extent regardless of the variety of contacts that bring them to the fore" (translation by L. Braniște) (Munteanu, 1973).

As opposed to G. Călinescu who subtly interpreted the documents, G. Munteanu tends to use the sociological and psychological approach, first and foremost concentrating himself upon explaining Eminescu's nature with the help of biographic data and his works, in order to avoid, as he highlighted, "suffocation in shapelessly collected documents" (translation by L. Braniște). Genius, according to G. Munteanu, is not a meeting point of extremes - it is a unique characteristic, the highest capability to organize human power of creation. Genius is not considered to be something rigid (as compared to Călinescu's interpretation), but modifying and developing; as for the biographer, he follows the poet's interior formation in the context of a certain social conditions, relations with his contemporaries and authorities.

The key moment from which G. Munteanu proceeds consists in the fact that the critic sees maturity in Eminescu's personality - a maturity that anticipates his biological age at all stages of his life. Thus, the poet's first love and his beloved's death are considered to be the fundamental moments that could produce an impact on his whole life. The first love, as the biographer states, "prompted an inclination, which used to be latent, to the Orphic perception of the world in the soul of the 13-year old adolescent", remaining "Eminescu's most important fundamental experience as far as the exaltation of life and paradises which it implies are concerned" (translation by L. Braniște) (Munteanu, 1973). The beloved's death is seen as Eminescu's "second fundamental experience" "meant" to be opposed to the inclination towards the Orphic perception of the world - the ecstatic and paradisaical one, with the gnomism resulting from his doubt as to whether to be or not to be" (translation by L. Braniște) (Munteanu, 1973). In line with these two important moments of Eminescu's life, in G. Munteanu's interpretation

"genius will base his power upon a tragic polarity of visions, including the representation of a possible, desirable and imaginable harmonious order of the world, as well as upon the polarity caused by the contemplation of the actual changeability of human condition" (Munteanu, 1973).

Rejecting G. Călinescu's regard of Eminescu as a hereditary bohemian, G. Munteanu stresses that "it can hardly be understood how Eminescu could live in such a way and be even more actively involved in his work" (translation by L. Braniște) (Munteanu 1973). Eminescu could gain authority among his contemporaries (not necessarily among a vast number of people) and impose his genius which became the dominant of his personality only by means of inhuman effort. But he chose to reject all praises and this was not caused by false modesty or lack of recognition of his own value (Mocanu, 2014).

The most discussed issue remains that of Eminescu's double nature. Some biographers claim that Eminescu had irreconcilable contradictions - the results of the poet's metaphysical theory; others distinguish romantic contradictions. They are sometimes explained as the contradictions of the epoch in which the poet lived: for example, M. Cimpoi mentioned "the native predisposition of Eminescu's self to ambivalence", genius being conceived as "the point of the junction of contradictions" (translation by L. Braniște) (Cimpoi, 1986).

Along with the interpretations mentioned above, other concepts included the titan contaminated with genius (C. Popovici), the titan and genius (M. Călinescu), the cyclical form of flux and reflux (E. Papu), and genius as an aspiration towards the absolute (Rosa del Conte (Del Conte, 1990)). They demonstrate the diversity of the researchers' visions as well as the complexity of the poet's personality which cannot be included in one single formula, not matter how vast it might be.

Eminescu incorporated all of them. Each of these sides of his personality glittered according to the circumstances of his personal and public life. This attention to Eminescu's genius personality and writings demonstrated by a number of important literary historians and critics can be accounted for by the efforts to study

the poet's artistic talent reflected in his writings by means of critical works – some of them are really valuable as far as analytical substantiality and hermeneutical construction are concerned. The characteristics of his thinking, feelings and art include elevated contemplation, diversity of poetic motives, as well as nobility and profoundness of feelings. The differentiation of the contents and the evolution of the form reveal a vast synthesis of the poet's feelings and his original way of communication. His art was meant to nourish all Romanian poetry which seems more blooming in the light of Eminescu's verse.

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### (Endnotes)

1. *Ea nici poate să-nțeleagă că nu tu o vrei... că-n tine/ E un demon ce-nsetează după dulcile-i lumine.*  
(How should she guess it is a demon in your heart that does pursue/ Her charm with such strange thirsty fire; a demon in your heart, not you – translation by Corneliu M. Popescu).
2. *If the butterfly wings its way to the sweet light that attracts it, it is because it knows not that the fire is capable of consuming it; if the thirsty stag runs to be brook, it is because he is not aware of the cruel bow./ If the unicorn runs to its chaste nest, it is because he does not see the noose which is prepared for him. In the light, at the fount, in the bosom of my love's light, I see the flames, the arrows and the chains./ If my languishing is so sweet to me, it is because the heavenly face delights me so, and because the heavenly bow so sweetly wounds;/ And because in that knot is bound up my desire, I suffer eternally through the fire of my heart, the arrow in mind brest, and the yoke upon my soul. – translation by Paulo Eugene Memmo.*