

**A Novel of Synthesis\***  
– Review –

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**Keywords:** Iliş Florina, Romanian literature, interpretation, fictionality, cultural memory, postmodernism, meta-narrative

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*In* the revived post-'89 Romanian literature, Florina Iliş has been rightfully hailed as one of the best fiction writers. Her third novel, 2005 *Children's Crusade*, imposed Florina Iliş on the first shelf of our contemporary canon and opened to widespread recognition – both public and academic. As a matter of fact, none of the Romanian novels published after 1989 had acquired such a double feat and such a perfect consensus, with the acclaim of both critics and readers. Among other Romanian young novelists, Florina Iliş stood apart by her obviously innate narrative talent, unmistakably leading her through complex architectures of stories, completed by an organic reading of some of the great masters of European prose (from Thomas Mann to José Saramago). The network organisation of the narrative, in which small stories connect through key scenes, the stream-phrase absorbing details, sensations, situations, the subtle interflow of the realistic and the metaphysical and, perhaps most importantly, the deep understanding of character and the ability to deal like a choir master with multiple human perspectives became all Florina Iliş' trademarks, reasserted also within the smaller dimensions of her fourth novel, the 2006 *Five Colorful Clouds on the East Sky*. However, in the years passed since, the novelist has made greater efforts to transform and even transgress the stylistics her readers had become acquainted with (and taken delight in).

In her 2012 *Parallel Lives*, the result of a long creative gestation, the novelist thinks big and aims far. In her most massive work yet, up to about seven hundred pages, Florina Iliş deals with one of the hottest topics of Romanian literature and culture, our greatest poet, Mihai Eminescu. The task might seem, from the very start, an overwhelming one: not only was Eminescu's 19<sup>th</sup> century life ripe with controversies that the passage of time did little to clear up, but his after-life was even more tumultuous, as the poet has become a national myth and has been subjected to various types of interpretations, sometimes distorting and improper (such as the ideological ones). Much more than the central figure of our literary pantheon, Eminescu has been attracted within the larger orbit of cultural discourses,

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\* Florina Iliş, *Viețile paralele* (Parallel lives) (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2012), 688 p. ISBN 978-973-23-2989-4

which built around him an often hyperbolic national myth. There is a huge literature on Eminescu, ranging from critical readings to biographic paraphernalia, authored by distinguished academics or by occasional impostors, and the corresponding field of *eminescology* is still unmatched in its eclecticism, exaggerations, massivity. Of Eminescu, every Romanian seems to know a bit, although apparently there is nobody to know everything.

Great work of documentation was required in order to approach this arborescent and most sensitive matter and Florina Iliș has spared no effort in reading a variety of sources, references, books, reports – whether first-hand or second-hand – dealing with the poet's life, work and posterity. She handles with care and discrimination this pile of documents and tries to delineate the places where false memory, false ideology or false intentions misinterpreted historical truths or corrupted literary meanings. The narrative acquires thus a palimpsest-like quality and shifts through multiple voices with fluency and refinement. Florina Iliș seems here not only to tell a story, but also to reflect upon the act of telling itself. An acute meta-narrator tackles with the labyrinth of sources, its voice at times ironical, self-aware or even concerned, as if it were feeling all truths slipping through one's (writing) fingers. Borrowing the voice of many witnesses, passing through many documentary filters and rendering sometimes clashing perspectives, this hyperconscious narrator always manages to elude our grasp, but so the more makes us pose disconcerting questions about whose truth prevails in the end. Because Florina Iliș' novel is much more than a mere archive-based biographical reconstruction. Faithful to the fictionalizing amendment asserted in old Plutarch's eponymous work, the novel betrays and undermines the assumptions of documentary realism, giving it a postmodern twist, through the awareness of the realistic reports' utter provisionality. As a consequence of that, the narrative implodes in a pure performance of texts – manuscripts, forgeries, quotations and so on – which pile up to obscure all grounded facts. The seemingly realistic depiction is conceived as a radio drama – with overlapping voices, syncopes, outbursts or jams – and this vocal quality of the narrative is perfectly rendered graphically by parantheses, italics, exclamations, elliptic utterances. As it sometimes happens in South American fiction, writing devours history and reality is shaped like an all-absorbing textuality.

A tormented character living in an age of Romanticism, with a frail personality, adverse circumstances of life, genial creativity and outlets of an overpowering disease, Eminescu has all the data of a tragic fate that much too often fails to comic caricature-like gestures. His "life" – whether real, imagined by himself, or assumed by the others – could not fit into the geometric lines of traditional chronology; it is therefore rendered by means of scattered events, torn from their originary contexts, at time distance apart, but zoomed out to hyperrealist details. The novelist's good narrative instinct leads her to building a "reality effect" and a drama of behaviours rather than discussing the "madman"'s story in orthodox psychological terms: such a morale would have seemed inauthentic. On the contrary, Florina Iliș tries to follow in high fidelity the hero's stream-of-inconsciousness, the logical illogic of his thoughts, reactions, gestures; in doing so, she resorts to syncopes and indirect speech, showing us manic scenes as if through a half-open door or even letting us step directly into the workings of the feverish mind. Paradoxically, it is

from this almost pointillist-like surface that we get the feeling of delving deeper into the psychological abyss, as it deploys in front of our very eyes in the narrative flow.

Indeed, many scenes stand out on their own by an inherent theatrical tension, great “period effect” and minute description: Eminescu and Veronica’s love story, with its series of distinct make-ups and break-ups, the scenes from the various mental asylums where the poet is successively confined, his occasional wanderings (during study years or for professional reasons), his attempts to mould his verses that sometimes disrupt the daily course of life. However, all these seemingly isolated instances come together in a bigger picture, meant to reflect upon the fine line between reality and dream, life and writing, sanity and insanity. Unsettlingly, the meta-narrator tends to insinuate all along these instances the mere randomness of such boundaries: creation of the most accomplished literature can sometimes be just a matter of circumstance and accident; the vision of the craftsman and the madman stand equally, as ambiguously overlapping poles of creation (just like in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*).

But as I have already stated, Florina Iliș’ *Parallel Lives* deals not only with a complex human character, but even more with a cultural myth, deeply imprinted in the Romanian patrimony and shaped by a cluster of discourses. In this respect, even before his posterity should begin, Eminescu’s life and meaning of it are disputed between the others’ alternative viewpoints. Veronica sees him through enamoured sentimentalizing lenses, literary critic Maiorescu already “calculates” the poet’s place in literary history, some politicians already suspect the intentions behind Eminescu’s resolute standpoints. Unfortunately, this state of facts would grow even more out of proportions in the future: the poet would always be read, interpreted, imagined by coming generations. The ill-fated man, slowly fading into the darkness of his mind, would become an image split within a labyrinth of mirrors, as an army of readers or ideologues would claim Eminescu as a cultural icon.

Consequently, Florina Iliș reconstructs an (anti)heroic epic of Romanian cultural memory which looms large, perpetually reinforced, over the span of one century and a half. During this time, Eminescu’s work, but also his human figure were altogether idealized, exacerbated in nationalist overtones, ideologically manipulated or rushedly deconstructed. The novelist draws the entire panorama of this intricate posterity, which babbles in the net of the narrative’s footnotes, each personalized and tailored to embody a different voice, a different perspective, a different interpretation. Some saw only the sentiment within Eminescu’s poetry, others the understated ideology; some lamented his practical misfortunes, others feared a political plot around the outspoken journalist; some read his literature through circumstances of his actual life, others merely presupposed his life from the invented images of his literature. Melodramatic, psychoanalytical, puritan, politically-biased – here are, thus, some of the most frequent types of signification (over)imposed on Eminescu’s life and body of work and often did the conflict of interpretations overshadow the latter.

However, the novelist sets the landmark of this historical process of (mis)interpretation in the 1950s, when the Communist regime colonized, like a malefic nettle fish, all domains of Romanian public and intellectual life. Indeed, during those black times of our history, forgery of the past was more than a simple

metaphor. In an attempt to brainwash our cultural memory in order to shape the "new man" 's way of thinking, Communist ideologues led a policy of selection and highly biased interpretation of Romanian literary history, to which our greatest poet was mostly prone to fall prey. In the first part of the novel, this second plot is kept under wraps, but at the same time intriguingly hinted at, by a carefully arranged series of mysterious signs, characters or assertions, all of which come to disentangle as the narrative advances to its middle.

And the key is by all means surprising: Florina Iliș resorts to SF devices in order to present the posterity haunting of the literary past. An entire agency of spies and informers in disguise go back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, trying to befriend Eminescu, to influence his ideas and, generally, to fill in all the blanks that surrounded his life and his madness. Although educated according to the Communist doctrine, all spies nevertheless come with certain literary training, some of them being archivists, occasional writers and, largely, passionate readers. It is exactly why they happen to fall under the spell of Eminescian charisma and forget the reason they had been sent back in time, immersing instead fully in the new life they wove around the poet. The Communist literary history – in course to be re-written – is moreover impeded by several communication jams involved along the time channels: reports arrive long overdue, their content unclear, informers disappear, mysteries deepen. The second level of the narrative (corresponding to the Communist reform of the past) overlaps thus with the first level (the view on Eminescu's 19<sup>th</sup> century) in their common attempt to dwell upon the inconsistencies of historical time and the protean nature of reality, which seems to shift by rules of fantasy rather than by means of human intervention. In *Parallel Lives*, periods apart collide in this virtual simultaneity with perpetually slipping poles of the time continuum.

Florina Iliș works this postmodern (anti)metaphysics by mixing elements of high and low literature, a conspiracy plot with a bookish plot, at a symbolic or a literal level, indulging in anecdote or raising the bar towards the problematics of time. The suspenseful spices of the plot (who are the "followers"? where do they come from?) keep alive an otherwise extremely sophisticated stylistics, filled with philological references, linguistic puns, bookish wordplay. There are many levels on which readers can delve into the text, either if they choose to commiserate with the central (and forever enigmatic) character, or if they follow the alert policier, or if they take the more polemical road of meditating on how a culture makes up its icons.

Last but not least, besides its many compartments and reading paths, besides its astounding self-generating mechanism, Florina Iliș' *Parallel Lives* is also, perhaps in its deepest core, a book written out of love of other books, an emanation, charged with subjective currents, of the Eminescian literature. Under all the (over)interpretation weeds, the novelist manages somehow to reach that aesthetic irradiation of the poet's texts, and summons it in some impressing scenes, that show from the inside, as a close interplay of two creators, how great literature takes life – out of nothing, out of detail, out of accident etc. – and lives forever.

The novelist has met indeed her big subject. The product of this fateful encounter is altogether remarkable in quantity and quality, in technique, stakes and accomplishments. Although closing the voluminous Eminescian "file", the novel keeps alive its questions and leaves readers with a sense of wonder at the end.