

**Ioana Bot, *Eminescu explicat fratelui meu*
(Explaining Eminescu to my Brother) ***
– Review –

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Keywords: Romanian poetry, Mihai Eminescu, rhetorical reading, the allegory of post-romanticism, the poetics of silence, the modernist paradigm

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The title of the most recent critical study of Ioana Bot – *Explaining Eminescu to my brother* (Bucharest: Art, 2012) – is both accurate and prone to misinterpretation as far as its object and methods are concerned. What may seem at first sight an overt and simply didactic initiative of an authoritative voice proves to be, in the end, a complex system of interpretative relationships. First of all, the object of the critical explanation is not as direct as the title suggests. The author dispels right from the beginning both her own and her reader’s “illusion that [she] is writing only a book about Eminescu”.¹ What the book actually relates is “the autobiographic experience of the construction of an interpretation”,² that is to say the personal encounter of a professional critic of Romanian literature with the work of the poet who is generally regarded as its most important canonical writer. In the space between what the title concisely terms “explaining Eminescu” and what it really means – “explaining how I [the author] interpret[s] Eminescu” – the reader discovers a professional who drops the mask of objectivity that critics hypocritically wear as a rule and not only offers her Baudelairian brother the conclusions of her investigations regarding the texts’ meanings, but also brings out into the open the process and the strategies of this investigation: “*I admit that I’m interested not only in the significations of Eminescu’s work, but also in the way in which they can be reached through reading*”.³ Sharing and concomitantly unmasking the inescapable duplicity of the critical discourse, the author defines her research in very personal terms: “I am particularly drawn to those writings of Eminescu in which the innovation, the mutation, the Idea appear under the guise of the already consecrated poetic figures, [...] I focus on the poems vibrating with the insoluble tension between what the text ‘says’ and what it ‘does’, between the logic of its imagery and the architecture of its rhetoric”⁴. In

* Ioana Bot, *Eminescu explicat fratelui meu* (Explaining Eminescu to my Brother) (Bucharest: Art, 2012), ISBN 978-973-124-725-0.

¹ Ibid., 10.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 13.

⁴ Ibid., 11.

these poems, “I thought I found the proofs of a reading process that is strategically made impossible by the author. Through the interplay between the realisation of the artistic image and its subversion, Eminescu’s work moved away from the triumphant romanticism it wished to illustrate towards the new archipelagos of modernism”¹.

The premise that underlies this particular approach is the belief that literary critics are liable to fall prey to their infatuation with their own methods and to their fascination with the idea of a thorough analysis, which would orientate all the details of a text towards a unique and fully encompassing meaning. From this point of view, Eminescu’s work is once again more than an object of study in itself. It provides a most illuminating example of how the critical relation works. The enormous bibliography attracted by his work “makes the history of Eminescu’s posterity an exemplary object for those who wish to understand the self-centred nature of the critical interpretation of literature”.² For Ioana Bot, Eminescu becomes “a paradigmatic case for illustrating the imperfection of any literary interpretation, in which the only certainties of the critic refer to her uncertainties as to how adequate her reading and interpretation are”.³

The second relation to be defined from the very beginning concerns this study’s position with respect to preceding approaches to Eminescu’s work. In accordance with the leading premise, the author intends “to re-explore poetic territories laid waste by previous exegeses – not through lack of understanding, but on the contrary, through a too perfectly functional interpretation”.⁴ The privileged method to counteract such reductive effects consists in “a rhetorical reading following the text so closely that it is able to perceive the pulse of the handwritten trace and other tensional remnants of the initial gesture, [...] a *close reading* of some of Eminescu’s poems that seem to have the ‘ stillest’ surface”.⁵ The book can thus be viewed as a collection of “micro-reading exercises”⁶ informed by a rhetorical and not by a thematic approach, whose final result does not resemble *a well-wrought urn* but constitutes a deliberately open-ended interpretation. What the rhetorical method demonstrates is that Eminescu was not a latecomer among the romantic poets, but one of the first modernist poets, a contemporary of Mallarmé and Nietzsche: “the romantic themes (already made popular through famous creations at the time when Eminescu was composing his poems) are in fact put to the test, reused – bearing sometimes discreet marks of ‘quotation’, of intertextual reference (ironic and subversive by definition) – in order to express allegorically a new paradigm, a new mentality, which I would call ‘post-romantic’ for the sake of inventory, although I believe it constitutes (in this unspectacular and unexpected form) *the actual paradigm of the major European modernism*”.⁷ To sum up, the book’s ultimate aim is to unveil “the birth of the ironic allegory of post-romanticism as theorised by Paul

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., 9-10.

³ Ibid., 13-14.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁷ Ibid., 18.

de Man, particularly in *Allegories of Reading*, in the Romanian literature at the end of the 19th century”.¹

Last but not least, the author wishes to define the relation with her reader, to whom the book is both addressed and dedicated, and who represents “the allegoric subject of this experience”.² Reading how a fellow reader reads the Romanian poet’s work and inevitably sharing the other’s “hypocritical” point of view may prove to be a revelatory experience, the result of which can be a better understanding of one’s own interpretative strategies: “[m]y brother, the ingenuous reader, can only be offered an incomplete interpretation and the complete display of its imperfection. He is my likeness, as in the Baudelairian dictum, and consequently, by accompanying me through the internal labyrinth of this enormous work, by discovering me in the reading mirror, he will also see himself, he will probably discover *his* self too as he has never seen it before. Reading Eminescu’s work can provoke such revelations”.³

The idleness of the thematic reading of Eminescu’s poems is recurrently deplored throughout the book because the critic identifies in this particular work a preoccupation of a superior order, which is the result of a change in focus: this type of poetry no longer focuses on expressing a wide range of major (romantic) topics, such as love, myth, history, patriotism, *ars poetica*, folklore, etc., although they still form the core of its content, but unobtrusively begins to call into question its own expressive capacities, or rather the expressive powers of language. Thus, the analysis of Eminescu’s love poems is built on the premise that “[i]t is the expressive function of the predicate and not ‘love’ that becomes the centre of an entire poetic programme. Such an interpretation of the love poems is obviously indifferent to the referential value of lyrical poetry; to put it more radically, I would say that it denies that lyrical poetry has any referential value”⁴; “‘love’ as subject, theme, direct object, etc. becomes the instrument of an allegory: the allegory always communicates in a covert manner something different than its explicit topic, sometimes even its incapacity to communicate”⁵; in other words, “talking about love is a way of talking about the limitations of language and, by extension, of interpretation. Love is the allegorical sign for something different than itself”.⁶ Previous examples of similar encoding strategies are to be found in Florence Dupont’s book – *L’invention de la littérature. De l’ivresse grecque au livre latine* –, which proves that a significant part of the ancient lyrical poems used the theme of love as an indirect means of symbolising the ritual of communion, and in Wilhelm Pötters’s study – *Chi era Laura? Strutture linguistiche e matematiche nel “Canzoniere” di F. Petrarca* – which uncovers a secret design of Petrarca’s book, running parallel to the love theme: the search for the mathematical and transcendental truth (“La verità”) for which the name of the poet’s beloved is only an anagram (“Laureta”). Ioana Bot’s readings of Eminescu’s (love) poems ultimately show that, in the case of the

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., 13.

³ Ibid., 14.

⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁶ Ibid.

Romanian poet, the use of similar devices illustrates the transition from the confidence that high romanticism expressed in the creative power of language to the pessimistic modernist view regarding its communicative failure.

The first illustrative example is an early poem entitled *The Place of the Wings* (*Locul aripelor*), which takes the form of a sensual discourse that doubles the scene of the progressive undressing of the woman by her lover. His apparently explicit exclamation “Oh, if only you knew what I’m looking for...”, which gives a misleading impression both to the direct addressee and to the reader of the poem, receives a new twist in the final line, which unveils that the object of the lover/poet’s search is not carnal pleasure but “the place of the wings”, that is to say the angelic nature of the woman, the transcendental truth she incarnates. The poem seems to question the truth value of the lyrical discourse, which is, at first sight, a direct expression of passionate love, yet shows in the end that its actual aims are to be found elsewhere. In this poem, the theme of love stands for something else, just as the feminine body stands for the angel’s wings, thus raising doubts about the possibility of unmediated knowledge.

The second example is a poem that has become a constant presence in the literary textbooks – *Călin* (*fragments from a tale*) [*Călin* (*file din poveste*)] – a rewritten version of a folk tale, whose predominantly lyrical character continues to bewilder the literary critics. It is such aspects, which run counter to the interpreter’s expectations, that form the primary object of Ioana Bot’s “micro-reading exercises”: “The importance of the poem for understanding the change that takes place in Eminescu’s work under the cover of the greatest conformity to the spirit of his time resides, I believe, in these territories which ‘evade’ the epic structure in order to build a lyrical vision. The grand epic style characteristic of high romanticism ‘disguises’ the shift of ‘the centre of rhetorical gravity’ to the lyrical aspects responsible for the crisis of the narrative-referential value of the poetic language”¹ and of the reading process as well. Resolving the reading impasse requires a change of method in the first place: “in accordance with de Man’s perspective, I opt for a rhetorical reading, in the sense of ‘attention to the implications of figurality in a discourse’ – as the only possible approach to a text in which the theme (the love story between a human and a supernatural being) is used for the construction of a figural meaning (the limits of the expressive power of the discourse), both levels (thematic and figural) exhausting their signifying resources before the interpretation reaches its ‘closure’”.² Thus, the love scenes *in absentia* (such as the girl’s monologue in front of the mirror when she discovers the marks left on her body by the unknown lover who visited her in her sleep), in which the discourse serves as an evocative and self-discovery means, alternate with scenes *in praesentia*, in which the discourse becomes superfluous and is therefore replaced by the more direct gesture of the embrace.

In other cases, the reading process is brought to a halt by the apparently redundant monologues in which the man describes the woman he loves, despite the fact that the object of his adoration is right in front of him and she is his only listener

¹ Ibid., 33.

² Ibid., 36.

(as in *Sarmis*). Once again, “this type of discourse brings together [...] the power of the eye to perceive the Meaning (that each partner sees in the other) and the power of the words (of love) to express this meaning”.¹ On the one hand, the speech of the enamoured viewer conveys the revelation of the angelic nature of the woman and her recognition as the other half of his self, as in the Platonic myth; on the other hand, it puts the figurative and ontogenetic powers of language to the test. The critical analysis of such instances does not focus on “‘what the lover sees’, but on the act of seeing and on the rhetorical means employed to express it”,² revealing that the contemplative regard is fundamentally ambiguous. It gives an objective reality to the subject of its contemplation, but at the same time it puts an insurmountable distance between the two partners: “the distance of speech and sight, which introduce an irremediable separation – so that they would fulfil their roles of acts of knowledge”.³ Despite the fact that the regard and the accompanying discourse confer reality to their object (in accordance with the romantic faith in the creative power of the word understood as *logos*), they are also responsible for the estrangement of the lovers (in accordance with the modernist view concerning the alienating force of language). Only when this distance is conquered and the partners are reunited in an embrace, which, in Eminescu’s work, anticipates or equals the (happy) cessation of existence, the alienating effect of the discourse (and of the regard) is annihilated. At the opposite end, the distance increases up to the point when it changes into absence or death, as in the elegies and sonnets of the mature age, in which the poetic language shows its incapacity to revive the departed one. The correlation between the verbal portrait and the absence of its feminine referent – in other words, the poet’s attempt to reveal the fact that the presence in the universe of representation is based upon the disappearance from the world of perception, constitutes, according to Eric Gans, one of the last preoccupations of the romantic poetics, anticipating the modernist poetics of absence (as illustrated, among others, by Mallarmé). This is the context for Ioana Bot’s reading of the seemingly superfluous fragments. Taking a closer look, the reader discovers that the problematic description is in fact the reminiscence of a previous contemplative and revelatory moment, when Sarmis saw Tomiris, his bride-to-be, for the first time and recognised in her his twin soul, in a Platonic sense, and the incarnation of a transcendental essence. The lover’s discourse suspends the present moment of the direct address in favour of an anamnesis of the transcendence, thus maintaining the distance with all its implications.

Another major topic of the critical studies on Eminescu’s work is his special interest in Romanian folklore and his extensive borrowings of themes and structures that are specific to it. In the chapter that Ioana Bot dedicates to this subject, she questions the received opinion that these borrowings are limited to the simple transfer of themes or to the literary polishing of the folk language. The first text she analyses is a tale entitled *Prince Charming, The Tear-Begotten (Făt-Frumos din lacrimă)*. What draws Ioana Bot’s attention is, in this case, the fact that the critics seem inclined rather to censure the so-called narrative mistakes of the author than to

¹ Ibid., 48.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 49.

wonder if the apparent unskilled rewriting has no other explanations: “I think that whenever a literary critic senses a change in form (an unsolved tension between the reader’s expectations and the innovation implied by that form), yet this intuition is expressed in a deprecative manner, we, the interpreters of literature, witness the great error that we are always likely to make ourselves: to have the sudden perception of ‘something else’ and to persist nevertheless in our critical blindness, consisting in the exclusive recognition of the already known forms”¹. Despite the fact that all the motifs employed by Eminescu can be identified in Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson’s index of folk tale motifs, he does not follow the traditional structure of such tales – Eminescu repeats the entire configuration of the folk narrative using different motifs each time. While in the folk tale, the main character completes one initiatic journey, in Eminescu’s tale, Prince Charming completes two such journeys, which constitutes a radical break with the strict distribution of roles in the folk narrative, where the only possible instance of a similar reiteration is the case in which the actual hero’s journey is doubled by the presentation of the false hero’s deeds in order to highlight the positive role of the first. In Eminescu’s tale, the hero’s sworn brother, in whose name he begins the second journey, is not a negative character, but a different manifestation of the same nature: the two of them represent contrary yet complementary principles, “two halves of the perfect being, two manifestations of a unique essence”²: the active one and the passive one. Thus, “the logic of the folk tale is abolished so that the narrative sequences form a different pattern, which illustrates Eminescu’s fascination with the theme of the *doppelgänger*”³ or his interest in dual and symmetric figures, such as the comparison. Moreover, the narrative structure of the tale mirrors its thematic content: the story of the two brothers consists of two complete and complementary plots. In conclusion, “Eminescu’s originality – the mark of a particular vision and creativity – is born precisely out of his betrayal of the folk tale model; it is this originality that justifies his departure from the set structure of the model”⁴.

A different type of transmutation is exemplified in the poem *In the Middle of Thick Forest* (*La mijloc de codru des*), in which “the text itself asks to be looked at [...], the way a visual poem does, (which would be inconceivable in the case of a folk song, whose only constraints have to do with the oral mode of communication and not with the written one). The text itself ‘does’ what it ‘says’: the lines which talk about reflection literally cut the text in two (almost) equal halves, separating the description of the landscape in the first part from the description of what can be seen in the water, in the second part”⁵. The form of the poem is analogous to its content.

Eminescu’s preoccupation with binary structures and figures reflects the vision of a binary and symmetric universe, in which the two terms are in a relation of harmonious complementarity. “The signs of the alienation of the blissful universe imagined by the poet will cause the reinterpretation of the binary rhetorical figure on

¹ Ibid., 73.

² Ibid., 77.

³ Ibid., 78.

⁴ Ibid., 80.

⁵ Ibid., 82.

which it is founded. While the comparison brought the pairs together and revealed their identical essence, their separation is formally expressed by means of the antithesis”¹. For instance, in *Melancholy (Melancolie)*, the symmetrical description of the external world (built upon typical romantic motifs: the ruined church, the moon, the cemetery with crosses leaning in all directions) and of the internal world (which bears the marks of emptiness) is no longer a sign of their reciprocal reflection and communication. Despite their symmetrical disposition, there is no harmony between the two worlds. The comparison no longer brings together the separate halves, but marks their complete alienation as a result of the loss of faith. “The comparison cannot serve as the figure of the alienation – what the text builds up to is the unsolvable antithesis of the estrangement of the self from the world. But what sort of language is the one that reveals an antithesis by means of comparative, symmetrical structures?”²

A different example of the way in which Eminescu departs from the romantic aesthetics and assumes a modernist view on the poetic language is identified in the extremely rich ensemble of versions that precede one of his most representative creations: *Ode (in Ancient Metre)* [*Odă (în metru antic)*]. Ioana Bot questions the editors’ generally shared opinion that all the fragments which precede *Ode to Napoleon* – the first coherent version of the poem – “do not have the necessary quality to form the object of interpretation, that is, they lack the coherent organisation of themes and ideas and their content is not structured as a fluent discourse. Or, this premise is erroneous. Why should we accept a thematic principle as the criterion of ‘legibility’ as long as this corpus is governed by a formal principle, by a metrical algorithm that forms the basic structure of the discourse (‘the Sapphic stanza’, ‘the ancient metre’ – that are explicitly referred to by the author even in the title of the final version)? I think that the distinction between ‘noise’ and ‘work’ should not be based on the linguistic coherence, but on the signification of the poetic form”,³ whose struggle with the content culminates in their reciprocal reflection in the last stages of the poem’s elaboration. Once again, the particular case provides the opportunity for addressing a more general question of poetics, which concerns the definition of the poetic meaning. In her analysis of Eminescu’s *Ode*, the author pursues a line of thought that she has also developed in a separate study,⁴ stating that in the case of poetry in general and of modern poetry in particular, the signification is not to be equated with the linguistic expression, regardless of its prosodic constraints. On the contrary, the formal constraints, be they prosodic or otherwise, are part of the poetic meaning and sometimes its most important meaning (as in Mallarmé’s sonnet in –yx, to quote a famous example). The avant-textes of the *Ode* reveal that the author’s primary preoccupation in writing this poem was the pursuit of a *vis formativa*, the search of a generative device which will become only later the

¹Ibid., 85–86.

²Ibid., 91.

³Ibid., 113.

⁴Idem, *Sensuri ale perfecțiunii. Literatură cu formă fixă ca încercare asupra limitelor limbajului* (Senses of Perfection. Fixed Form Literature as a Challenge on the Limits of Language) (Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2006).

receptacle of a legible content. An early example of a verse line – “Trochee, spondee, dactyl, trochee” – proves, probably in a less radical way than other verses, that the prosodic requirements take precedence over the rules that govern the discourse, yet it also names, in a revealing manner, what the poem does. Such creative techniques contradict the romantic portrait of the inspired poet that the critics have drawn of Eminescu and argue for the extension of the interpretative attention to the formal aspects of the poem. Ioana Bot adds that the dynamic character of this pursuit (which she also analyses in a different version of this article¹) would become much more visible in an electronic edition.

Eminescu’s ambiguous attitude towards literary categorisations is best illustrated in an *ars poetica* written early in his youth – *The Epigones (Epigonii)*, which earned him a great reputation with the contemporary critics, as well as with the critics of the 20th century. Where all these interpreters identify a clear-cut romantic antithesis between the praiseworthy literary predecessors and the less imaginative contemporaries, Ioana Bot distinguishes a much subtler relationship. In her opinion, the poem describes two types of poetics without organising them hierarchically or expressing an option “[since] the explicit choice (the eulogy of the poetic creed of the predecessors) is undermined once the evocation of the first poetic model employs the figural resources of the second, ‘the epigonic one’”²: Eminescu uses different intertextual techniques (which have an intrinsically ironic or subversive character), such as partial quotations or pastiche, in order to characterise the style of the previous writers. “In other words, *if the poem praises ‘the literary canon of the illustrious predecessors’, this praise is achieved through poetic means which are not specific to their aesthetic practice*”.³ The opposition does not describe two successive artistic conceptions, but two alternative ways of writing poetry: the first is supported by the belief in the creative power of language, the second derives from the loss of this belief and the realisation of the artificial or arbitrary character of language. When Eminescu writes this poem, he includes himself among those who adopt the second view. However, “[b]y choosing to write an ode which evokes the artistic creed of the ‘believing’ predecessors, Eminescu implicitly expresses his own faith in their value and in the validity of *that old* [...] meaning of Poetry. The ‘epigonic’ voice believes therefore in something: in the poetry of the predecessors, or else it would have been impossible to validate it. But, at the same time, [he says:] ‘we believe in nothing!’. The two ways of writing poetry are forever kept in an unsolvable tension in Eminescu’s poem”.⁴ By the time the exposition of the two poetic modes comes to an end, the two literary forms which are supposed to figure the author’s view on each of them – the ode (for the presentation of the predecessors) and the satire (for the presentation of the epigones) – seem to have exchanged their features: the ode has an ironic undertone and could be ultimately read as a satire, while the satire disguises a praise for the epigones, who are capable

¹ Idem, “Entre le bruit et l’œuvre”, in *Textes en performance. Actes du Colloque CeRNET, novembre 2003 Genève*, ed. Ambroise Barras and Eric Eigenmann (Geneva: MetisPresses, 2006), 211–226.

² Idem, *Eminescu explicat fratelui meu*, 133.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 141.

of recreating the visionary poetics of the predecessors. In conclusion, the rhetoric of the poem goes counter to the ideas it states. “The fact that the antithesis between the first part (the ode) and the second part (the satire) of *The Epigones* is no longer operational leads to the allegorisation (in de Man’s terms) of the figural level of the discourse and blocks the realisation of the antithetic meaning, as well as the possibility of thoroughly interpreting the text”.¹ It is at this point that de Man’s *allegory of reading* meets the *impossible interpretation* of Harold Bloom (as theorised in *The Anxiety of Influence*), which the critic sees as fundamentally similar.

The choice of the antithesis as a structural principle is also brought into question with respect to a much discussed poem – *Letter III (Scrisoarea III)*, in whose case the literary analyses usually highlight the contrast between a glorious episode from the national history (the defeat of the invading Ottoman armies by Mircea the Elder) and the despicable present, while overlooking two fragments that upset this balance: the sultan’s dream (placed at the beginning of the poem), which takes the form of a love story relating the myth of the empire’s birth, and the love letter that a Romanian prince is writing to his beloved after the battle, inserted between the episode of the military confrontation and the satire that closes the poem. Once the antithesis is placed in the larger context, the theme of the poem reveals itself to be ampler than the critics have thought: *Letter III* constructs the panorama of the complete cycle of a civilisation: the mythical birth, the state as an organic system, the epoch of the estrangement from the Idea, the death of the alienated civilisation. The letter of the prince is actually placed in the centre of the poem as a sort of structural axis: the love story at the centre of the Romanian medieval world symbolises its non-alienation, as opposed to the Ottoman world, which has forgotten its mythical origins. The language of the poem also mirrors these changes: it progressively departs from the visionary perspective adopted in the beginning and assumes a satirical tone towards the end.

The discussion of the problematic character of language is further developed in a poem that was not published in Eminescu’s lifetime: *Odin and the Poet (Odin și poetul)*. In Ioana Bot’s view, the poem could represent “the first occurrence of a typically modernist poetics of silence in the Romanian culture”.² It relates the descent of the main character – the poet, who is extremely disappointed with his contemporaries, into the depths of the frozen sea where he meets the northern gods, to whom he offers his services as a bard. The detail that escapes the attention of the critics is the fact that Odin rejects the two types of poetic discourse offered by the poet – the satire (of his contemporaries) and the Orphic discourse, and explains that the true beauty consists in the peacefulness of the soul. By drinking from the gods’ cup, the poet is initiated into the Apollonic sense of beauty. He also meets an angel-girl, described as the most beautiful song that has ever left the harp of a bard, an incarnation of poetry itself. Their kiss, connoting a mystical revelation, concludes the poem. What generally passes for an unfinished poem, due to the apparently abrupt ending and to the use of blank verse, is read here as a logical conclusion: “Odin’s rejection of the types of poetry offered by the poet during this process of

¹ Ibid., 139.

² Ibid., 152.

initiation becomes fully clear in the end, when the embrace of the two partners leaves no place for any utterance or makes the utterance (of any type of poetry) completely unnecessary because the (ontological) divide that the poetic logos should compensate for does no longer exist”.¹ On the whole, the poem relates “[a]n adventure which allegorises the evolution of Eminescu’s own conception of poetry, from the belief in the destructive power of the Orphic language to its messianic and unmasking role and, finally, around the moment when he slips into illness and silence – to the rejection of any type of language because of its treacherous and secondary nature”.²

At the peak of the investigation into the expressive capacities of language, “Eminescu’s poetic language is faced with an unsolvable problem: how can one name what cannot be named? What is impossible to name is the chaos, the pre-conceptual state, and also the divinity preceding its own manifestation”.³ The numerous fragments in which he attempts to describe the state of the world before its coming into existence bear witness to this preoccupation. Such experiments are accompanied by a progressive decontextualisation of the subject: the characters lose their individualising features and become abstract emblems in a conceptual presentation of the evolution of Being: “But this experiment crosses the boundary of romanticism and ventures into the territories of the post-romantic experiments, such as Mallarmé’s descriptions of nothingness, Rimbaud’s self-annihilating language, etc.”.⁴

Once the arbitrary character of language has been unmasked, the poet employs it in a negative way: “The ontogenetic language must be uttered in reverse, freed from its fundamental articulations, so that the world brought into being by the divine word could be [...] undone”.⁵ This attitude explains the presence of the curse as a recurrent speech form in his creation. One of the most illustrative examples can be found in an ample poem that remained in manuscript form – *The Twins (Gemenii)*. The climax of the poem is represented by the prayer that the Dacian king, Sarmis, who has been usurped by his twin brother and robbed of his fiancée, addresses the supreme god, Zamolxe, a prayer in which the apparent hymn or ode disguises, in fact, a curse, which encompasses the entire creation: his homeland, his brother, his beloved, the god and himself. In cursing the world and in asking for its (and explicitly his) extinction, Sarmis reveals the creator’s weak point: he cannot destroy his creation because that would be contradictory to his nature. What attracts Ioana Bot’s attention is the fact that “the destructive function of language can borrow the rhetorical structures of the language that makes the world come into being; this causes a perpetual indecision regarding the rhetorical quality of speech (and turns it into an object of irony). Far from being perfect, the poetic language ‘does’ the contrary of what it ‘says’, thus proving that there is no relation between the action and its expression”;⁶ “the poem stages [...] the unmasking of the incapacity

¹ Ibid., 157.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 178.

⁴ Ibid., 179.

⁵ Ibid., 178.

⁶ Ibid., 186.

of the language to be *literal*. The form of the ode is, in this case, the rhetorical *figure of the curse*".¹

The answer that the gods give to the mad king is ambiguous and ironic. They decide that when he dies, his body will be laid on the bottom of the frozen sea, but his eyes will remain forever open; in other words, they grant him an eternal sight, which is not the power to see everything, but the blindness caused by the absolute character of the experience. Ioana Bot convincingly interprets it as "a new way of questioning the expressive capacity of language: that of describing what one 'sees' when one cannot see anything"² and as illustration of Eminescu's orientation towards the modernist poetics of the incommunicable.

The final point that the critic wishes to clarify concerning the thematic approach to Eminescu's work refers to his treatment of the patriotic theme. The poetic mutation that has been identified in different areas of his creation is also manifest in the poems that centre on a patriotic subject, if the reader pays close attention to the text. In this case, the breach with tradition consists in the abandonment of the messianic role that his immediate predecessors – the generation of writers that took part in the revolution of 1848 – attributed to literature. While these writers used the resources of the literary discourse in order to express political ideas and to incite to action, Eminescu's treatment of the patriotic theme is independent of any external considerations and represents another means of pursuing his own artistic vision. It is the mistaken belief in Eminescu's presumed messianic role that is responsible for the creation and perpetuation of the cult of the "national poet", a phrase in which the adjective weighs heavier than the noun and which has no objective foundation in the poet's work.

An extremely relevant example of Eminescu's personal approach to this theme is to be found in an unfinished dramatic project, in which the key point of the patriotic speech uttered by the main hero, Andrei Mureșanu – one of the writers and revolutionaries of the previous generation – is actually a curse, an invocation of death (and not the poem that is the national anthem today, as initially intended). This is because the patriotic theme is subject to the same decontextualisation that manifests itself in other areas of Eminescu's work: the national suffering is only an instance of the tragic destiny of the entire universe, governed by an evil force, from which the only escape is the return to a state of non-existence. "If, in Eminescu's love poems, love (also) signifies death, through the reunion with one's partner, in this early poem, the supreme proof of one's love for one's country is also the invocation of death as a solution to the existential suffering".³

Another significant instance of a personal interpretation of a highly cherished topic of the contemporary writers concerns the ethnogenesis of the Romanian people: while the representatives of the previous generation believed that the Roman conquest of Dacia led to the birth of a nation with a great destiny, in Eminescu's work, the confrontation of the two peoples is read against the background of the eternal cosmic drama: the defeat of the Dacians by the Romans symbolises the

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., 193.

³ Ibid., 215.

destruction of a mythical world due to the intrusion of rational thinking, which is here a manifestation of the evil principle that rules the world. The fate of their descendants is not the glorious destiny that the revolutionaries had in mind, but a tragic fate, which seems to fulfil the curse of the defeated Dacian king, Decebal.

The ample analysis of Eminescu's innovative strategies can also account for the difficulty in introducing his work to a foreign public.¹ According to Ioana Bot, the major problem that the translators are still confronted with is related to the "age" of his poetic language, which differs from the language of his contemporaries and anticipates the linguistic solutions proposed by the poets of the next century. What passed for an experiment at the end of the 19th century was perceived as (an illustration of) the norm in the 20th century. But most of the European languages did not experience a similar change in poetic language at the end of the 19th century, which leaves the translators with only two restrictive options: they can either translate his poems into the poetic language of late romanticism, in which case the innovative character is much attenuated, or opt for their translation into the modern language of the 20th century, a choice which would be anachronistic, but more adequate for illustrating its novelty. The literary interpretation and reception are highly dependent on the translators' choices. The translators' preference for the first solution still perpetuates the idea that Eminescu was the last European romantic and it is precisely this perspective that Ioana Bot's study attempts and succeeds to change.

At the end of this exploratory close reading of Eminescu's most representative creations, it is no longer difficult to anticipate the answers to at least two out of the three questions that Ioana Bot asks in the final chapter: Was Eminescu a poet for the 19th century? Was he a poet for the 20th century? Is he a poet for the 21st century?

The history of his contemporaries' reception proves that the answer to the first question is negative. What they were able to read was only the conventional surface of the conformity to previous literary models. Anything that went beyond these limits was interpreted as error. The detractors reproached him "the excessive pessimism, the inclination to philosophise, the immorality of the love poetry, the lack of patriotism, visible in his approach of the national history, the erroneous use of the folk art models, the incorrect use of the Romanian language".² The positive answer to the second question and its motivation are represented by this particular study, which re-explores each of these problematic topics with the instruments of a professional 20th century reader and rigorously reverses their value. The positive answer to the third question is a bet of the same 20th century reader, who knows from personal experience that the complexity of the poet's work can address the sensibilities and preoccupations of new readers.

What remains to be added is that the fellow reader who signs the review has found this insight into Eminescu's work as reflected into another reader's mind particularly fascinating and revealing, and can only hope that somewhere along this reading of another's reading of Eminescu and of his critics' interpretations, any reader of this presentation will (re)discover the great work that generated them all.

¹ A version of this chapter entitled "A Romanian Product Refused for Export" was published in *The Canonical Debate Today*, ed. Liviu Papadima, David Damrosch, and Theo D'haen (New York: Amsterdam-Rodopi, 2011), 323–336.

² Idem, *Eminescu explicat fratelui meu*, 258.