

REMEMBERING THE “NATIONAL POET”: FROM MEMOIRS TO POSTMEMORY

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Abstract Drawing on Jan Assmann’s concept of cultural memory and Marianne Hirsch’s notion of postmemory, this article examines how personal recollections of Mihai Eminescu’s life (1850-1889) entered the Romanian cultural and literary circuit. At the time of his death, Eminescu’s prestige as a „national poet” was already established, thence at this moment precisely, I argue, starts a complex and collective process of national remembrance, reinforcing the cultural myth of the Romantic poet. In the following decades these recollections are continuously reworked and rewritten, especially through biographical, literary, and filmic representations which shape and canonize Eminescu’s postmemory. Thus my analysis is concerned with the memory-dimension of the Romanian myth of the “national poet”, and at the same time it suggests a new way of reading the memoirs about Eminescu, in the frame of cultural memory studies.

Keywords Mihai Eminescu, national poet, memoirs, literary remembrance, cultural memory, postmemory

I. Two ways of reading memoirs: aesthetic vs. philological

Among the discursive genres placed by the Romanian critic Eugen Simion under the heading of “biography”¹ – diaries, memoirs, epistles, autobiographies – memoir writing has an ambiguous status. The ambiguity comes from the tension between the subjective, selective and distorting character inherent to individual memory and the memoirist’s claim to be a witness and objective reflector of history. The latter commitment is felt more strongly in the pre-modern age of the genre, which includes – because of their form rather than the moment they were published, after 1900 – the memoirs regarding Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889), Romania’s

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¹ Eugen Simion, *Genurile biograficului* (Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic Gold, 2002), 7.

“national poet.”² Heteroclitic, unavoidably filled with gaps and volatile, what we generically call the memoir corpus includes, aside from personal recollections of the poet’s contemporaries, a diverse material, difficult to place in the genre of memoirs. However, the recollections and documents on Eminescu have a particular situation among similar texts: first of all, they have a biographical relevance; second, a cultural relevance – the construction of Eminescu’s myth starts from memoirs – and third, they gain an aesthetic relevance, since the accounts regarding the poet’s life became hypotexts for several fictional writings and filmic representations. The diversity of works informed and, in some cases, generated by such accounts³ – academic biographies (G. Călinescu, *Viața lui Mihai Eminescu*), fictionalized biographies (Cezar Petrescu, *Romanul lui Eminescu*), psychological novels (E. Lovinescu, *Mite* and *Bălăuța*), and postmodern novels (Florina Ilis, *Viețile paralele*) –, lend these individual recollections not only the status of documents belonging to literary history, but also that of aesthetic objects. Building on these premises, my essay will analyze several aspects regarding the posthumous national remembrance of Eminescu and its cultural encoding. To this end, I will be using several concepts and theoretical assumptions from *cultural memory studies*, a multidisciplinary academic field established in the past three decades.

Generally, memoirs make up an interdisciplinary – if only virtual – subject matter, which may be approached from the perspective of various humanistic disciplines, among which literary and cultural studies, history, or anthropology. Still, in Romania such texts have been dealt with usually from an aesthetic angle, being categorized in literary histories either as a genre, or as individual species. While writers’ memoirs are habitually seen as annexes of their literary work (leaving aside the rare cases where an author becomes part of the canon precisely because of such para-literary writings), it is harder to explain the integration into the aesthetic domain of memoirs about prison and torture during the communist era, which have taken by storm the Romanian public space after 1989. For instance, Ruxandra Cesereanu, a researcher of the collective imaginary, resorts mainly to literary instruments in her study on the recollections from the Romanian Gulag and as such illustrates an “aesthetic” way of dealing with memoir writings. Cesereanu claims that the “distortions” of remembering trauma lead these memoirists to a quasi-fictional discourse: in “the memories relating to detention, even when they claim to reflect reality objectively,” fiction “emerges involuntarily.”⁴ Generally, memoirs are appraised neither as fictional literature, nor as fully believable historical documents. Instead, they are read in a manner that I would call, for lack of a better word, “philological.” There are several symptoms of the philological reading of memoirs: first, an

² John Neubauer, “Figures of National Poets. Introduction”, in *History of the Literary Cultures of East Central Europe:Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (vol. 4), ed. by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2010), 11-18 (11).

³ It is of notoriety that E. Lovinescu confessed that the impulse for starting the work on his first novel in the Eminescu cycle, *Mite*, was reading Mite Kremnitz’s memories about Eminescu.

⁴ Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Gulagul în conștiința românească. Memorialistica și literatura închisorilor și lagărelor comuniste* (Iași: Polirom, 2005), 10.

emphasis on style and its qualities, whether we are dealing with the erudite and elegant souvenirs of the Romantic Alecu Russo, or with the candor of a peasant woman who confesses her own experience as a deportee to Siberia such as Anița Nandriș-Cudla; second, an emphasis on the author's sensitivity – particularly in the case of female memoir writers; and third, stressing the involuntary fictionalization of memories in the process of writing them down.

The recollections of Eminescu's life seem to demand by default a primarily philological approach, given that they were habitually seen as the natural paratext for the poet's work and biography. Petru Creția, one of the few who aimed to systematize the corpus of memoirs about Eminescu, went as far as enunciating in his book *Testamentul unui eminescolog* (1998) the principles for a future critical edition of the biographical testimonies.⁵ There Creția insists not just on the mandatory accuracy of text reproduction, but also on the need to establish the "memoirist's psychology and his/her degree of culture" or "the duration and nature of his/her relationship with Eminescu, down to the smallest detail, including those that may alter the authenticity of the account, making it either more favorable or more negative."⁶ It is clear that, for Creția, analyzing the psychology or the context is nothing else but another philological exigency, given that the final purpose of this process is to obtain accounts that are as accurate as possible both in letter and in spirit. But can the principles of accuracy and adequacy, so important in philology, guide the analysis of the memoir writing? How could a philological reading account for the memory distortions, information gaps, or preconceptions of the memoirist, that undermine his/her will to evoke the past "as it was," without prudishness and without bias? No matter how much the memoirist craves for "the truth," the subject that carries out the act of remembering is neither a historian, nor a biographer, even though he seems to assume precisely these roles.

Apart from the difficulties mentioned by Creția, there are several other challenges when dealing with the memoirs on Eminescu. First of all, there is the volatility of the corpus: in the absence of a critical edition or of an anthology built on a unitary criterion, the recollections about Eminescu make up a territory with uncertain boundaries. Then there is the heterogeneity of these writings: the recollections include, aside from accounts of his contemporaries, biographical documents (such as the family memoir, written by Matei Eminescu), the correspondence about Eminescu between his contemporaries, as well as obituaries and commemorative poems. Finally, one has to take into account the circumstances in which these recollections emerged: as responses to public calls or questionnaires aiming to collect biographical data of the poet's life, or as literary evocations written by those close to Eminescu, such as Iacob Negruzzi, Teodor V. Ștefanelli and Ioan Slavici, or as attempts by marginal or indirect witnesses to take part in the process of making public Eminescu's biography. The status of such recollections, be they canonical or not, must also be assessed by studying the manner in which they were used in establishing the myth of the "national poet".

⁵ Petru Creția, *Testamentul unui eminescolog* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998), 207.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 207-208.

Even though memoir writing raises a number of complex issues, important for literary history, it would be fitting to ask to what extent it is possible – or, more precisely, to what extent it is desirable – to use an aesthetic or a philological reading as a method of cultural analysis of the memory genres. In the case at hand, it seems to me that it would be more productive to have an approach of the memoirs on Eminescu from a different perspective, which would benefit greatly from the instruments used in the field of cultural memory studies.

II. From individual to collective: how Eminescu entered public memory

Viewed from the vantage point of the options for storing and retrieving information that we have available nowadays, the corpus of memoirs about Eminescu is not particularly impressive in terms of size or diversity – it is very likely that, in our hi-tech era, it may appear as quite poor. The diligence with which it has been collected and edited in the early 20th century, when the publication of the poet's posthumous work also started, did not have an exclusively documentary purpose, but it was also an emergency: if not put on paper and then printed, the memories of those who had actually met Eminescu at some point in his life would have disappeared, together with their owners.

In the first decades after Eminescu's death, the recollections and the documents regarding him are circulated in the press. A first critical bibliography of this material will be made by G. Călinescu, in the 4th edition of *Viața lui Mihai Eminescu* (1964).⁷ In 1903, Radu I. Sbiera published in Cernăuți *Amintiri despre Eminescu*, a volume from which Teodor V. Ștefanelli will reproduce in his own *Amintiri*, published in 1914, a number of school documents. I. Slavici published his memories about Eminescu in 1909, only to republish them in his memoir volume *Amintiri. Lumea prin care am trecut* (1924), and *Amintirile de la Junimea* by Iacob Negruzzi were printed in 1921. Throughout this interval, several collective volumes of tributes, called *Omagii* emerged (in 1909, 1914, 1934, and 1939). In these volumes, as time passed, the memories of the poet's contemporaries, the commemorative poems and the previously unpublished documents make way for critical studies and translations from Eminescu's work, aiming to support the "universality" of the Romanian poet. In the 1930s, the volumes of literary documents published by I. E. Torouțiu (the volume dedicated to the "Junimea" society was published in 1934) bring new information concerning Eminescu; it is at the same time that Călinescu provides, in *Viața lui Mihai Eminescu* (1932), the first authoritative critical narrative of the poet's life and "psychology". In the novel cycle consisting of *Mite* (1934) and *Bălăuța* (1935), Lovinescu aims for a polemic positioning in relation to the psychological portrait penned by Călinescu.⁸ Both critics relied on accounts about Eminescu not just for extracting

⁷ For a (quasi)complete bibliography of memoir and tribute texts, see ***, *Mihai Eminescu. Bibliografie adnotată 1990-2005 (Cu o Addendă) la perioada 1866-1989*, București, Biblioteca Academiei Române, online source <http://www.biblacad.ro/EminescuFinalAd.pdf>.

⁸ G. Călinescu, *Viața lui Mihai Eminescu* (București, Minerva, 1989), 238.

information, but also practiced on them a critic and hermeneutic approach. The treatment of witness accounts is, of course, different in the two authors: while Călinescu is closer to memoir, using the routines of the historian and “painstakingly dealing”, as he himself admits, with issues of genealogy and documentary sources, Lovinescu finds in Mite Kremnitz’s memoirs the psychological trigger and stimulus for writing a novel that would explain its hero’s “erotic psychology.” Finally, the collection in mass anthologies of witness accounts by Eminescu’s contemporaries occurred quite late, in the 1970s,⁹ with the most recent such anthology being published in 2013.¹⁰

Without a doubt, the memoirs regarding Eminescu can be read in an affective note, but the emotion felt while reading is more an effect of the reader response, rather than one created by the text itself. In other words, those who make the evocations seem to treat their memories not as personal emotions, but, instead, as historical documents. Some of the accounts were put on paper a long time after the moment they are describing, lacking the spontaneous character of an unprovoked remembrance. Besides, any reflection on the processes of individual memory and their fallibility is almost absent even in the case of memoir writers who produce vast portraits, such as Ștefanelli and Slavici: each of the authors appears to be convinced that his memories of Eminescu are “authentic” and accurate. This positivism of memory is due to a great extent to a certain rhetorical pattern, visible in all Romanian memoirs of the late 19th century and early 20th century, with the notable exception of Ion Creangă’s *Amintiri din copilărie* (1880-1890). By remembering the past, these authors – some of them minor figures – document an era that is already perceived as belonging to history. The impression of uniformity of memories present in the recollections on Eminescu may be explained by the fact that those who remember Eminescu – the man were present in the same groups and “social frames”¹¹ as him: the school in Cernăuți and later the University of Vienna, where the young poet meets Slavici and Negruzzi; the “Junimea” literary circle and the editorial office of *Timpul*. In this context, it is very likely that the “memories”, written down and published in different periods, had migrated among the members of these spontaneous communities. We may also be dealing here with a certain piousness regarding the subject of such memoirs: the authors feel, without a doubt, responsible for a sympathetic and compassionate perspective on Eminescu’s life. Thus, it is understandable that a critical inquiry on the authenticity of remembrance are more or less accidental, as is the case with the

⁹ Apart from the already mentioned editions, the most important of the anthologies printed before 1990 are *Amintiri despre Eminescu*, anthology and edition curated by Ioan Popescu (Iași: Junimea, 1971); *Pagini vechi despre Eminescu*, edited by Gh. Bulgăr (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1976); *Ei l-au cunoscut pe Eminescu*, edited by Vladimir Dogaru (Bucharest: Ion Creangă, 1984); *Ei l-au văzut pe Eminescu*, anthology, notes and bibliography by Cristina Crăciun and Victor Crăciun (Cluj Napoca: Dacia, 1989).

¹⁰ Cătălin Cioabă, (ed.), *Mărturii despre Eminescu. Povestea unei vieți spusă de contemporani* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2013).

¹¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *Memoria colectivă*, translated by Irinel Antoniu (Iași, Institutul European, 2007), 75.

prologue of Slavici's *Amintiri*.¹² Similarly to Slavici, Ștefanelli – himself also close to Eminescu – makes in his *Amintiri*, published in 1914, the effort to offer an authoritative biographical narrative, resorting for this purpose to the collective memory of a small community of colleagues and friends from Bukovina, whom Eminescu was reunited with in Vienna in 1869–1872. The rhetorical artefact of the editorial “we” – “to us, to everyone, he was a model of fairness and morality”¹³ – suggests the existence (later confirmed) in the public space of competing biographical narratives.

Whereas memoirs have their roots in autobiographical memory and are read as an account of the author's personality or character, the collective memory, to the extent to which we accept this concept, put forward by Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s,¹⁴ deals with a common “memory” that is shared by a group or a community, be it national or not. In his fundamental work published at the end of the 20th century, the contemporary historian and philosopher Jan Assmann introduces the concept of *cultural memory* in order to support the collective and social character of remembrance within a given community. Starting from the theory of the social frameworks of memory, developed by Halbwachs, Assmann analyses the forms of cultural remembrance, insisting on the differences between the autobiographical narrative, which is the work of the individual memory, and the collective legitimizing narratives, constructed around symbolic figures that belong to the category of heroes:

There is a difference between the autobiographical memory of the individual looking back from a certain vantage point over his own life, and the posthumous commemoration of him by posterity, and it is this distinction that brings out the specifically cultural element of collective memory. We say that the dead will live on in the memory of others, as if this were some kind of natural prolongation of their life. In reality, though, this is an act of resuscitation performed by the desire of the group not to allow the dead to disappear but, with the aid of memory, to keep them as members of their community and to take them with them into their progressive present.¹⁵

Assmann insists in this excerpt on two cardinal features of cultural memory. It is a social and political construct, the result of a deliberate and collective act; nonetheless, it has a cultural character, as it is created, consolidated, transmitted or reconstructed by official

¹² “this is why it has always been hard to talk about him, as I could never do that without taking about myself.” Ioan Slavici. *Amintiri. Lumea prin care am trecut* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1994), 11.

¹³ Ștefanelli, Sbiera et alii, *Amintiri despre Eminescu/ Profesori și colegi bucovineni ai lui Eminescu* (Craiova: Scrisul Românesc, 1996), 102.

¹⁴ Halbwachs, *Memoria colectivă*, 49-51.

¹⁵ Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization. Writing, Remembrance and Political Imagination* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 19-20.

institutions, social practices and media of communication.¹⁶ In Eminescu's case, the decision to protect him for oblivion and to take him with "us" into the present has its trigger in 1889.

While Eminescu had been in the spotlight of the press since at least 1883, in the wake of his "biographical accident,"¹⁷ in fact the beginning of the nervous illness that would torment him until the end of his life, the poet was, at the date of his death, not only a public person – he had been the chief editor of the *Timpul* magazine and an established writer, supported by the influential "Junimea" group –, but also a cultural symbol, that of the "national genius," prematurely gone from this world. The disappearance of the man who had already become "the national poet" at the time of his death started a collective memory effort, which echoed in time long after the death of those who had known Eminescu directly, continuing with increased intensity and relying not on acts of individual remembrance, but instead on forms of collective commemoration. We can therefore state that the zero point of Eminescu's myth – which I understand as an exemplary biographical narrative, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, as a collection of commemorative practices – coincides with the establishment of a cult of collective remembrance. In this myth-making process, the corpus of memoirs plays an essential part. Nonetheless, the press also had a crucial role not only in constructing the myth of the "national poet" in the interval 1883-1889, as Iulian Costache demonstrates,¹⁸ but also afterwards, when it became the preferred medium for circulating the first witness accounts regarding Eminescu's life.

In Europe, as well as in other parts of the world, in the late 19th - early 20th century, the press was the main channel of social communication, fulfilling a double role: ensuring the circulation and the public impact of the contents it carried, as well as creating and supporting figures of the national imaginary, often in the absence of the state frameworks of a nation.¹⁹ In publishing memories about Eminescu – but also in its public calls to "Write memoirs!", launched in 1899 by the magazine *Floare albastră* and picked up by *Familia*, the Transylvanian publication in which Eminescu had made his debut – the Romanian press inside and outside the borders of the 1880s-1890s Romanian state kept alive the interest of the wider public for Eminescu's biography, at the same time placing upon his life the mark of an exemplary fate, and thus turning him into a romantic national hero. This pattern will prove to be extremely long-lasting, and it was revived, as well as distorted, both by the communist regime governing between 1947-1989 and, quite surprisingly, by the emergent nationalist current in the first

¹⁶ See also Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (New York, Cambridge University Press), 11.

¹⁷ See Iulian Costache, *Eminescu. Negocierea unei imagini* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2008), 194.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 175–221.

¹⁹ In his *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), Benedict Anderson analyses the social function of the press (the newspaper) and of literature (the novel) in the process of (self)constructing the national community imaginary. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 22–36.

decade of post-communism. However, we should not see here a new sample of Romanian exceptionalism, as tends to do the Romanian historian Lucian Boia in his works dedicated to the cultural myth woven around Eminescu.²⁰ As shown by a recent comparative research authored by Marijan Dović and Jón Karl Helgason,²¹ the treatment of “national poets” in Eastern Europe – as well as in other “minor” cultures, such as Iceland – consecrates them as “cultural saints,” and their canonization has, on top of its aesthetic component, a political function and also a socio-cultural one. I will return to this mythization process²² in the next section of the article, in order to suggest an answer to the following question: do the frameworks of collective memory influence – and if yes, how? – the effort of the individual memory of those who, in the first three decades after the poet’s death, continued to publish their recollections of Eminescu?

IV. Postmemory and the myth-making processes

Apart from the evasive and loose character of the term, *memoir* proves to be an inoperative concept in the case of indirect recollections and semi-fictional writings based on reported memories. The memorial work regarding Eminescu also includes a few cases of indirect memories, such as those penned by Ionel Teodoreanu following an account by his father, Osvald Teodoreanu, or the memorial evocations of Vintilă Russu-Șirianu, whose father, Ioan Russu Șirianu, had known the poet quite well.²³ It is harder to explain the evocatory drive in the first generation after Eminescu – among Lovinescu, Hortensia Papadat Bengescu or the younger Cezar Petrescu – who repeatedly expressed their fascination with Eminescu’s personality and their envy for his close contemporaries. The cyclic novels dedicated to the poet by Lovinescu and Petrescu have a manifest compensatory character: since they can no longer write, as those from the generation before them, first-hand memories about Eminescu, the two novelists write a sort of second-degree memoirs, fictionalizing the poet’s biography. Even though, in Lovinescu’s case, the declared purpose of the Eminescu cycle was not a fictionalized biography, the way both novels were read favored the documentary character of these works, over the fictional and metaliterary one.²⁴

²⁰ See, for instance, Lucian Boia, *Mihai Eminescu, românul absolut. Facerea și desfacerea unui mit* (București, Humanitas, 2015).

²¹ Marijan Dović, Jón Karl Helgason, *National Poets, Cultural Saints. Canonization and Commemorative Cults of Writers in Europe* (Leiden, Boston: Brill), 2017.

²² For a detailed chronology on how Eminescu’s myth was constructed, see Ioana Bot, „Istoria și anatomia unui mit cultural”, în *„Mihai Eminescu, Poet Național Român”. Istoria și anatomia unui mit cultural*, coord. by Ioana Bot (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 2001), 11-107.

²³ See Cioabă, *Mărturii despre Eminescu*, 318, 483.

²⁴ The literary critics of the period between the two World Wars almost unanimously read these novels as a fictionalised biography. It was only a recent study that underlined the profoundly metatextual character of Lovinescu’s novels from the “Eminescu cycle”, by analysing the quotations and the literary clichés that

This kind of second-degree referential literature regarding Eminescu claims a larger framework of analysis, one that is able to take into consideration the transmission of the “memory” of direct witnesses to the post-Eminescu generations. Adapting a concept developed by the American researcher (with Romanian origin) Marianne Hirsch, Eminescu’s posterity may be viewed in retrospect as a situation of *postmemory*.²⁵ The concept has become indispensable nowadays in analyzing the memoirs and the literary fiction on a collective trauma, particularly because it fulfills the need to bring the past into the present by resorting to forms of individual experience that facilitate aesthetic identification, such as literary fiction. In Eminescu’s case, his untimely demise, occurring before he had reached creative maturity – since his posthumous work became public well over a decade after his death – was perceived at the time as a national trauma; and this had even more weight at a time of political struggle, in the absence of a fully unified nation-state, as many Romanians were living outside the national borders. The introduction of the obituary published by the Transylvanian magazine *Familia* in its issue of 25 June/ 7 July 1889 is illustrative in this respect, even when we take into account the rhetorical model of the era, which required a *lament* structure as a blueprint for commemorative texts:

My nation, put on the mourning veil!... Literature, grieve!... Romanian poetry, cry! A pillar has fallen, a star has been extinguished, you have been robbed of a jewel... the genius poet Mihail Eminescu has passed away. [...] he shared the fate of the greatest poets. He brought glory to his nation, but remained poor, lived struggling with scarcity and died a pauper.²⁶

As a result, the posterity’s duty to commemorate Eminescu becomes imperative: on the one hand, as an act of symbolic reparation for the scarcity that the poet had to live with throughout his life, and on the other hand as a cultural act, aiming to collect his poetic works and to gather information and documents in order to put together a biography. At the time, both calls to action could be found in the commemoration pages of the literary journals for which Eminescu had been a contributor.

In his book *Eminescu. Negocierea unei imagini* (2008), Costache analyses the poet’s image in the public sphere in the late 19th century and the early 20th century and argues that, beginning with 1883, two public images of Eminescu coexisted: one “imposed by the discourse of literary criticism, accredited by virtue of establishing cultural stereotypes” and another,

feature in abundance in the two books. See Ligia Tudurachi, *Cuvintele care ucid. Memorie literară în romanele lui E. Lovinescu* (Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 2010).

²⁵ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press), 3.

²⁶ ***, “Scrieți amintiri!”, in *Familia* XXXV, no. 26/ 27 iunie (9 iulie) 1899, online resource: http://dspace.bcucluj.ro/jspui/bitstream/123456789/3863/1/BCUCLUJ_FP_279290_1899_035_26.pdf (access date 12.09.18).

“created by the discourse of the news and of press reportage.”²⁷ These two symbolic identities – the *cultural* one, created mainly by Titu Maiorescu’s exegesis, and the *public* one, underpinned by the informal media – will fight for gaining influence over the audience in the 19th century’s eighth decade, as well as in the immediate posterity of the poet. Taking Costache’s reasoning further, it is worth mentioning that, in this semiotized context, any memories that Eminescu’s contemporaries recounted cannot preserve a neutral character. In other words, the memory of the generation that knew Eminescu directly, when captured through the recollections of the poet’s contemporaries, is neither “candid,” nor objective.

In the book mentioned in the introduction to this article, Assmann speaks of two ways in which human memory operates, distinguishing between “communicative memory,” limited to the biological lifespan of a generation (set by historical convention at 80 years), and cultural memory.²⁸ Communicative memory (or generational memory) is the one preserved by eyewitnesses; when they disappear, when the place of memories is taken by forms of mediated memory, such as commemoration, we are entering cultural memory territory. This level of collective memory sees the perpetuation, in forms that are culturally encoded, of the recollections of an event or a person, about which the community feels they have a major importance: “As soon as each person and each historical fact has permeated [the group’s memory], it is transposed into a teaching, or a system of ideas.”²⁹ If we accept Costache’s previously mentioned observations, we accept that in the case of the memoirs on Eminescu we are dealing with a cross contamination between the communicative memory and another type of memory, whose contents are already semiotized and which therefore belong to cultural memory. More to the point, Eminescu’s contemporaries’ recollections are to a great extent already “Eminescianized.” Even Eminescu’s portrait evoked by Iacob Negruzzi in 1921 – who was convinced, prior to meeting the poet, that he would have no trouble recognizing him among the Romanians “with common expressions” – seems to rely on the photograph of a young Eminescu, the one taken in 1869: “The door opened all of a sudden and I see a slender young man coming in, with a pale face, with bright but wistful eyes, with dark hair, almost reaching his shoulders, with a tall and intelligent forehead.”³⁰ This image, which has inspired along the years many representations of the poet – busts, portraits, statues, literary characters, even cartoons – had already become a *cliché* even when the poet was still alive, if we are to believe the words of someone like State Dragomir who, as a child, caught a glimpse of the Eminescu in Iași, while he was sick, and did not recognize “the poet I had imagined otherwise in my childlike imagination : O, thou art beautiful as but / In dreams an angel shows.”³¹

²⁷ Costache, *Eminescu*, 178.

²⁸ Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, 29–42.

²⁹ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 188. Quoted in Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, 24.

³⁰ Cioabă, *Mărturii*, 237.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 529.

This paradoxical process of fictional contamination of Eminescu's biography occurs also through the insertion in memoirs of pseudo-biographical information, extracted from his literary works. This is what happens, for instance, in the recollections of Ștefan Cacoveanu – "There was no sweeping or cleaning in that room, on the ceiling and in the corners there were cobwebs, as the poet describes in his poem *Singurătate*"³² – or in the account of someone like Vasile Scânteie: "Eminescu [...] would stand for hours around the antique shop shelves and counters, leafing through old books [...] It is about these Greek books that the ill-fated genius speaks so fondly of in the immortal pages of the philosophical and mystical novella *Sărmanul Dionis*."³³

It is for these reasons that the always fallible attempts to discern the "authenticity" of some memories over that of others must be replaced by an analysis of the ways in which Eminescu's memory has been ritualized, and by re-defining Eminescu's myth as "the concerted will of a memory community."³⁴ There are not only competing forms of remembrance, but also different communities, which actualize whatever they feel is worthy or remembering "from Eminescu" in their own frame of reference. The dynamics of these memoirs is underpinned by a complicated process of selection and canonization of biographical accounts that become founding memories, while others remain dormant in the collective memory and are sporadically activated. One proof of the canonization of certain memories over others, which remain in the memory archive area,³⁵ can be found in the polemical portrait made by Mircea Cărtărescu for the *Dilema* magazine in 1998:³⁶

As a child he was short and tubby, with very dark skin, like all his siblings. In Chernivtsi he was pathologically afraid of ghosts. [...] He grew up to be a rather short man (1.64–1.65 m), 'with Herculean muscles' and particularly hairy [...].³⁷

Although consisting exclusively of "real memories," assembling several physical details mentioned in the memoir corpus by several contributors, the portrait of the "national poet" painted by Cărtărescu was received not only as false by the audience of the 1990s, but even as

³² Ibid., 96.

³³ Ibid., 494.

³⁴ Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, 18.

³⁵ Assmann, Aleida, "Canon and Archive", in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International Handbook*, ed. by Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 97-108 (98).

³⁶ See Cezar Paul-Bădescu (ed.), *Cazul Eminescu. Polemici, atitudini, reacții din presa anului 1998* (Pitești: Paralela 45, 1999).

³⁷ Mircea Cărtărescu, "Fapte", în *Cazul Eminescu*, 29-33 (29).

profoundly offensive, as an insult not only to the poets' memory,³⁸ but also to Romanian culture, as several public claimed in the wake of its publication in *Dilema*.³⁹

IV. Eminescu, the total work of art

Eminescu's postmemory is not only continuously constructed and constantly negotiated at the collective level. This construct is at the same time challenged and reflected subversively, even in a reactionary manner, in the postmodern sense – the way it happens, for instance, in the novel *Viețile paralele* by Florina Ilis, published in 2012⁴⁰. Written as a counterfactual fiction, with a plot that begins in 1883, when the poet became mentally ill, the book aims – without making this its sole purpose – to build a metabiography of Eminescu, precisely because the onset of illness gradually “darkens” the main character's biography, repopulating it with schizophrenic egos. Iliana Gregori had a similar intention in her “parabiographical” essay *Știm noi cine a fost Eminescu?*,⁴¹ but there are significant differences between the two books. Apart from the difference in genre, it is noteworthy that Ilis does not rely solely on contemporary documents and on the poet's works in order to solve the enigma of Eminescu's personality, but she also draws upon the posterity of the “national poet,” as it became crystallized throughout the past century, in a number of texts, contexts and hypertexts. As the title suggests – and as the author has explained in several interviews – the novel stages a parallel between the retrospective look an amnesic Eminescu casts on his own life, and the biographic construct created by his posterity. This cultural, political and even ideological construct that is Eminescu's biography fulfilled several functions: to *mobilize* a national community through the cultural trope of the “national poet” unrecognized by his own countrymen during his illness and in the first decade after his death; to peddle *propaganda*, as was the case with the ideological annexation of Eminescu's biography and work by the far right in the 1930s and by the far left during the communist years; or to exact *compensation* for perceived cultural complexes, as happened during the protochronist moment in the 1970s-1980s and with Eminescu's cult in the 1990s.

Any novel about Eminescu – and this is also valid for other types of narrative, be they biographical or critical – must solve the problem of their relationship with several documents, that have widely different regimes of authority: first of all, there is Eminescu's work, which has created several *raisonneur* characters and has placed in circulation what has been called the author's *Weltanschauung*; then there are the accounts about Eminescu, as authentic sources

³⁸ The “scandalous” potential of the evocation penned by Cărtărescu transpires clearly from the comment that accompanies the indexation of the text in *Mihai Eminescu. Bibliografia adnotată* (1990-2005): “memories that unveil dark and much too naturalistic pages, which overshadow the poet's greatness” (** 2014: 551).

³⁹ See *Cazul Eminescu*, 53-150.

⁴⁰ Florina Ilis, *Viețile paralele* (București, Cartea Românească, 2012).

⁴¹ Iliana Gregori, *Știm noi cine a fost Eminescu? Fapte, enigme, ipoteze* (București: Art, 2008).

of information; and, last but not least, we have authoritative critical texts, themselves classicized due to the repeated citation in the shape of axiomatic quotes. In the novel cycles published in the 1930s by Lovinescu and Petrescu, these sources – despite all the differences in the treatment given by the two authors – are complementary and contribute to a “psychology” (in Lovinescu’s case) and a “life” (in Petrescu’s) developed around the figure of the genius. On the contrary, *Viețile paralele* denounces precisely the impossibility of building a coherent narrative based on the documents that we currently have about Eminescu. Even though such an impossibility may also signal a shortcoming of the novel, for the discussion at hand, what matters is the manner in which Ilis works with the documents regarding Eminescu, and her polemical positioning not just in relation to these sources, but – above all – in relation to an entire Romanian tradition of interpreting them.

Every line in the massive volume written by Ilis seems to discredit the documents that underpin Eminescu’s cultural myth. If we were to use Gérard Genette’s terminology, this novel may be described as a hypertext, in which the witness accounts of Eminescu’s contemporaries about his life and work are connected in networks that illustrate almost all the series of transtextual relations.⁴² For instance, they operate simultaneously as hypotexts on which Ilis builds her own narrative on Eminescu, and as metatextual elements, whenever the authors of these (hypo)texts are summoned in the footer of the page in order to provide comments and additions, most often going against the grain of the epic woven based precisely on them.⁴³ By resorting to a multitude of reflectors, voices and texts that mix polyphonically, the author enacts a distorting reading of the sources she uses. On the one hand, we are dealing with philological sources, be they authentic or apocryphal (such as those circulated by the collector Octav Minar), and on the other hand with outright fabrications, such as the *Securitate* surveillance reports that appear regularly in the fantastic thread of the novel. The interpretation of these documents is, however, contrary to the “philological reading,” which is concerned with the credibility of the text, with comparing several sources and recovering the most accurate version possible. Ilis employs in her novel postmodern techniques such as intertextuality, media mixing, collage, polemic commentary – as marks of the auctorial suspicion toward the biographical narrative that the very novel proposes. But the author goes even further, speculating the homonymy between the meaning of the word “sources” used in philology and that of “sources” used by the secret police, the *Securitate*, one of the most feared institutions during the Romanian communist regime. Thus, all those who used to know Eminescu are turned into informants of the political police, operating, whether consciously or not, to solve the “National Poet” case. The code names of the “informants” – Șirianul, Iancu, Jacques etc. – make explicit references to the real identities of Slavici, Caragiale, Negruzzi,

⁴² Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests. Literature on the Second Degree*, transl. by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 5.

⁴³ See also Andreea Mironescu, “A Metacritical Approach to Eminescu’s Myth. With a Look to Florina Ilis’s Novel *Parallel Lives*”, in “Analele Științifice ale Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” din Iași – Științe ale comunicării, 10:1, 65-78.

among others, and their testimonies are interpreted in a biased manner, confronted one with another and, more often than not, discredited.

Caught in the mechanism of a super-productive textual machine, which grants the same truth value to canonical critical interpretations, to conspiracy theories and to purely fictional elements, the Eminescu-character proposed by Florina Ilis remains, from start to end, an object of interpretation. The poet is alienated not so much by his illness, but also by the fact that the others objectify him, manipulate his image, distort his work. In this hypertextual novel, the memory of Eminescology – with its common places, as well as with its misstatements, its gaps, its erroneous associations and its false memories – usurps the memory and the self-consciousness of Eminescu-the fictional character. Devoid of identity, biography and the will to live, Eminescu becomes the linguistic creation of those who interpret him, a “total work of art,”⁴⁴ behind which there is, however, no subject left, but instead an unending chain of interchangeable interpretations.

V. Conclusions

A discussion of the memoirs regarding Mihai Eminescu can no longer overlook the semantic plurality of the term “memory,” perceivable at the level of the theoretical discourse through the emergence of concepts such as *collective / cultural memory* and *postmemory*. The three notions are already largely applied in the analysis of retrospective narratives that legitimize communities or cultures, as they conceptualize supra-individual forms of memory, mediated through cultural discourses and social practices. In the case under discussion here, these concepts stimulate an alternative reading of the written recollections on Eminescu, other than the philological reading or the aesthetic one. In this article I argued that, starting from the published memoirs about Eminescu, and analyzing their further reworking, it is possible to trace the path of the poet’s entering the national memory. Following the creation of a “mediatic biography”⁴⁵ circulated by the press in the poet’s immediate posterity, the memoirs and later the fiction literature on Eminescu shaped the construction of the cultural myth of the “national poet,” three decades before the Romanian “nation” earned, through the Great Unification of 1918, its political recognition. Entering, as I have shown, a complex inter-, transtextual and cultural circuit, such individual texts have become, during the century that has passed since they were written and published, cultural objects, and the tradition of their use is in itself a field of study perfectly worthy of interest.

⁴⁴ I borrowed this formula from Boris Groys’s book *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* (2008), but my use of the phrase is different.

⁴⁵ Costache, *Eminescu*, 178.