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ACADEMIA ROMÂNĂ



Adrian-Gelu JICU

# Coordonate ale identității naționale în publicistica lui Mihai Eminescu

*context românesc și context european*



Editura Muzeului Național al Literaturii Române



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Adrian-Gelu JICU

**COORDONATE ALE IDENTITĂȚII NAȚIONALE  
ÎN PUBLICISTICA LUI MIHAI EMINESCU  
*CONTEXT ROMÂNESC ȘI CONTEXT EUROPEAN***



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ÎN PUBLICISTICA LUI MIHAI EMINESCU  
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Lucrare realizată în cadrul proiectului „Valorificarea identităților culturale în procesele globale”, cofinanțat din Fondul Social European prin Programul Operațional Sectorial Dezvoltarea Resurselor Umane 2007 – 2013, contractul de finanțare nr. POSDRU/89/1.5/S/59758.

Titlurile și drepturile de proprietate intelectuală și industrială asupra rezultatelor obținute în cadrul stagiului de cercetare postdoctorală aparțin Academiei Române.

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ISBN 978-973-167-157-4

Depozit legal: Trim. II 2013

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## **ADDENDA**

### **Abstract**

#### **Elements of National Identity in Mihai Eminescu's Journalism. Romanian Context and European Context**

Legendary Romantic poet, Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889) embodies all aspirations Romanians share. There is no other writer whose work is so admired such as Eminescu's. Considered a fool or a genius during his life, he turned into a myth. Symbol of the virtues Romanians believe in, he is now worshiped and blamed with the same intensity. Ever since death, his work has become the supreme landmark, cultural and political groups using it as argument to justify their options. The process continued with intensifying force after The Second World War, when the Communists tried to turn it into a justification for the fierce nationalism they developed. More, after 1989 Eminescu became the main target for all kind of attacks trying to take him down from his position in the very heart of the literary canon.

\*

Exposing his conception about the role of the monarch in the social structure of a state, Eminescu himself uses, in an article written in October 1876, a suggestive image neglected so far by all his interpreters: „If someone who truly believes in the national idea dares raising his voice for it, he falls down crushed as an iron idol with clay legs.” The metaphor hides (sad premonition!) a self-portrait and a collocation defining his whole journalistic activity. It anticipates, in an almost unbelievable manner, his biography and the winding track of Eminescu's reception.



Pagan tribes used to burn their idols to regenerate their faith. Eminescu makes no exception, being involved in such a purifying ritual. His work is (still) blamed for different reasons. At the moment the cult for Eminescu is at stake, resembling a besieged temple. In the last decades, his challengers hurried to claim the destruction of the idol, while his supporters vowed eternal faith. Unable to destroy his face, the former focused their attacks on his clay legs. Achilles' heel, his journalistic activity turned into the object of unprecedented speculation. Unlike poetry, already accepted as an absolute model, his journalism is closer to earth and, thus, vulnerable through its connections to life and context. Hitting its basis, some hope to discredit the whole idol. An idol they hate for having the courage to build an identity project which still stays strong against the whirligig of History. Even if sometimes illusory, it holds up through the national values it promotes. Eminescu had in mind the national idea and did his best to defend it. What really matters is what rests after such symbolic incinerations. If his poetic work has already forged, gaining a central position in our literature, his journalistic activity is still in search for a defining description.

\*

Through the complexity of the problems it approaches, Eminescu's journalism caused all types of reactions, from unconditioned admiration to violent denials. The list of accusations includes past addiction, reactionary ideas, (ultra)nationalism, discrimination, intolerance, xenophobia or even anti-Semitism. It is worth mentioning that such labels are usually the result of subjective interpretations. No matter if we talk about Liberals, Socialists, peasantry-defending ideologies, traditionalists or modernists, about the Iron Guard or the Communists, they all judged Eminescu's articles according to their cultural or political ideas. That is why between the two world wars, there appeared exquisite exaggerations which forced G. Călinescu (the most important Romanian literary critic) to reject such tendentious interpretations: „Friendless and mocked at during his life, Eminescu became, after his death, by means of a violent exaggeration, the prototype of all human virtues and qualities. [...] It is now the time studying Eminescu in the name of truth and with such respect preventing us from turning our intercession into caricature.”

The blame for misinterpreting his anti-modernity should be attributed to Nicolae Iorga who created, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the image of a past-oriented Eminescu. Thus, the activity of the journalist was pushed into an ambiguous zone, that of past-addiction and sympathy for peasantry which later became a fecund source of inspiration both for the Right and the Left. In fact, Iorga's interpretation underlined half of the true, the one that fitted his plans. He charmed Eminescu's conception about identity. That is why a reversed process is required when analyzing his articles. To have the true image of Eminescu's journalistic activity one must go back to their initial meaning avoiding (when possible) ideological traps. Unfortunately, discussions on this topic are rarely honest for different reasons. Proper approaches are difficult to find because there are many external factors which influence an adequate reception. As Eugen Negrici underlines, the problem must be sought in our prejudices concerning Eminescu's work, in which Romanians see the embodiment of their great expectations. For all these reasons I believe that reading Eminescu's journalism in terms of national identity, linked to the internal and the external context, but also related to the spirit of that period might offer the key for understanding such a complex and controversial work. An ambitious task which will surely generate reactions because Eminescu (and we all know that) is no longer a writer to be analyzed without being blamed of *parti-pris*.

\*

The first thing to be dealt with in Mihai Eminescu's journalistic work is his intellectual formation. Whether we like it or not, his thinking is tributary to the European thinking of that time. Studying in Wien (1869-1872) and Berlin (1872-1874) he was highly influenced by the German nationalist movement and developed an ethnic-based conception about the mission of the state. His nationalism is, in fact, the nationalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which led to the unification of Italy, Germany, Serbia or Poland.

Eminescu's conception was shaped not only by the European context, but also by internal sources. The revolutionary generation was still influential in Romania. Eminescu witnessed the debates in the public space and read the most important books of the period. Those decades were

dominated by an increasing national feeling after the unification of Moldavia and Walachia (in 1859) and the two political parties (the liberals and the conservatives) competed to turn Romania into an independent state. That is why the liberals started a fast process of modernization having in mind the French model. In no time, forms of civilization from Western Europe were introduced in the recent unified Romanian state. Unsatisfied with this direction, Eminescu pleaded for an organic development. This idea was common in the European thinking where many voices have already started blaming the inconsistency of the values The French Revolution proclaimed. Theodor Buckle's theory on evolutionism combined with references from German and British thinking explain Eminescu's rejection of the revolutionary social prototype borrowed by Romanian liberals. Although accused of past-addiction, Eminescu did not want the return to past, but a natural evolution which could be applied, in his opinion, only by the conservatives.

On the other hand, after 1850 Europe witnessed increasing anti-Semitic feelings. After the emancipation of the Jews in most Western countries, there developed fears about a so-called conspiracy according to which Jews were to rule the world. Thus, important philosophers, artists or scientists built theories according to which there exist evident differences between the human races. During these decades (1850-1890) anti-Semitism turned from religious discrimination into racial discrimination. Countries such as Germany, Austria or Hungary shared such fears. Not to mention Russia, Romania or Serbia, where the emancipation of the Jews was not even legalized. Eminescu was familiar to such theories which also influenced his thinking. From this point of view, Eminescu's anti-Semitism is Europe's anti-Semitism slightly adapted to the specific conditions from Romania.

\*

A thematic approach reveals the complexity of Eminescu's journalistic activity. The author's European culture allows him to develop a coherent ideological platform based on the idea of national identity. In his more than 2000 articles, Eminescu writes in the name of the peasantry, supporting the national state which can be considered his main concern.

From this point of view there is no surprise that he aims at persuading the public opinion about the importance of defending Romanian values which define us as a distinctive people in the eyes of Europe.

The first element of national identity is language and Eminescu writes tens of articles on this topic. He insists on two major aspects: helping Romanians abroad (Turkish Empire, Russian Empire and Austro-Hungarian Empire) preserve it as a distinctive sign of their common origin with their brothers and second the necessity of writing and speaking it correctly. Another important theme in Eminescu's articles is history in which he sees a symbolic link between past and future. Glorious historical past becomes an example for the backslid present. Invoking princes and kings such as Stephen the Great, Michael the Brave, Mircea the Old or Grigore Ghica he aims at stimulating patriotism and fortifying a feeling of national pride. Yet, frequent references to past brought him the accusation of being a reactionary. In fact, he did not want the coming back to a previous form of social and political organization. He used past as an argument to prove the wrong direction the country was heading to.

Two essential institutions in Eminescu's conception are church and school, whose mission is that of preserving national identity. The journalist praises the activity of the Orthodox Church whose contribution was that of supporting Romanian language and of keeping Romanians together under difficult historical conditions. He understands the special influence of the church over the Romanians abroad and requires its independence. Closely related to church is school, since many of the Romanian schools in the neighbouring empires were confessional. Eminescu regards them as the only active factors in the struggle of the Romanians to assert their identity. On the other hand, he criticizes high-schools and universities for their low level of instruction, which means a real threat for the future of the country.

Somehow surprising, Eminescu considers work among the instrumental conditions for a strong nation. The idea is rather modern being part of the contemporary theories defining national identity as a mobile construct. The Romanian writer insists on hard working as a compulsory element for any country which hopes to be independent because he understood that economy is also extremely important in the

process of gaining an identity. As a whole, his journalistic activity can be defined as culturally rooted and economically conceived.

\*

From a different point of view, Eminescu's thinking can be described in terms of four major lessons he teaches throughout his articles. The first one is the sociology lesson, which, in turn, consists of several other theories defining his journalism. If the Liberals fought for the interests of the bourgeoisie and the Conservatives for those of the landowners, Eminescu develops the theory of overlaid social classes according to which the only ones working are peasants, while the others benefit from their efforts. Peasantry is, in his opinion, the only positive social class. Accordingly, he demands a better life for these peasants which are also keepers of true Romanian values and blames political parties (especially Liberals) under the accusation of being strangers.

That is why the prototype for the best social organization is the beehive, where the relationships between the members are naturally established to ensure the survival of the community. Eminescu dreams of a harmonious organization, with definite tasks for all the members. Closely linked to this idea comes another social theory, the theory of the regulator, which states that the king's mission is to provide balance by interfering whenever one of the social classes does not do its job. Since the party he represents when writing in *Times* was in opposition, he blames King Charles the First for being guilty of tolerating the politics of the Liberals. That is why the journalist frequently accuses the king and mocks at him using an ironical nickname: „Charles the Compliant”.

The second lesson is the economy lesson. Having read what is best in Western thinking (as specialists such as G. Călinescu, Caius Dobrescu or Ilina Gregori have proven) Eminescu knows for sure its absolute importance for national identity and acts as a consequence, frequently referring to economic aspects. Thus, he pleads for protectionism in which he sees a must-have for a young economy. Inspired by nationalism, he demands resolute measures convinced that they could help Romania become an independent country in South-Eastern Europe. At the same time, he warns about the danger of colonization referring to Austria's

concern of turning Romania into an outlet market for German products. It goes without saying that such ideas threatened influential politicians. On the other hand, Eminescu analyzes the internal economic situation and finds that most of the Romanians are peasants and pencil pushers, while trade, banking and small industry belong to foreigners (especially Jews). He defines this dangerous situation through the theory of economic gaps, asserting that places traditionally belonging to Romanians have been taken by strangers which threaten our national identity. That is why he insists on protectionist decisions which could help Romanian traders and bankers. One can easily see that his economic theories are interrelated, aiming at fortifying the Romanian element.

The third major lesson Eminescu's journalism teaches us is the history lesson. In turn, it covers three distinct areas. The first one refers to the situation of the Romanians in The Austro-Hungarian Empire, where millions lived, being a majority in Transylvania and Bukovina. The journalist involved in the struggle for their getting equal rights to the other nations of the empire since he was a student in Wien and continued his activity over the years being known as an influential activist. This explains why the imperial secret police tailed him as reports I have found in the State Archives from Wien prove. Eminescu shows the same concern for the fate of Basarabia, old Romanian territory claimed by Russia at the end of the Balkan War (1877-1878). In a series of articles dedicated to this geo-strategic European dispute, he argues with Russian journals and newspapers which pretended that the region between Prut River and Nistru River was conquered from the Tartars and did not belong to Moldavia. In a six episodes cycle, called "Basarabia", Eminescu proves that the above-mentioned region is lived by Romanians for centuries and the historical rights Romania has since it was conquered in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by Mircea the Old, the Walachian king from the Basarab dynasty, his name being the best proof. On the other hand, Eminescu underlines the importance of this region for the whole Europe since it played the role of a natural barrier in front of the Russian intentions to extend their influence in the Balkans and then in the West. He also points out that Russia should claim war damages from The Turkish Empire and not from Romania which was an ally. Thirdly, Eminescu is interested in preserving the identity of the

Romanians living at the south of the Danube, throughout the Turkish Empire which were threatened to be assimilated by the Greeks, Serbs or Bulgarians.

The political lesson was unavoidable. Writing most of his journalistic activity for *Times*, the official newspaper of the Conservative Party, Mihai Eminescu was considered the voice of its ideology. In fact, things are slightly different since he shared some of the opinions of the conservatives, but did not agree to those he considered dangerous for national identity. That is why his position must be defined in terms of conciliating two points of view: that of the aristocracy (the majority in the party) and his own, according to which peasantry was the most important social class. Rejecting the official ideology of the party he started illustrating his own believes which made him unwanted. From this moment on he continued to write as a freelancer until June 1883 when he was taken a cure in a mental disease hospital.

It goes without saying that Eminescu attacked The Liberal Party which was guilty, in his opinion, of betraying national values. That is why he distinguishes between true liberals and Reds, which were Greeks and Bulgarians interested in their personal benefits and not in the progress of the country. Except his subjective and sometimes unfair attacks, Eminescu's political thinking must be analyzed beyond doctrines. He was not what we use to call a politician, but a journalist who defended some principles: national identity, economic independence, hardworking and social equity. Yet he developed a political discourse which I place between Don Quixote and Sisif since Eminescu was aware of the uselessness of his fight and still continued it up to its last consequences. Although the term might sound old-fashioned, his discourse is a patriotic one, illustrating his fierce wish to defend national identity. His nationalism must not be taken for the nationalism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which became reprehensible, but accepted as a sincere manifestation of his love for his country and people. We must also remind that his nationalism is the nationalism of his age, as he developed in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe.

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Analyzing Eminescu's articles involves re-interpreting some solid opinions which already became standing points in current discussions about his work. Yet another approach, having in mind recent biographic researches and theories on nationalism and identity, is necessary in order to have a proper image of what his journalism meant at that time and of what it means today. The legacy of his journalistic activity is a moot point. In my opinion the discussion about some stages in his journalism is didactic and useless. Eminescu's thinking did not change essentially from his debut, in 1870, to his last article, in 1889. There are differences, but not major changes. They explain a conception in progress which continued to grow without denying previous ideas. From the very beginning Eminescu supported national identity in different ways.

Another difficulty derives from the attempts of literary critics to find the one label able to define Eminescu's thinking. The result is a variety of stereotypes ("reactionary", "conservative", member of Junimea society) I tried to describe, stating that, in fact, he is not a past-addicted journalist (as usually considered) but rather an anti-modern, according to Antoine Compagnon's recent theory. That is why I include Eminescu in the spiritual family governed by Titu Maiorescu, next to I. L. Caragiale, another Romanian exponential writer after 1880.

There is no other aspect as controversial as Eminescu's attitude towards foreigners. Pleading for national values brought him accusations such as nationalism, xenophobia or even anti-Semitism. I tried to analyze his ideas according to Appdurai Arjun's theory called "fear of small numbers", a metaphor which best describes the mechanisms of xenophobia. In his conception, hating strangers is the result of majority's fears caused by the threat the minorities represent. Arjun calls it "the anxiety of incompleteness", a collocation suitable to describe Eminescu's thinking. Briefly speaking, he writes many articles in which he blames the foreigners for the situation of the country. He does not hate Greeks for being Greeks, Bulgarians for being Bulgarians or Jews for being Jews. His articles against them are the result of his fear that they might threaten national identity. That is why I would define his attitude as *defensive anti-Semitism*. Eminescu reacts whenever he discovers cases of frauds made by



Jews. One must also accept that there are also articles in which he defends Jews which were abused by the Romanian authorities. This doesn't mean that he was filo-Semit, but adds a spot on his journalistic activity too often reduced to one feature.

\*

Another worth mentioning aspect regarding Mihai Eminescu's articles is their *utopian dimension*. Nonetheless, it exists and it should be linked to his preoccupation for preserving national identity. Some have explained it in terms of Romanticism without mentioning that the writer was familiar with modern theories of his time. That is why I dare say that his so-called utopian project is the result of an inappropriate interpretation. Eminescu knew what utopia means and he deals with it in several articles. If theoretically he understood its risks, in practice he continued writing in the name of national values even if they were unattainable. Thus, he compared foreigners to the stranger that threatened peace in the island Romania symbolically was. From this point of view Eminescu's thinking proves utopian because the solutions he suggested did not fit the Liberal conception regarding the development of a modern state. Contemporaries didn't understand him, which turns Eminescu into a "*rough soul*", living in a society which acts on him as a Procust's bed.

To sum up my brief presentation of Mihai Eminescu's journalistic activity I must add that he is not a traditionalist, but *an anti-modern*, not a rudimentary xenophobe, but *a nationalist*. His thinking is the result of internal conditions (a nationalist tradition, an increasing number of foreigners causing a demographic problem, an intense struggle for independence) and of external influences (studies, personal experience abroad, reading the most important books of the period). In other words, he adapts the Western thinking on nationalism and identity (*genus proximus*) to the situation in Romania (*differentia specifica*). Keeping in mind the context, we can understand the complexity of his articles, based on a cultural foundation. Of the two paradigms in fashion in Europe at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (the French one and the German one), Eminescu chooses the later which fitted his conception on the necessity of a natural development for the country. In other words, Eminescu prefers the *German*

*cultural pattern* which he considers proper for a young state as Romania. In fact, he does not reject Liberalism, but the false discourses of his contemporary Liberals claiming the ideals of the French Revolution. On the other hand, the journalist suggests that the best example of a true democracy is Great Britain with its secular parliamentary experience. The essence of his journalism is *the national idea* which he illustrated so convincing as he confessed in 1876, in a conference about The Austrian Influence on the Romanians in the Principalities: "Preserving national identity is essential..." Living today, Eminescu would have been *Euro-skeptic*. His journalism defends national values becoming one of the first *clear-cut identity discourses* in Romanian culture. He laid down the basis for an *ethno-centric identity pattern* which would become fundamental for the evolution of 20<sup>th</sup> century Romania and for the development of Romanian culture. From this point of view his project anticipates G. Călinescu's *The History of Romanian Literature from the Beginnings up to the Present*, where the literary critic strives proving that Romanians have a European literature.

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It is a pleasant duty for me to mention here several special people who made it possible for this book to exist. First of all, academician Eugen Simion, the heart of this European project, whose generosity worked its best once again. Then, to Mr. Valeriu-Ioan Franc and his team, who put into practice this noble idea. A special mention for Mr. Nicolae Login, a man I do not know, but proved patient enough to work with me and to modify the text so many times. Thanks. Special thanks to our European partners who kindly agreed to my research stages in the institutions they work in. I am much endowed for their help to Dr. Aurelio Díaz, Dr. Montserrat Clua and Dr. José Luis Molina González from Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. I feel the same appreciation for the staff from The National Library of Catalonia. Then, I want to thank Prof. Dr. Michel Metzeltin and Ph. D. Mag. Phil. Petrea Lindenbauer for their kind support. The same, for Mrs. Susanna Mersits, head librarian of the Institut für Romanistik in Wien. It was also extremely useful for me to be at the Library of The Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris, where Mr. Jean-Claude Kuperminc and his colleagues were really helpful. At the same time, I want to thank prof.

Constantin Călin and prof. Pavel Florea for their keen suggestions, which really helped me find the way out in some controversial aspects. I was also helped by librarians from the Library of Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacău and from Costache Sturdza Library in Bacău. To all of them (and to the others I might have forgotten) thank you very much.

Last but not least, I take a bow in front of Professor Nicolae Mecu, my expert, to whom I owe so much. Thank you for your skilled advice, for your patience and, most of all, for your subtle humour.

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Editura Muzeului Național al Literaturii Române

CNCS PN - II - ACRED - ED - 2012 – 0374

Coperta colecției: *AULA MAGNA*

Machetare, tehnoredactare și prezentare grafică:

Luminița LOGIN, Nicolae LOGIN

Logistică editorială și diseminare:

Ovidiu SÎRBU, Radu AMAN

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Traducerea sumarului și sintezei, corectură și bun de tipar  
asigurate de autor

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ISBN 978-973-167-157-4

Apărut trim. II 2013