

Philosophical Foundations of Romanian Poet Mihai Eminescu's Aesthetics

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Abstract: Is there a proper mixture between poetry and philosophy? Though not admitted as a genuine theme by philosophy as science, this problem can become an interesting investigation in the aesthetics. In this paper I focus on the Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889), in an attempt to show that his poetry is sustained by a strong aesthetical conception, and moreover, a genuine philosophical system. The term philosophy is considered here in its romantic sense, one that can accommodate this intricate symbiosis between the philosophical thought and the poetic means of expression.

It is all about an aesthetically equity in which one may find a harmonious merger between the profoundness of the philosophical truth and the emotional load of the poetic metaphor. Mihai Eminescu's work appears as an aesthetically, modernist program aiming at the total poetry as a means of understanding and acceptance of the world, as a genius proposal of regenerating the Romanian spirituality.

Totally committed to reconsider the human being, Eminescu develops the ontology of Arch-ego (defined as immaterial substance) and offers a vivid explanation about the philosophy that hired poetry and assimilated it. The Arch-ego is the core of the philosophical thinking, with Eminescu allowed to echo in his poetry later on. Eminescu's way of thinking, originating in a tendency of exploring the great existential problem, defies the borders placed between poetry and philosophy, and blesses, due to his genius, the Romanian spirit.

Romania's greatest poet, Mihai Eminescu's entire work stays under the badge of an original aesthetic conception, elaborated as well explicitly, from a philosophical point of view, but especially implicitly, in his poetry. In fact, it is about an aesthetical equation where a harmonious fusion between the depth of the philosophical truth and the emotional charge of the poetic metaphor takes place. A modern and coherent aesthetic programme, whose ideal was the total poetry, as a form of discovering and assuming of the world, as an brilliant proposal for renewing Romanian spirituality.

Unfortunately, most exegetes did not have the courage to admit the exceptional manner Eminescu realized the osmosis between poetry and philosophy and they limited themselves to analyzing his poetry. Thus, by omitting the truth that a genius is much more familiar with the world's unit and essence, the symmetry and wholeness of a monumental creation have been broken. The

effects were unfortunate, not only for Eminescu, but especially for the generations following him, that still needed to discover a coherent model with reference to the absolute.

This situation is partly justified by the exegetes' misunderstanding of Eminescu's intuition concerning art's formative role, by its vocation of entirely engaging the human being, both as living and as intellect. But the very Eminescu, urged by his belief in art's virtues, did not accustom himself with the idea of being only a philosopher or only a poet, and he aimed and succeeded in being a poet-philosopher, meant to redeem his nation by means of beautiful, poetic-philosophic thought. His great spiritual mobility helped him romantically discover the complementariness of philosophy and poetry in even their promising impulse of embracing the absolute.

It is true that, in our century, the old elevating feeling of deep relationship between philosophy and art no longer exists. I am not considering only the comprehensive sense of the term "philosophy" used in Ancient Greek culture, but also the romantic doctrine that pleaded for the unity of all forms of manifestation of the human spirit. As the 19th century romanticism inclined more to synthesis than analysis, it felt the philosophy-art unity in a very energetic manner. And this is exactly the energy that keeps Eminescu's genius alive.

Therefore, it is just as true, that any school of criticism and study of Eminescu, even those focusing mainly on the aesthetics of his poetry, felt the need of a philosophical basis. As the unit of Eminescu's creation was already "broken", the only solution, in fact a false one, came from the attempt to identify its "sources". Thus, there was developed a considerable enterprise of seeking the roots of the Romanian spirit's genius in all fertile foreign soils, either the German philosophy, or Greek or Indian philosophy. Not even this undertaking led to properly grasp the essence of Eminescu's true creation.

However, something was gained. It is the truth that Eminescu was seeking the way to the absolute, with his entire being. And in order to meet this fundamental need, he envisaged, as no one else did, the essence of all great monuments of the universal philosophical creation. Yet he remained identical not only with himself but also with his spiritual origins deeply rooted in the culture of the people he was born in.

Accepting this truth was quite difficult and it was realized only partially; yet, it stimulated the research of some great Eminescu-scholars over the last decades, in trying to change their perspective of the philosophical basis of Eminescu's artistic creation. This will probably be the direction of future research. It is evident that only by a new reading of the texts that should bring into light the ideas of the poet – thinker, the unity and wholeness, roundness of a unique creation will come to light. This means that in order to understand the real Eminescu, we must know and recognize his own truth, that is, his own philosophical-poetical mentality, which recommended him to guide us towards perfection.

With this sense, I consider that another attempt to approach the issue concerning Eminescu's conception of the relationship between poetry and philosophy cannot be but useful. The starting point is an old criticism, formulated by Romanian scholar Iulian Jura in the work *The Myth in Eminescu's poetry*, published in Paris, 1930. Here, the above-mentioned author writes: "Eminescu's poetry does not include a proper philosophy. Eminescu knew very well that poetry, once in the speculation plan, is no longer poetry. However, by going over the basis of Eminescu's poetic creation, we can observe that there is a *thinking*. If it is not a "philosophy", than what can be the nature of this thinking? As all great poets, Eminescu thought in a mythical manner ... The fact that Eminescu did not think philosophically, but mythically, many people say it, can be of no importance. But it is not so. Considering myth as the generating factor of his poetic creation, this creation can be followed step by step. As the path the poetic creation goes through is identical with the path the myth goes through. The poet, concerned with some metaphysical problems, always starts, as in myth, from the legend to the abstract idea: never the other way round. All philosophical elements the poet uses have, thus, only the simple role of facilitating this process of crystallization from real to abstract, from particular to general" [7, 4-5].

As a reply to these statements, Eugen Todoran, in his work *Mihai Eminescu – the Romanian epos*, writes: "The myth is, in fact, a generating factor in Eminescu's creation, but taking it into account we must at once admit that the poet was thinking mythically, at least to the extent where it is not necessary that, in his fundamental creations, thinking should be mythical, it is not philosophical. (...) In any poem there is a *thinking*, a poetic idea we could say, but it does not necessarily have to be either *philosophical* or *mythical*: it is necessarily a poetic thinking." [8, 21-22]

Solely on the basis of the references on these two authors (not the only ones), we believe that we can emphasize, at a first step of analysis, a trend in criticism supporting total and plain negation of philosophical thinking at Eminescu. The good intentions of these critics, of recognition of the superior value of Eminescu's poetry, cannot surpass such an omission. As Eminescu did not think

only mythically, as Iulian Jura believed, nor only poetically, as Eugen Todoran stated; he thought both mythically and poetically because first of all he thought philosophically.

The failure of this type of criticism, which also included George Calinescu's position, even if he discovered in Eminescu "a great inclination towards speculation", comes from the fact that it relates the poet's work to the modern sense of "philosophy", which designates knowledge based only on reason. Or, Eminescu thought and created in accordance with the old convention that assumed philosophy first of all as a way of living. It is true, as Iulian Jura said, that Eminescu knew very well that poetry, once on the speculation plan, is no longer poetry, but, we must add that, he also knew how much the poetry needs philosophy in order to discover the deep meanings of the myth. As proof, here is one of the poet's declarations of faith: "It is true that poetry does not decode, but, on the contrary, it encodes a poetic idea in sensitive symbols and images – and these images must be the coat of an idea, as other wise they are meaningless mixed colours... The idea is the soul and this soul bears in itself as inherent the thinking of its body, such as the cause has its own necessary result." [3, 34-35]

The conclusion of this fragment is that, according to Eminescu's conception, poetry, creation in sensitive images, is "the coat of an idea", as otherwise these images are "meaningless mixed colours". In other words, the idea bears in itself "the thinking of its body", of sensitive images. And the poet is a special person who lives in a state of spiritual ascension, realizing that it is not how the eyes of the body see it, but how the eyes of the mind understand it. Just as justified is Romanian critic Tudor Vianu's observation according to which "the amplitude, the vastness and the depth are basic characteristics of Eminescu's world and consciousness... Eminescu's mind works with the idea of the world's origins, of the infinite of creation; that are the highest concepts created by human mind. Among these, the idea of eternity dominates his thinking in such a way, that one of the most common attitudes of his poetry is considering things from the eternity point of view, under *specie aeternitas*. There is in Eminescu's poetry a consideration of things from very high and from very far, from a point of view that shames any narrow-mindedness, any limited selfishness." [9, 110-112] In fact, in Eminescu seems to have reached that proper osmosis between poetry and philosophy, so strong that the two forms of the spirit cannot be separated but with the risk of breaking the work's unity and harmony.

One of Eminescu's letters dated June 1870 and addressed to I. Negruzzi, contains a significant passage about his vision of the relationship between poetry and philosophy: "... mother of images – fantasy – it seems an essential condition of poetry – while thought is only the skeleton that cannot even be noticed in the works of art ... at some the first predominates, at others the latter: the unity of both means perfection, its bearer is the genius."

The illustration of this original synthesis between "fantasy/imagination" and rational reflection can be easily noticed, given enough goodwill, throughout Eminescu's entire work, be it poetical, philosophical or journalistic.

One can notice everywhere the poet-thinker's effort of placing words in the service of an abstract idea so that the idea should not be expressed only by concept, but by unique sensitive and philosophical metaphors. And this is because Eminescu predicted the impulse of his reforming genius, intuited the inner force of metaphors that materialize a metaphysical vision and acted programmatically for the aesthetic refining of the national language.

It is at Eminescu that we find indubitable arguments to support this idea. Let's remember, first of all, a stanza from *Epigones*:

"Tell me what is holy thought? A luminous but misty look
Of formless nonexistings set in a sad and tangled book
Made to confuse the minds of men, if they should chance to read therein.
And what is poetry? An angel pale with crystal gaze,
Voluptuous pictures, trembling sounds. With heavenly toys the poet
plays-

A robe of purple and gold laid on a mortal creature's skin." [5, 33]

It is worth bearing in mind the fact that for Eminescu the year 1870 meant, among other things, his debut at "Literary Conversations" magazine, marking an essential moment in his creation. The debut also meant the initiation of his relationships with the "Junimea" environments in Iasi. After *Venere and Madonna*, the first poem published in "Literary Conversations", brings a fresh breath in our literature, announcing the beginning of an aesthetic revolution, the poem *Epigones* shapes the coordinates of Eminescu's conception on literature, on the noble mission of poetry and poet in society. In this poem Eminescu dashes, with lucidity and complete confidence, to his high creating horizons, confessing his aesthetic creed of militant poet, existentially related to the destiny of his country's culture. Therefore, *Epigones* is the programme of a creator who reached the full condition of its own value and of the poet-thinker's prophetic mission.

As a matter of fact, in the work of that who is “the complete expression of the Romanian spirit” (N. Iorga) art, philosophy and even science complete each other and harmonize in an architecture difficult to explain by means of the classical logic. Here is a text from the manuscript 2258, leaf 114: “the representation is a unique ball, given simultaneously. The unfolding of this ball simultaneously is time and – experience. Or even a tow spinning the thread of time, seeing only this way what it contains. Unfortunately, both the spinning and the tow go forever. Who can see the tow without the spinning has philosophical predisposition.”

Commenting upon this fragment, Ion Ianoși, with good reason, notes: “It is clear that the metaphor belongs to the poet, the thought to a philosopher, or in any case to a young person with a deep philosophical predisposition. That who sees the tow without the spinning, sees it abstract, but even the sight keeps the abstraction in a sensitive field: as an image of idea. We are at a crossroads, indomitable to one of the components.” [6, 77]

This means that if we recognize the philosophical merit, Eminescu is less a poet? Not all all. On the contrary we must mention that such a suspicion was erased even by the poet-thinker. In manuscript 2287, leaf 11, he writes: “Yes! Any generous thinking, any great discovery comes from the heart. It is strange that when someone comprehended Kant, when he used the same point of view no alien to this world and to its ephemeral wills – mind is nothing but a window that the sun of a new light passes through and gets into the heart. And when you lift your eyes, you are really in one. Time has disappeared and eternity with its serious look comes from every thing. It seems that you have awakened in a stone-still world with all its beauties and that death and birth are only an illusion. And your heart cannot transpose you in this state any longer. It trembles slowly from up to down, as a wind harp, it is the only one moving in this world ... it is its horologe. And thus the fantasy is no longer the reflection of the world as we can see it when we are awake, but as in the poet’s and artist’s fantasy, it rises in the stone-stillness of eternal ideas that it represents. Round about there are hanging canvases where the perspective is apparent, where time passes without leaving a trace, all of them having an unknown arranger, and fancies of a great soul. What I call fantasy ordinary heads, is not fantasy but weakness of brains. The chosen one – it speaks in its language – and its language is Plato’s harmony.” [4, 549-550]

Let’s remember, for understanding, that I. Kant elaborated the apriorism of the creating pure reason, able to know the *phenomenon*, but unable in front of the *noumen*. And Eminescu, while translating the *Critique of Pure Reason*, unsatisfied with the *reason apriorism* which led to the separation between *noumen* and *phenomenon*, offers his own solution, that of the *heart’s apriorism*, by means of which he anticipates Heidegger’s fundamental ontology.

Taking into account this fact, Theodor Codreanu makes an observation that cannot be treated with indifference: “Eminescu reaches the highest point of thinking as *logos*, where poetry meets philosophy, not because poetry would let itself dominated by *idea*, but, on the contrary, because the poet found the word to express the being’s truth.” [2, 17] Totally engaged in rethinking the being, Eminescu develops “the prototype ontology (defined as immaterial substance) and offers a living explanation by the complementary engagement of poetry and philosophy. Thus, the being’s truth can reach the language and there appears the possibility of metaphysics. Furthermore, there are laid the foundations of an original aesthetics. Constantin Amariutei says “it can be defined as a *Discourse* of the Romanian nation and to the Romanian nation, as programme of creation (that allowed the extraordinary evolution of the Romanian lyricism: Blaga, Barbu, Arghezi and ... their after-comers.” [1, 6] Matters concerning aesthetics we come closer to, after clearing up the issues concerning Eminescu’s philosophy. For now, it is important that research follow a good direction.

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