

## THE MYTH OF THE NATIONAL POET, USED IN THE PRESENT ROMANIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE WHAT IS NEW?

The post-communist Romanian Parliament decided (through Law no. 238 from 7 December 2010) for the National Culture Day to be celebrated on 15 January, the official date of birth of Mihai Eminescu, the national poet. In the Republic of Moldova, Mihai Eminescu's date of birth is actually the national day. Celebrations for this occasion are extremely numerous and diverse every year, as is to be expected. Without being worried that their intensity (often, lacking in imagination and originality) could lead, among the wider public, to over-saturation with the symbol of the "national poet", the elected representatives encourage, finance and participate in such commemorative rituals. These also speak about the relationship of current Romanian society with its nationalist-romantic filiation models, about the permeability of the public to anachronistic or extremist political positions. As ever since the institution of Eminescu's figure as a national poet in Romanian culture, the manifestations related to his cult reflect the state (options, vulnerabilities, frustrations, etc.) of our society and not the qualities, which are indisputable and numerous, of the writer Mihai Eminescu, who thus finds himself reused in constructions that are foreign to him<sup>1</sup>. What has drawn our attention, over the past few years, has been the frequency with which the national poet is invoked at such public, official, celebratory moments by the political discourse of sovereigntist, extreme-right parties that have recently appeared on the Romanian political stage. The invocation of the national poet as a founder of a modern extremist ideology (incorrectly, but we all know that the "founding fathers" are, after all, a part of a mythological past, reconstructed to serve a future that is otherwise fragile) was frequent in other eras of Romanian history as well. From Corneliu Zelea-Codreanu's extreme-right Iron Guard to the "nostrification" of the national poet by the Stalinist and by Ceaușescu's Communism respectively, the use of the myth went through the entire political spectrum and accompanied the most important delimitations of certain historical eras. However, in the face of this

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<sup>1</sup> On the personality of the writer Mihai Eminescu (probably the most important 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romanian poet) and on his mythicization as a national poet at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Ioana Bot, "Eminescu, Mihai", in Joep Leerssen (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe* (electronic version; Amsterdam: Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms, <https://ernie.uva.nl/>), article version 1.1.3.1/a, last changed 26-04-2022. Accessed February 27, 2025. See also Ioana Bot, Angela Tarantino, "Eminescu, Mihai", in Ioana Bot, Angela Tarantino, *Cronologia della letteratura rumena moderna (1780–1914) / Cronologia literaturii române moderne (1780–1914)*, Florence, FUP, 2019.

recent use of the figure of the national poet, we wonder whether we can detect any changes in the functioning of the cultural myth compared to the historically established, known and previously studied patterns. Let's take a closer look at a few examples.

In 2025, on 15 January, on the National Culture's Day, the leader of the Sovereignist Party SOS Romania, Diana Șoșoacă (a member of the European Parliament in the current legislature) travelled to Ipotești (Botoșani), the birthplace of the national poet, where her party organized its own Eminescu commemoration event. As it can be noticed on the poster for the manifestations organized in Botoșani (**Annex 1** below), Diana Șoșoacă's one-day attendance is announced on the scale of a "national conference" (whether this conference really took place we do not know, as nothing was disclosed to the press about it afterwards). The participants listed on the poster are, at best, minor names from the provincial cultural life, singers of sentimental songs etc. – probably members and sympathizers of the SOS Romania Party. What we know with certainty is that the participants at the "congress" in question travelled to the poet's memorial house in Ipotești, destructively and memorably imposing their presence<sup>2</sup>. Just like on other occasions, Diana Șoșoacă recited again from Eminescu's poem *Doină*<sup>3</sup>, which she considers exemplary for her own party's political programme. A year prior, on the same occasion, also in Botoșani (a county where political options are favourable to her, an aspect emphasized by the parliamentary and presidential elections of November-December 2024), the same politician combined revolutionary patriotic symbols (Avram Iancu, the leader of the 1848 Revolution in Transylvania, another Romanian province, different from Moldova, where Botoșani is situated) with references to the national poet, in a discourse with instigating accents, deficient lexis and rudimentary logic:

I will tell you something: many of you are afraid – renounce fear. Fear makes you betray your children. You had and I had children to build a nation, and the nation must be happy as desired by Avram Iancu. You have the obligation to sacrifice yourselves for your children; you created them to educate them with courage. Leave fear aside because this fear has brought us where we are. Eminescu's words are more actual – with fear, you ended up being enslaved, and our children abroad are Europe's slaves. This is not what Eminescu wanted...<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> See Florin Budescu, "Diana Șoșoacă și susținătorii ei au distrus florile de la bustul lui Eminescu, la Ipotești" ["Diana Șoșoacă and Her Supporters Destroyed the Flowers at Eminescu's Bust in Ipotești"], *Newsweek România*, 21 January 2025, <https://newsweek.ro/politica/diana-sosoaca-si-sustinatorii-acesteia-au-distrus-florile-de-la-bustul-lui-eminescu-la-ipotesti>. Accessed February 27, 2025.

<sup>3</sup> See the public recording of Șoșoacă reciting an allegedly "uncensored version" of the poem *Doina* on <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1344481443654697>. Accessed February 27, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> See Alina Toma, "Diana Șoșoacă, discurs agramat despre Eminescu: 'Ați ajuns să fiți sclavizați, iar copiii noștri în afară sclavi ai Europei'" ["Diana Șoșoacă's Illiterate Speech on Eminescu: 'You Have Become

The question is: what are “Eminescu’s words”? Diana Șoșoacă frequently recites (she did it this time as well, in Ipotești) the poem *Doina*, pretending that she is rendering the “uncensored version” of Eminescu’s text. This is one of Eminescu’s creations that can be easily instrumented to support xenophobic positions: conceived as an occasional text, the poem has eight autonomous versions before the final text of 1883 (read by the poet at the unveiling of the statue of the voivode Ștefan cel Mare in Iași)<sup>5</sup>. Because of the xenophobic – and especially Russophobic – sentiments that are explicit in the poem, it was forbidden by communists, but it remained, however, extremely well-known to the wider public. Eminescu’s xenophobia is as incontestable as it is historically contextualized in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an era with Romanian nationalism on the rise and political fragility of the new Romanian state in relation to the major European powers (the independence of the Romanian Kingdom, declared in May 1877, had been received with major reservations in Western chancelleries, just as it had been in Moscow or Constantinople...).

But Diana Șoșoacă is not at all interested in maintaining the historical truth or the finesse of certain interpretive nuances. Each time she publicly recites one of the versions of Eminescu’s *Doina*, she pretends that she is restoring the uncensored text as well: it is not clear either who, when or why has censored it – the politician implicitly presents herself as the privileged owner of an ultimate truth, embodied as such by Eminescu’s poetry. The manipulative strategies are important to her, the national poet being subordinated to party reasoning, which adds to poor knowledge of the writer invoked, decontextualized and thus reduced to a blasphemous invective.

The national poet’s image is also used by another political group, which is relatively new on the Romanian scene, but occupying extremist, sovereigntist positions similar to those of the SOS Romania Party: AUR. The website of the AUR party leader announced, in January 2025, that the design of the party cards issued this year would display Eminescu’s effigy in order to “properly” commemorate 175 years since his birth<sup>6</sup>. The rhetoric of the announcement, abundant and empty, is highly significant: the national poet is “the soul of eternal Romania” and “he teaches us what dignity, sacrifice and respect for our roots mean” (what all of this *means* is not detailed, it is just the national poet who is

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*Slavized, While Our Children Abroad Are Europe’s Slaves”*], *Ziare.Com*, 14 January 2024, <https://ziare.com/diana-sosoaca/discurs-sosoaca-agramat-eminescu-1847014>. Accessed February 27, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> A synthesis of the history of writing and publishing the *Doina*, in Cătălin Cioabă, “Note” [“Notes”] to Mihai Eminescu, *Poezii* [Poems]. Selection, chronology and notes by C. Cioabă, București, Humanitas, 2014, pp. 576-577.

<sup>6</sup> George Simion, “Mihai Eminescu, sufletul României eterne! El ne învață ce înseamnă demnitatea, sacrificiul și respectul pentru rădăcinile noastre” [“Mihai Eminescu, the Soul of Eternal Romania! He Teaches Us what Dignity, Sacrifice and Respect for Our Roots Mean”], *georgesimion.ro*, 15 January 2025, <https://georgesimion.ro/mihai-eminescu-sufletul-romaniei-eterne-el-ne-invata-ce-inseamna-demnitatea-sacrificiul-si-respectul-pentru-radacinile-noastre/>. Accessed February 27, 2025.

indicated as the source of wisdom). For the 2024 parliamentary and presidential elections, AUR used, among its election slogans, a line from Eminescu: “*Alte măști, aceeași piesă*”<sup>7</sup>. The choice of a line from a gnomic poem urging one to withdraw from the world, employed to express a call to fight... against the “system’s” corruption, shows that the reference to Eminescu is made neither out of a thorough knowledge of the source, nor in relation to the latter. The allusion to the national poet is supposed to work, in such situations, as a *passe-partout* of a simplistic message, recognisable by the wider (and, implicitly, uninformed) electorate. George Simion, the leader of AUR, often participates in low key commemorations of the national poet, profiting from a logic of association (... with one unanimously known) in order to increase his visibility<sup>8</sup>.

The political leader of AUR is also famous, in relation to the use of the national poet’s image, for two “live” blunders. In 2021, he claimed to recite a poem by Eminescu from the Parliament rostrum. However, the text belonged to a minor contemporary provincial poet, Marian Bamboi<sup>9</sup>. On a different occasion, the same Simion led a march of “true Romanians” (a phrase that reminds too much of the “green Romanians” in the rhetoric of the interwar extreme-right...) up to Cotroceni Palace, where he declared: “I have given President Johannis a map of Greater Romania, of the whole Romania, from the Dniester to the Tisza, as it was left to us by Mihai Eminescu”<sup>10</sup>. If Eminescu was invoking the Dniester and Tisza rivers (in the same poem, *Doina*), he was doing it referencing the Romanian provinces found, at the time of the writing of that poem, between the borders of the Russian Empire and the Habsburg Empire. He could not have referred to the borders of

<sup>7</sup> English translation: “Other masks, the same old story”. See Mihai Eminescu, *Poems*. English version by Corneliu M. Popescu, Bucharest, Eminescu, 1978, p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> Thus, in January 2025, at the poet’s grave in Bucharest. See Mălina Pană, “George Simion îl ‘seimplânge’ pe Mihai Eminescu la cimitir. Președintele AUR, afectat la slujba organizată la mormântul poetului” [“George Simion ‘Half-weep’ for Mihai Eminescu at the Cemetery. The AUR Leader Feigns Emotion during the Service Held at the Poet’s Grave”], *Mediaflux*, 15 January 2025, <https://mediaflux.ro/foto-video-george-simion-il-semiplange-pe-mihai-eminescu-la-cimitir-presedintele-aur-afectat-la-slujba-organizata-la-mormantul-poetului/>. Accessed February 27, 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Mihai Roman, “Epic fail: George Simion l-a confundat pe Mihai Eminescu cu obscurul poet Marian Bamboi. Cum a declamat în fața întregii țări falsele versuri eminesciene” [“Epic Fail: George Simion Mistook Mihai Eminescu for the Unknown Poet Marian Bamboi. How He Proudly Recited Bamboi’s Verses as Eminescu’s Before the Entire Country”], *G4Media.ro*, 26 May 2021, <https://www.g4media.ro/video-epic-fail-george-simion-l-a-confundat-pe-mihai-eminescu-cu-obscurul-poet-marian-bamboi-cum-a-declamat-in-fata-intregii-tari-falsele-versuri-eminesciene.html>. Accessed February 27, 2025. A poet without any publications, Marian Bamboi exists only on social networks, where he was probably found and read by the AUR leader.

<sup>10</sup> Victor Gheja, “Simion, patriot analfabet: ‘Eminescu ne-a lăsat Romania Mare de la Nistru până la Tisa’. Eminescu a murit cu 30 de ani înainte de Marea Unire” [“Simion, Illiterate Patriot: ‘Eminescu Left Us Greater Romania, from the Dniester to the Tisza’. Eminescu Died 30 Years before the Great Union”], *aktual24.ro*, 14 December 2020, <https://www.aktual24.ro/simion-patriot-analfabet-eminescu-ne-a-lasat-romania-mare-de-la-nistru-pana-la-tisa-eminescu-a-murit-cu-30-de-ani-inainte-de-marea-unire/>. Accessed February 27, 2025.

Greater Romania (on the Dniester and Tisza) since they were established only in 1918! George Simion does not let such details hold him back, though: Eminescu is, once more, the magical word that justifies the very idea of political reclaiming, of historical justice.

Finally, the third in this series of examples (and the last one, for now) centres around the candidate at the most recent (annulled) presidential election of November 2024, Călin Georgescu, who (successfully) promoted a violent sovereigntist, xenophobic and anti-rationalist discourse. One of the striking particularities of his discourse is the lack of a logical relation between his statements, which is – probably – attractive to those looking for a prophet promising salvation. The salvation of the nation, of course: Georgescu's political strategies reload several elements of historical messianism with vague romantic, nationalistic connotations, all of them impoverished by a repetitive imaginary. By proposing himself as the saviour of the threatened national identity (by the European Union, by migrants, etc.), as a man of peace and a saviour of the nation, Călin Georgescu is explicitly exhorting Romanians to make peace with Eminescu (one wonders where the war is...), apparently... the most disruptive man after Jesus Christ<sup>11</sup>. With this entirely unsupported statement, the idea of Eminescu as a “world threat” allows Georgescu to promote himself by addressing certain atavistic fears: he will save the Romanian nation, he will save the world from all the dangers that threaten it at present, etc. In this use of the national poet as an identity image there is no detailing of the contents of said image, which is brought into discussion as a “monad” – in fact, as an image lacking in content. Its only content is, perhaps, the “national” reference: Eminescu is the national poet, so whoever disrespects him, disrespects the nation he (supposedly) represents.

Those used to the history and the shapes the myth of the national poet took in the Romanian political discourses of the last century know that the use of Eminescu's image to justify political programmes (entirely foreign to the vision of the writer), as well as the abusive manipulation of his writings, are not new. It was no earlier than the 1990s when Miron Cozma, one of the most controversial political figures and the leader of the miners from the Jiu Valley (who came to Bucharest to quash the civil society's protests), justified his messianic destiny as a leader of the Romanian people by some physical similarity with one of Eminescu's pictures (*sic!*)<sup>12</sup>, and, respectively, by his poetic talent (in fact non-existent – as

<sup>11</sup> See “Călin Georgescu, o nouă replică: ‘Mihai Eminescu a fost cel mai periculos om după Isus Hristos’” [“Călin Georgescu, a New Statement: ‘Mihai Eminescu Was the Most Disruptive Man after Jesus Christ’”], *Știri de Cluj*, 26 November 2024, <https://www.stiridecluj.ro/national/calin-georgescu-o-noua-replica-mihai-eminescu-a-fost-cel-mai-periculos-om-dupa-isus-hristos-video>. Accessed February 27, 2025. See also “Călin Georgescu despre Mihai Eminescu” [“Călin Georgescu on Mihai Eminescu”], *Observatorul Prahovean / YouTube Channel*, 27 November 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bahdENxb-nQ>. Accessed February 20, 2025.

<sup>12</sup> “At 33, Miron Cozma perfectly resembled Mihai Eminescu. He had long hair [...] and the same gaze as the great poet. Later, while in prison, Cozma started writing poems for his then girlfriend,

proven by his self-published volumes<sup>13</sup>). Miron Cozma even adjudicated the nickname “The Evening Star of Hard Coal”, an allusion to Eminescu’s clichéd nickname “The Evening Star of Romanian Poetry”<sup>14</sup>. What is, then, the additional element brought by the recent uses of the national poet in the electoral messages of the new extreme-right on the Romanian political chessboard? Beyond establishing that the romantic side of the national poet, invoked for his messianic role by a fragile community, survives in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Romania, could one notice in such references to Eminescu a change in the acknowledged paradigm in use since the inter-war modernity?

This paradigm was evident, for instance, in the 2010 justification of the Romanian Parliament to institute the National Culture’s Day on 15 January, Eminescu’s birth date. The reasoning for the decision in question was read, in a festive Parliament seance, by Eugen Simion, the former president of the Romanian Academy, a literary historian and specialist in Eminescu’s poetry; it followed a nationalist, conservative logic, justifying the adoption of such a celebration as a means to oppose globalization: if we, Romanians, lose our culture, we lose our nationhood and we will end up disappearing from the map of history... consequently, we should celebrate the national poet, who embodies the myth of the existence of Romanians<sup>15</sup>.

Just as it is very well proven by Anne-Marie Thiesse,

La commémoration pousse à l’extrême l’ambivalence entre l’œuvre, l’auteur et la nation quand la logique décimale de l’anniversaire met en avant non pas la publication d’un livre, mais la date du premier vagissement ou du dernier soupir d’un écrivain. Les appropriations successives de créateurs littéraires par des régimes politiques différents, voire antagonistes, montrent que les ajustements de biographies et d’œuvres sont communément pratiqués<sup>16</sup>.

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Marinela Nițu, which earned him the nickname *The Evening Star of Hard Coal*, after Eminescu’s famous work”. See Petre Dobrescu, “Așa arăta Miron Cozma în tinerețe” [“This Is How Miron Cozma Looked Like in His Youth”], *Libertatea*, 30 May 2009, <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/exclusiv-asa-arata-miron-cozma-in-tinerete-348966>. Accessed February 27, 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Gheorghe Chelu, “Miron Cozma: ‘Nu mai scriu pentru Marinela’” [“Miron Cozma: ‘I No Longer Write for Marinela’”], *Click.ro*, 23 July 2018, <https://click.ro/vedete/vedete-romanesti/miron-cozma-nu-mai-scriu-pentru-marinela-61944.html>. Accessed February 27, 2025.

<sup>14</sup> See Ruxandra Cesereanu, “Mitopolitică românească în secolul XX” [“Romanian Mythopolitics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century”], *Memoria.ro*, 2003, [https://www.memoria.ro/studii/cluj/studii\\_si\\_recenzii/mitopolitica\\_romaneasca\\_in\\_secolul\\_xx/1463/pagina-6/](https://www.memoria.ro/studii/cluj/studii_si_recenzii/mitopolitica_romaneasca_in_secolul_xx/1463/pagina-6/). Accessed February 27, 2025. See also Ramona Ursu, *Miron Cozma de la “sursa Paul”, la Luceafărul huilei* [Miron Cozma from “Paul”, the Codename as the Securitate Collaborator, to the *The Evening Star of Hard Coal*], București, Integral, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> The discourse of Eugen Simion is used as an example by Anne-Marie Thiesse, in her exceptional synthesis *La fabrique de l’écrivain national. Entre littérature et politique*, Paris, Gallimard, 2019, p. 184.

<sup>16</sup> Thiesse, *La fabrique*, p. 201-202.

However, in the cases mentioned in the opening pages, it is not only about “adjusting” certain elements from literary history to fit new political discourses or programmes – but about an actual, even violent, impoverishment of the contents associated with the image of the national writer, as a symbol of identity and unity of a historical community.

The insistence with which these politicians resort to invoking the national poet (... for causes and programmes that are foreign to him and his work) is, perhaps, according to a specialist such as George G. Grabowicz, even more evident around Central and Eastern Europe, where it responds to certain persistent historical fragilities and frustration of certain communities for which belonging to a “nation” is itself a recent element in their historical evolution. Grabowicz shows this by reference to Slavic cultures, which have, according to him, a less stabilized identity along a historical evolution that is sufficiently favourable and long:

Cette tendance est plus évidente dans les pays slaves [...] mais elle s’applique aussi aux nations ayant apparemment une identité stable. [...] La notion de poète national a sa propre historicité [...] Dans chacune des sociétés en question les conditions sociales et politiques sont si propices – et le besoin d’une reconfiguration et d’une reformulation de l’identité nationale tellement irrésistible – que le poète en question, ayant déjà atteint un niveau inégalé d’éminence de son vivant, devient peu après sa mort un héros culturel indiscutable et avant al fin du siècle l’icône nationale. [...] Mickiewicz, Pouchkine, Chevtchenko, traversant des étapes largement analogues d’apothéose – en tant que Barde, Martyre et Prophète – deviennent des idoles majeures incarnant l’esprit national, héros divinisés de la religion séculière de chacune de ces sociétés<sup>17</sup>.

However, what the studies dedicated to national symbols in Central and Eastern Europe have demonstrated over the past forty years (in the area of research constructed by Pierre Nora), was that recrudescence of the cult of national figures (heroes, prophets, poets...) followed patterns consecrated in the first modernity, even as such phenomena were “hijacked” by the political dictate of totalitarian regimes (again, Central and Eastern Europe offer several examples to this end). One can conclude, together with Anne-Marie Thiesse, that

Les références aux écrivains nationaux relèvent du cadre de vie usuel de la nation. Lorsque le pouvoir interdit l’expression politique dans l’espace public, la commémoration de l’écrivain national ou le rassemblement auprès de sa statue peuvent en être des substituts<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> George G. Grabowicz, “Le poète national: le cas de Mickiewicz, Pouchkine et Chevtchenko”, in Chantal Delsol, Michel Maslowski, Joanna Nowicki (eds.), *Mythes et symboles politiques en Europe Centrale*, Paris, PUF, 2002, pp. 352, 354.

<sup>18</sup> Thiesse, *La fabrique*, p. 169. On the topic of 19<sup>th</sup>-century national commemorations, see also Joep Leerssen, Ann Rigney (eds.), *Commemorating Writers in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Nation-Building and Centenary Fever*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Nevertheless, as it has often happened in the recent history of Central and Eastern Europe, the “return of the repressed” excluded from major historic narratives, imposed by dictatorial regimes after World War II, meant not only the tenacious survival of “inherited” nationalisms together with the construction of national cultures and their political claims<sup>19</sup>, but also the return to such mythemes or identitarian figures of the nation, reloaded in entirely new political contexts. Anne-Marie Thiesse thus invokes the case of the Slovenian national poet, France Prešeren (1800–1849), who enjoyed a rather modest level of glory in his lifetime but became a cult object of the Slovenian nation during its affirmation process at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Subsequently, his cult was consecrated in Slovenia by successive political regimes: his first statue was erected in Ljubljana in 1905, subsequently to be venerated by the national resistance under World War II and later by the communists, who promoted him as a precursor of their 1945 revolution. The date of his death became the National Day of Slovenian Culture in Yugoslavia and then, after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Slovenia’s new anthem had lines written by this national poet. His celebration continues nowadays, within a discourse of national self-determination that is specifically post-Yugoslavian and, sometimes, anti-European<sup>20</sup>.

The national poet becomes the subject of recent reloadings where current political claims meet the older, 19<sup>th</sup> century model of national affirmation. This happened with Taras Shevchenko, Ukraine’s national poet, celebrated on 9 March 2014, at the bicentennial of his birth. In the tense political context resulted from the recent Russian attacks, the commemorative celebrations of the national poet were to be transformed in demonstrations and protest gatherings at his statue in the centre of Kiev, which moved to the Maidan, where – on the occasion of the official anniversary organized by the authorities – the Ukrainian Prime-Minister quoted Shevchenko’s verses in order to explicitly criticize the territorial claims of nowadays Russia. In 2014 in Sevastopol, the fights between those who opposed the annexation of Crimea and those who supported Russia also started next to the statue of the Ukrainian national poet<sup>21</sup>. For our demonstration, we find it highly relevant that the lines of the “Ukrainian national poet” were used, with obvious irony, by the Russian adversaries of Putin’s regime over the following years. They were invoked by Mihail Hodorkovski, who recorded discourses of the Ukrainian demonstrators from the protest<sup>22</sup>. Calling to revolt against Putin, the former oligarch turned leader of the anti-Putin resistance refers to the symbolism of the national poet *of a different nation* (!) inciting, by the respective lines, to

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<sup>19</sup> About the survival of European Romantic nationalism, see the exceptional synthesis coordinated by Joep Leerssen, *Encyclopaedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe*, Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam Press, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Thiesse, *La fabrique*, pp. 176-177.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 173.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 173.



disobedience (to *disunion*, in the logic of the symbols of the national unity of the era in which such mythemes had been created) against the very leader of the nation, its “father” and saviour, thereby denounced as a dictator.

Still, in this part of contemporary Europe, the national poet is reloaded as justification in sovereigntist, extreme-right discourses. The discourse of a Party-minded position publicly claims to represent an entire community (which falsifies from the start the stakes of the poet’s affiliation to the tradition of nationalist Romanticism, namely that of *nations united*), under the guise of invoking a figure that is traditionally accepted as “unifying”, as the national poet is. It has happened during the recent anniversary of the bicentennial of the birth of Petőfi<sup>23</sup>, Hungary’s national poet, when the Hungarian Prime-Minister Viktor Orbán claimed his political positions replicated the ideas advocated, two centuries ago, by the national poet, with reference to the creation of an independent state of the Hungarian nation<sup>24</sup>.

In such a historical and political context, we wonder whether the recent uses of the “Romanian national poet” have any additional dimension – and what this could tell us about current Romanian culture, as well as about our political stance on the world stage?

Unlike the previously mentioned national poets, who received this title mid-19<sup>th</sup> century because of their involvement in the construction of a national romantic current, the Romanian national poet we are discussing is... *the second Romanian national poet*. In Romanian culture, the one who would historically correspond to the previously discussed national poets is actually Vasile Alecsandri, a politically engaged writer and hero of the 1848 Revolution, a long-lasting politician (and, as such, careful about constructing his public *persona*). The consecration of Mihai Eminescu as “the Romanian national poet” does not belong to the generation of Romanian revolutionary Romanticism, nor to the one following, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but to the generation that, at the beginning of the next century, accomplished “the great Union” of all provinces inhabited by Romanians, a political act consecrated in 1918, after the fall of empires and the end of World War I. The unionist ideals (for which the political voices of maximum audience belonged to figures such as Nicolae Iorga or Octavian Goga – important political actors even during the inter-war period) were reawakened following the format of national claims of the barely closed century, under the banner of a mythical figure, skilfully built and imposed to the general public.

Mihai Eminescu, the Romanian romantic poet who was “invested by his compatriots with this singular role [and who] is revered as the most significant

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<sup>23</sup> About the events organized on this occasion, see <https://www.petofi200.hu/>. Accessed February 20, 2025. We thank our colleague Imre Balázs for pointing out these references.

<sup>24</sup> See Orbán’s Facebook post “Minden magyarban van egy kis Petőfi” [“There Is a Little Petőfi in Every Hungarian”], 15 March 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=232407489191444>. Accessed February 20, 2025.

monument of Romanian culture”<sup>25</sup>, has thus become, in the Romanian public discourse, the symbol of certain claims foreign both to the author and to his work. The era that justified resorting to his mythicized figure was no longer that of the original national Romanticism, but a new, modern one that was, at the same time, turned toward a mythical past, fragile in its European claims and frustrated by its numerous features of backwardness, which put it at a disadvantage on an ever more complex political stage after World War I. In the fact that he is *a second national poet*, whose cult almost entirely erased the first from the Romanian national memory in order for the myth to be embodied, lies Eminescu’s first particularity – that of the cultural myth of a national identity always reclaimed from defensive positions. Knowing this primary detail, it is no wonder that “Eminescu came to embody Romania’s claim to glory and its leading obsessions”, while the superlatives entailed by his cult “have often obscured his true contributions, giving rise to a choir of immaculate misconceptions”<sup>26</sup>.

This is probably a rare occurrence of romantic nationalism reloaded so tardily and so persistently in the history of European nationalism, under the mask of the “national poet”: “This tardy, post-hoc application of the Romantic Nationalist «national poet» function to a post-Romantic author makes the reception history of Eminescu an unusual case in the history of cultural nationalism in Europe”.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, if we take a closer look at the use of the figure of the Romanian national poet in the political discourse of the past century, we quite easily realize that the misconceptions are not as “innocent” as they were made fun of by Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu. The mythicization process that the romantic writer went through is accurately synthesized by the author:

Shortly after his death, Eminescu was hailed as a civilizing hero, the prophet of a hallowed past [and he] was invested with utopian values, to be later personalized again as the embodiment of Romanian absolutes; [...] his iconicity became an obligatory feature, and was put to repeated use and abuse by critics, teachers, politicians, priests and students, by soldiers and civilians alike<sup>28</sup>.

Eminescu’s xenophobia, which can be historically explained in the European context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, just like his thanatophilia and passéism, were rediscovered and used as political justifications by (various periods of) extreme-right movements in Romanian modernity. The themes of the revolutionary Romanticism, developed in his poems, were reread and adapted to the Bolshevik ideologies of the communism imposed by the Soviet occupier after World War II.

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<sup>25</sup> Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu, “Mihai Eminescu: The Foundational Truth of a Dual Lyre”, in Marcel Corniş-Pope, John Neubauer (eds.), *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe. Junctions and Disjunctions in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries*, volume 4: *Types and Stereotypes*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010, p. 86.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 86.

<sup>27</sup> Bot, “Eminescu”.

<sup>28</sup> Mihăilescu, “Mihai Eminescu”, p. 88.

De-contextualized and misread, Eminescu was instrumentalized as a founding father of the currents of nationalist socialism during Ceaușescu's dictatorship, with numerous interesting episodes, relevant to the history of the past Romanian century. Although the most interesting commentators of his work from the end of the previous century "warned against abusing his image"<sup>29</sup>, the enthusiasm of the mythicising discourses and practices has not been extinguished, generating very diverse types of ritualization of the myth.

Still, in its posthumous reception, as well as in the construction of the national poet figure carried out by successive generations of Eminescophiles in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, literary critics and political figures alike, Eminescu's work was often subjected to distortions attempting to exacerbate its nationalism, originally late Romanticist in nature (and mainly motivated by the context of the writer's intellectual formation<sup>30</sup>). What is happening today in situations such as the examples that opened the present article, resorting to the reference of the national poet Eminescu, confirms the idea, supported by Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu as well, that "Even in present-day Romania, Eminescu remains an ambivalent marker of Romanian identity and a cypher for diverse imaginings of that identity"<sup>31</sup>.

Most of the studies dedicated to Eminescu's mythicization focus on the formation of the myth and on its evolution intensified by the political discourse of two dictatorships that appropriate it as an original reference: the right-wing dictatorship of the inter-war period and the communist dictatorship after World War II. These analyses target less the myth's current functioning. There is a detailed study of Eminescu's "image negotiation" in the historical context of the Junimea movement and under the dominant figure of Titu Maiorescu, the *spiritus rector* of the movement and the poet's protector – and, at the same time, the first and the most important promoter of a recognition of his immense literary talent. The same study, signed by Iulian Costache<sup>32</sup>, follows the instrumentalization of the reception of the writer's work, with the help of modern (posthumous) editions, but it does not investigate other territories (especially the political ones) that the poet's figure, thus constructed, migrates toward as it becomes mythicized. From the myth's emergence to its consecration, recent bibliography records a volume dedicated to the "history and anatomy" of the cultural myth<sup>33</sup> that reveals, through a series of case studies, examples of using the national myth up until the immediate post-communist period. Passionate and journalistic, the essay by Lucian Boia –

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 89.

<sup>30</sup> Bot, "Eminescu". See also Ioana Bot (ed.), "Mihai Eminescu, poet național român". *Istoria și anatomia unui mit cultural* ["Mihai Eminescu, the Romanian National Poet". *The History and Anatomy of a Cultural Myth*], Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 2001.

<sup>31</sup> Bot, "Eminescu".

<sup>32</sup> Iulian Costache, *Eminescu, negocierea unei imagini. Construcția unui canon, emergența unui mit* [Eminescu. *The Negotiation of an Image. The Construction of a Canon, the Emergence of a Myth*], București, Cartea Românească, 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Bot (ed.), "Mihai Eminescu".

published in 2015 – does not offer a synthesis and does not systematically bring to date the historical information of previous research, but rather prefers an emphasized ironic-critical perspective, commenting on several moments when the misuse of the national poet allows him to satirize the current state of the Romanian academic environment, of the political class, etc.<sup>34</sup>. With a different stake and scope, we can mention the studies by Andrei Terian<sup>35</sup>, whose starting points are different from the presumptions of the present considerations, both at the conceptual and applied levels, concerning details of literary history related to the relation between Eminescu's work and the construction of the figure of the national poet. To start with, the distinguished literary critic considers that the national poet is a concept foreign to – and paradoxical for – the world literary stage. We consider (in line with the ideas expressed by Joep Leerssen, on which the *Encyclopaedia of Romanic Nationalism* was built, but also with those of Alain Vaillant, at the basis of the *Dictionary of Romanticism*<sup>36</sup>, for instance) that the myth of the national poet, built in all national literatures upon French (Victor Hugo) and English (Byron) models, is the transnational project of European Romanticism “par excellence”. Regarding Eminescu, Andrei Terian attributes to the author himself the intention of becoming both a universal poet and a voice of his nation: a complex career project for which we consider that neither the work itself nor Eminescu's archives offer sufficient arguments. Synthesizable, in the critic's words, as “What I want to do, instead, is to show how, in certain situations, national poets, in order to become and be acknowledged as such, take the longer, international and even intercontinental road home, to national recognition and, in our case, idolatry”<sup>37</sup>, his perspective has an amplitude and object different from our considerations.

Most of the studies dedicated to the national poet's myth continue, in fact, to mythically read history itself, in a perspective that implicitly claims to originate from the same 19<sup>th</sup> century, with its “seemingly parthenogenetic birth of a new historical science”. Such a perspective “consigns to «an older tradition» precisely those historical-minded writers who galvanized the imagination of the contemporary public”<sup>38</sup>, despite the fact that historians and writers such as Nicolae Iorga or Octavian Goga were building, by this new myth of the national poet, an

<sup>34</sup> Lucian Boia, *Mihai Eminescu, românul absolut. Facerea și desfacerea unui mit [Mihai Eminescu, the Absolute Romanian. The Making and Unmaking of a Myth]*, București, Humanitas, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Andrei Terian, “Prophet, Martyr, Saint: Mihai Eminescu's Lateral Canonization”, in Jón Karl Helgason, Marijan Dović (eds.), *Great Immortality: Studies on European Cultural Sainthood*, Leiden, Brill, 2019, pp. 294-312; Andrei Terian, “Mihai Eminescu: From National Mythology to the World Pantheon”, in Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru, Andrei Terian (eds.), *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2019, pp. 35-54.

<sup>36</sup> Alain Vaillant (dir.), *Dictionnaire du romantisme*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Andrei Terian, “Mihai Eminescu: From National Mythology to the World Pantheon”, ed. cit., p. 36.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Bann, “The Sense of the Past: Image, Text and Object in the Formation of Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century Britain”, in H. Aram Veeseer (ed.), *The New Historicism*, Routledge, New York, 1989, p. 103.

essential component of the national imaginary that, in 1918, would have fulfilled the main claims left pending in the middle of the previous century – and that would evolve rooted in the same imaginary. It is a special interpretative process, through which historical plenitude sees itself conjured with the help of an assertive rhetoric: the way Nicolae Iorga (or Constantin Noica)<sup>39</sup> wrote about “Eminescu – the absolute Romanian” is very similar with the late re-establishment of the myth of the national poet: as if it were an objective historical reality, coming from a Romantic past, on an uninterrupted path: a filiation that is compulsory, taken on as such and only then looked at critically.

Resorting to the myth of the national poet in Romanian contemporaneity seems to be a difficult subject, left to specialized studies. The emphasized interference of critical endeavours with the power plays of academic and cultural national institutions, which build the policies of public memory and finance the appropriate programmes, is not foreign to such difficulties – quite the contrary<sup>40</sup>.

We wonder whether the examples such as the ones discussed in the beginning allow us to observe new emerging paradigms, in which the use of the national poet no longer works according to the consecrated definitions. On the one hand, like any myth – this one too should answer

certain fundamental needs of the individual and of the community; by resolving these requests (whether economic, social, political or psychological), it earns a special (cultural) prestige and a leading position in the entirety of the collective’s cultural products. This explains the community’s special attitude toward such a type of narrative: the fact that a certain story ends up having a certain prestigious cultural position generates an out of the ordinary attitude toward the respective story – namely, faith<sup>41</sup>.

To which fundamental needs does the myth of the national Romanian poet, employed thus, respond? What new social functions can we see attributed to it, since the myth itself does not have “a special content, but [...] special social functions”<sup>42</sup>. Let us look at such questions more closely.

The history of this cultural myth throughout more than a century of Romanian modernity is developing and gaining strength in times dominated by what Pierre Nora called “the obsession of commemoration”. In the conclusion of his monumental synthesis about memory places (entitled precisely “L’ère de la

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<sup>39</sup> See Nicolae Iorga, *Istoria literaturii românești. Introducere sintetică* [History of the Romanian Literature. Synthetic Introduction], București, Editura Librăriei Pavel Suru, 1929; Constantin Noica, *Eminescu sau gânduri despre omul deplin al culturii românești* [Eminescu or Thoughts on the Universal Man of Romanian Culture], București, Eminescu, 1975.

<sup>40</sup> These aspects have been discussed in Ioana Bot, “A quoi bon, le poète national l’âge de la littérature mondiale?”, *Slovo*, 50, 2020, pp. 57-75.

<sup>41</sup> Mihai Coman, *101 concepte pentru a înțelege religiile lumii* [101 Concepts for Understanding the World Religions], Iași, Polirom, 2024, p. 137.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 137.

commémoration”), Nora commented on France’s entry, in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, into a “phase of high commemorative frequency”, manifested in all contemporary societies that define themselves as historical or, in other words, as secular<sup>43</sup>. Indisputably, Pierre Nora’s synthesis represents one of the most adequate conceptual grids for understanding the intricate relations of modernity with historical memory. The examples we started from in the present pages challenged us, however, to reflect upon what, in their construction and functioning, did not (any longer) match this perspective.

We consider that the use of the mythical figure of the national poet in situations such as the ones invoked at the beginning of our discussion reveal a clichéd protraction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural and political imaginary that the 1997 conclusions of Pierre Nora foretold without being (yet) able to detail, when he observed the fall of national commemoration into the political domain:

the politization of commemoration, partially responsible for its proliferation, has transformed, in fact, the entire system: it made it secular; it made it democratic; it brought it closer to a manifestation. [...] the code and significance of the commemoration passed in the hands of particular groups, parties, unions and associations, with all the inevitable internal conflicts and litigations that they presuppose<sup>44</sup>.

The use of the figure of the national poet is also, today, the indicator of this mutation of commemorative paradigms: the national memory, founded by the Romantic institutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, politically instrumented by groups of interest or power factions, does not entirely reload with the new meanings of an era. It, however, *fragments* the nation community, following a logic (where future historians will probably, retroactively identify the patterns of a new community dynamic) where the particular groups invoked by Pierre Nora will have more power than the old nation community, with its common history shared within a value system. Paradoxically, this renewal of the paradigm of certain (possible, future, promised, etc.) community constructions – defined by an ever-increasing politization of the community’s relations with its own founding memories – happens with one eye looking to the past. To a past that becomes, in turn, more distant from and foreign to the reclaimed constructions, in a deceptive game of “Voluptuous pictures, trembling sounds”<sup>45</sup> from 19<sup>th</sup>-century national Romanticism.

*English version by Alina Oltean-Cîmpean*

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<sup>43</sup> Pierre Nora, “L’ère de la commémoration”, in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, vol. III, Paris, Gallimard, 1997, pp. 4687-4718.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4694.

<sup>45</sup> Eminescu, *Poems*, p 130.

## Annex 1



The poster of the “national conference” dedicated to the National Culture’s Day by the SOS Romania Party, January 2025, in Botoșani/Ipotești

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THE MYTH OF THE NATIONAL POET, USED IN THE PRESENT  
ROMANIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE. WHAT IS NEW?

*(Abstract)*

The present study proposes to reflect on the theme of the national poet – and the avatars of this romantic figure in contemporary Romanian culture. Mihai Eminescu, the “Romanian national poet par excellence”, is a mythical figure from whom we must admit that it is difficult to separate ourselves, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This tenacious figure of national mythology reflects certain problems of society, as well as of Romanian culture – and it testifies to a particular survival of national Romanticism. The article discusses his presence in the contemporary Romanian political field, based on some very recent samples, in order to configure a reflection on the relations between politics and literature, in contemporary Romania.

*Keywords:* national poet, Mihai Eminescu, national mythology, political discourse, nationalism.

MITUL POETULUI NAȚIONAL, UTILIZAT ÎN DISCURSUL POLITIC  
ROMÂNESC ACTUAL. CE E NOU?

*(Rezumat)*

Studiul propune o reflecție pe tema poetului național – și a avatarilor acestei figuri romantice în cultura română contemporană. Este vorba despre Mihai Eminescu, „poetul național prin excelență”, o figură mitică de care trebuie să constatăm că ne este greu să ne despărțim, chiar dacă am ajuns în secolul XXI. Această figură tenace a mitologiei naționale indică existența unor probleme particulare ale societății, respectiv ale culturii române – și ea mărturisește despre o supraviețuire aparte a romantismului național. Sunt discutate aici prezențele sale în câmpul simbolurilor politice contemporane, pornind de la câteva eșantioane foarte recente, pentru a configura o reflecție despre relațiile dintre politic și literar, în România zilelor noastre.

*Cuvinte-cheie:* poet național, Mihai Eminescu, mitologie națională, discurs politic, suveranism.