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The Danube, An Eminescian Obsessive Present

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Abstract: A national poet never ignores the fundamental landmarks of a people. This is also the case of Mihai Eminescu, the one who builds a series of landmarks in his own mind, which he will never give up. The first encounter of the Danube in his imagination is in national culture, where the name of the river is often mentioned. During the period of adolescent peregrination he physically meets the river; as a student in Vienna, he has numerous stops on its banks. The poetic creation has its exposed mentions, related to its grandiose symbolism. Political journalism, especially that of *Timpul*, has got in Eminescu an attentive and applied analyst to the political issues raised by the interests of the great powers vis-à-vis the strategic and economic potential of the Danube in general and the mouths of the Danube in particular. Taken together, all of this entitles us to speak of an eminescian obsession with the Danube.

Keywords: national poet; fundamental landmarks; the Danube; the imaginary; popular culture; Eminescian obsession

1. Introduction

The Danube, ancient water, the King River, the ancient world deified it as a sacred personality. In the legends, in the beliefs of the ancients, the water of the Danube had the gift of washing away sins. Like the water of the Ganges, like the water of the Nile, the water of the Danube was kept in the golden houses, at the royal courts of the East. According to the orders of Zamolxis, our ancestors, the Dacians, whenever they went to war, they shared and swore not to return until they defeated the enemy.

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The Danube... The huge liquid mass has been flowing continuously, for thousands of years, towards the sea, without end, without respite. Many nations and tribes have perished on its water road, leaving deep traces in the long course of the ages. Old Danubius was in ancient times a whole world of wealth, of events, of bravery, of love and poetry. River about which conquerors, as well as diplomats, had happy dreams, which it took one by one, on its waves to the sea.

The destinies of the Romanian people have always been linked to those of the Danube. The ancestors of the Romanians, in ancient times, the great patriots from the days of the national revival, fought to defend the control of this water, always aimed at by the greedy neighbors. From our ancestors, said the great Kogălniceanu, there is an instinct in the Romanian people that without the Danube, Romania could not exist.

Another Romanian patriot, Alexandru Lahovari, stated: The interest we have for the Danube is the oldest, greatest and most permanent interest of Romanians. There is not a matter that could be more important for this country. We consider the Danube matter above all - it is an eternal significance. Conventions, treaties, no matter how bad they are, have a term. It will last as long as the Danube flows towards the Sea. This Danube we have paid enough for in the past, since there were centuries when it carried more Romanian blood to the sea than water.

The bed of this river was the cradle of the Romanian nation, the connection between the Romanian people and the water of the Danube was so strong, that to this day it is preserved in popular songs, in Romanian stories and carols...

The Danube has always represented a rich source of inspiration for the arts, accumulating feelings, traditions, and customs, which express the identity of the peoples who have come into contact with this special river over time. It inspires poets and composers, painters and storytellers, it flows through ten European countries and reaches the Black Sea, to pour here the stories it witnessed and which it collected along the course.

The great German poet, Goethe, in one of his poems, compares water to the human soul, comparing the splashes that spread towards the slippery rock with the immortal spirit of the human being, which, just like water, comes from the sky, goes to the sky, having to descend again to earth, in an eternal change. He ends this simile with a conclusion that links the primordial elements of nature and the essence of human nature, likening the soul of man to water, and the fate of man resembling it to the wind.

The Danube is present either in Romanian prose, or in everyday life, or in the expression of the feelings of the great painters, keeping a special importance in all masterpieces in which we find it. It is important for the history in which it took part and for the events that happened along it.

The poet, the literary critic, the ideologist of the generation from 1848, the soldier of the past Alecu Russo, compares Romania with the wide, big and deep Danube, in which the special waters from the right and the left meet; the more streams, the more the Danube grows; foreign waves crashed into Romania, no wave could drown it, many times a threatening wave of destruction strengthened it and pushed it towards prosperity.

The Danube is an integral part of Romania. Naturally, Eminescu integrates the motif of the Danube among the others frequented with lyrical assiduousness. The specific marks of eminesceism can be found in poetic visionary, integrated in emblematic poems such as “Memento mori”, “Letter III”, or “Revedere”. The lyrical moment transforms the geographical detail into an integral part of a vision of the grandiose and the transcendent.

“Served by an enormous accumulation of Romanian and foreign cultures, by an impeccable taste, formed at the school of Homer, Shakespeare and Goethe, as well as at that of classic Romanian folklore, Eminescu created a work of synthesis of all popular and cult traditions, national, surpassing them through his genius and unpremeditated work and embodying them in creations of substance and admirable forms, worked in his tireless titanium workshop” (Călinescu, 1993, p. 17). Trying to fix in words the relationship between the Poet Eminescu and his era, Zoe Dumitrescu Buşulenga wrote: “Because what has significance and remains, is not the will and the ability to relate, but the connection with the seen and unseen context of his world, the familiar insertion in the atmosphere constituted during a historical evolution, assuming the responsibility of being successor and forward in a collective consciousness. Other than, Eminescu was, in these ways, most profound of his era, of our history, of the 19th Romanian and European century”. (Dumitrescu Busulenga, 1989, p. 495). As a universal genius, M. Eminescu appears to us the artist-demiurge who realized in his work the deepest and most complete synthesis of the Romanian creative spirit.

The greatest Eminescian poem and “undoubtedly the greatest lyrical construction of our literature” (Negoïtescu, 1980, p. 69) is “Memento mori” (“Panorama of vanities”) known at Junimea under the title “Diorama”. The poem is constituted as

a panorama of the history of human civilization, conceived as a series of paintings from the history of mankind, depicting its culminating points.

Regarding the sources of the poem, G. Călinescu fixed them in the knowledge assimilated in the university atmosphere in Vienna, an atmosphere abounding in post-Kantian idealism, especially Hegelianism and Herder's historicism. To these must be added the influence of Schopenhauer's philosophy, with which the poet was already familiar.

Ion Negoïtescu notes: "Through the descriptions of landscapes and monuments, through flowering and decline, the river of lyricism flows with heavy waters, sometimes lazy, sometimes frothy, and in the magical monotony of the verses, in their abundant succession, the Eminesian conception, the philosophical idea this time does not alter the *poetry*, letting it be filled with the *bitter* sap of the tone and be overwhelmed by visions. A conception that unites the idealism of Hegel, reconstructor of the spirit, of thinking in history, with the pessimism of Schopenhauer, of ruining history, undermined by the blind evil that *handles it*". (Negoïtescu, 1980, p.169)

"Memento mori" offers a panoramic vision of the birth and disappearance of human civilizations touched by the relentless flow of historical time. *Ioana* Emil Petrescu comes up with a new interpretation of the poem: "More than an image of the death of successive civilizations, "Memento mori" is a meditation on the birth and death of myths, beliefs, that is, it is a meditation on the incorporations (followed, each, of an inevitable alienation) to the spirit in history" (Todoran, 1972, p. 165). The poem is impressive in size, over 1100 lines arranged in six-line stanzas, and is structured in tables. The exegetes also include in the poem "Emperor and Proletarian", published by the poet on December 1, 1874.

The beginning of the poem creates the general atmosphere and *sets* the specific romantic frame. The poet *isolates* himself from the real world, remaining in the dream world.

"The history of Humanity - considers the researcher from Cluj - appears as a succession of mythical interpretations of the divine, each incorporated in a civilization that is born with its central myth and dies in the moment the myth loses its active value, ceasing to represent the living faith of an era. The history of humanity therefore appears as a perpetual pilgrimage in search of the divine." (Petrescu, 1978, p.79)

Submerged into the temple of Time, the poet's thought turns the huge wheel of time back to the beginning. The poet stops first at the Stone Age. Primitive man has as its dimension the *adoration* from which the practices of combining superhuman forces, magic and idolatry were born.

The giant wheel of time is stopped at the first moment of human civilization - the civilization of Babylon, a city as proud as a country, with the gardens of Semiramis.

Perpessicius, following a thorough analysis of the Eminescian manuscripts, introduces, after the episode of Babylon, the antuma "Egypt", published by the poet in 1874. In this context, which is structured by the poem of civilizations, the poem "Egypt" acquires much deeper meanings. Through his inner structure as well as through the assimilated culture, Eminescu approached the history of Egypt with great curiosity. The Nile Valley was the cradle of human civilization. The temples of the Nile valley, the pyramids, the Egyptian religion exerted a special fascination on the romantics.

And in its movement, the wheel of time stops for a moment at Palestine and at the mythical Jerusalem. The historical *presence* of Palestine has two defining elements: the temple in Jerusalem and monotheism, and, as memorable characters, David and the wise King Solomon. The atmosphere suggested by the picture of Palestine is idyllic, agricultural, as G. Călinescu says. Some images remind of Alecsandri's poetry. The judgment came that leads to the fall of the Jewish people from the height of their messianism to their dispersion in the world and to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem - which marked the historical presence of Palestine.

But the law of rise and fall, a law known since Dimitrie Cantemir, makes it rise, from the dark see the Greece. The picture of the ancient Greek civilization occupies a fairly large place in the canvas of the poem. Eminescu, connoisseur and admirer of Greek history, includes multiple and deep meanings in the images created by the verses.

The episode of ancient Greece begins in the poem with an invocation of the poet who would like the voice of his lyre to rise to the height of the civilization built by one of the most famous peoples of antiquity - the Greeks.

In the order of the flow of time in the "Panorama of vanities" Rome appears. In the eternal race of the worlds towards infinity or towards the "end of the beginning", the ray, the direction of the race is the thought of history - the destiny-law above men, above gods, above time. If the brilliance of Greece *resides* in its culture, art, science and philosophy, in a way it became the master of the ancient world, the glory of

Rome consisted in the conquest of the ancient world. The peoples of the ancient world knelt, one after another, before the power of Rome and the boundless will of its emperors.

In Romanian culture, the motif of Rome appears linked to the origin of the Romanian language and people. Rome has been present since the writings of the chroniclers, it is present in Dimitrie Cantemir, as well as in the writings of the Corypha of the School of Ardeal. In "Panorama of vanities", he sees in Caesar's victory the beginning of the decline of Roman power, expressed poetically in the same symbols of the old eternity, which act in history." (Eminescu, 1958, pp. 293-306). Because the "cunning" of history acts in the passage of time, the poet sees in the power of the Romans only its culminating point in history, the conquest of Dacia, after which the end follows.

All the civilizations panned by Eminescu, except the mythical Dacia, seem to be born from a primordial element (water in Greece, earth in Babylon and Egypt, fire in Rome, etc.), an element that "dreams" its form and receives through the shaping effort of thought; when thought is alienated, every civilization returns to the element from which it was born.

It was considered that mythology is the poetry of the beginnings of the history of any people. F. Schelling in his "Philosophy of Mythology" course stated: "It cannot be said that myths have nothing to do with history, since they form the content of the oldest history... Whatever the intention of our research, we end up always by reaching this time lost in darkness, time that is only contained in mythology" (Schelling, 1940, p. 25).

The mythological beginnings of peoples' history, understood as cosmogonic visions, are the basis of poetic reconstructions in the epics of ancient peoples and in historical myths.

The mythology of the Geto-Dacians did not have a Homer, who would give it the scope of an epic, it did not have a Shakespeare who would discover the significance of the human tragedy in the symbolic representations of myths. In a more modest achievement, remaining in the form of a project, but it found in Eminescu the poet who would turn it into an epic of the historical beginnings of the Romanian people. Mihai Eminescu is the one who opened the perspective of universality to national art by creating a Romanian myth as an artistic reconstruction of national history.

The most comprehensive evocation of the historical antiquity of the Romanian people, as a Geto-Dacian episode in universal history, is in the Eminescu's myth, the

episode of Dacia in the work “Memento mori”. Dacia was for the poet a fundamental theme of the primordial, in proportion to the mythos of the national being. His Dacism is organic, essential, shaping his existence from the inside. The poet’s deep self is identified with Dacia, and Dacia is more than Goethe’s Italy, Eichendorff’s or Stendhal’s, than Holderlin’s Greece or Schlegel’s and Novalis’s India. That is, Dacia is a country “beyond”, the symbolic projection of an ideality, it is a natural habitat. It is the very root of his being, found in the deep substrata of the unconscious. Thus, not only a pure reverse nostalgia, the land data of the romantics, returns him to the paradisiacal time par excellence of Dacia, but the awareness that it is the matrix of his being.

Dacism had found its expression still in the works of the representatives of the School of Ardeal, in Pashoptist literature by Gheorghe Asachi in “Dochia and Traian”, in the poem “La patrie”, in Vasile Pârvan’s “Getica”, by Dimitrie Bolintineanu in an epic “Traianida” and to Alecu Russo in the prose poem “Cântarea României”.

In this Edenic nature we meet the Danube, which is depicted as a symbol of time flowing into eternity:

“There, the old Danube, free, brave, immense
With a thoughtful murmur rolls it waves,
That moving-falling-asleep go into the sea of bitterness;
Thus the thousands of ages with lives, a thousand thoughts,
Asleep and old go deeper into eternity
And behind from the springs cool and clear times rise.”

The Edenic nature of Dacia is also found in “Cesara”. And here, as in “Memento mori”, the abundance of vegetation appears: “All around stand the huge granite rocks like big guardians, while the valley of the island, deep and, of course, under the mirror of the sea, are covered with bunches of flowers, of wild vines, of tall and fragrant grass that the scythe never entered. And above the loose blanket of plant life, a whole world of animals moves. Thousands of bees roam the flowers, clinging to their mouths, bumblebees clothed in velvet, blue butterflies filling a certain stratum of air, above which you see the sunlight trembling” (Eminescu, 1965, p. 68).

Neither the setting in which the wedding takes place in “Călin - file de poveste” built on another dimension. And there is a limit that must be crossed to enter the vegetable heaven of “herbs”, “blue flowers” and “incense air”.

The harmonious universe of the Dacians is disturbed by the encroaching Roman hostilities. Thousands of Roman soldiers pass over the bridge built by Apollodorus, “stony thought rushing from arch to arch”:

Over the bridge with thousands of helmets passes the heavy glory of Rome,

The sun is blinding in the sky from the glint of weapons.

Shields burn, chariots thresh and howl deafeningly.”

Preparation for war is taking on hyperbolic proportions. The universe itself seems disturbed from its equilibrium, as if it had revolted against the “globe in the sky.” The entire troops of the Dacian gods participate in the battle:

“Not. From the bottom of the Black Sea, from high-deep halls

From arched rocks into gigantic portals

The army of the gods of Dacia in long lines came out -

And Zamolx, with the old hurricane, through the clouds.

Move his lightning horses and his chariot. Riding on oxen

His luminous army followed him from the East.”

From the West come the gods of Rome under the leadership of Jupiter. They freed the titans from the depths and made them fight against the Dacian gods to help their people. The battle is fierce, the gods shout fiercely and encourage their subjects:

“The gods are roaring - the rocks are shaking, the clouds in strips are having fun

And of long and long lightnings flow in the broken and bare mountains.”

In this battle between the immortals no one dies, there are neither defeated nor victorious. The fate of the battle is decided, however, by the force of the gods. The gods of Dacia descend into the depths of the sea, into their palaces and will later decide the death of Rome. The Dacians are defeated, but their defeat is the last great victory of the mighty Romans. In Sarmisegetusa, the Dacians drink wine and poison from the skull-cups of their enemies and die laughing, that is, they cross the threshold of life into the endless kingdom of the gods. Decebalus does not die, he calls out to the Romans the curse foretelling the end of the powerful empire. He foretells the

birth of a new people from the Romans and the Dacians. Decebal is the man who, like Caesar, transcends the moment and looks to the future:

“Woe to you, strong Romans! Shadow, dust and foam
Your magnification will be decreased! The tongue will die on the *lip*,
Times will come when grandchildren will not understand their parents
-As high as your rise is, so deep is your fall.
Bit by bit drying up the glass of gallic decay,
Frantic people will get drunk – kind will want to despair”.

Through the birth of the new people, the curse of the Dacian king is fulfilled. It is the curse of history in its dialectical march, without stopping, according to the law of rise and fall:

“The cruel core of death is in life...
And in exaltation you find the seeds of the fall.”

In this pessimistic meditation, the idea expressed in the poem “Memento mori” emerges, in a cosmogonic vision, encoded in the symbols of myths: Evil, as a principle of human existence, rolls its waves to pour into the sea of bitterness. It is a symbolic expression of the becoming that history follows in eternity; a law of passage that makes the whole of history be seen as a “panorama of vanities”. These cosmogonic thoughts affirm the idea that history begins from the building of the world, as in the conception of the chroniclers, authors of histories based on chronographs. For Eminescu, these chronographs will be the poetic sources of history, the cosmogonic thoughts of Dochia, a meditation on history in which evil as the principle of existence determines Decebal’s tragic fall. Dacia will remain the symbol of the historical continuity of the Romanian people with its beginnings in the Geto-Dacian myth.

A thorough research on the multiple meanings implied by the symbol of water in Eminescu’s poetry would stop with interesting aesthetic gains on the symbol: water-mirror. The symbol of the mirror is used in “Memento mori” in the episode of Egypt, only here the “golden mirror” is not the water in which the sky is reflected that closes the ultimate mystery of life, but the golden mirror itself.

Andre Maurois places Shelley’s existence under the sign of water, and that of BaJzac under the sign of titanism. In Romanian literature, Sadoveanu admires both the

solemnity of the mountains and the tranquility of the Delta. Blaga is primarily alpine. Eminescu does not seem seduced by the immovable mountains, except to the extent that they lead to a fairy tale, to archetypes and mystery. To the alpine abode of the Dacian gods, you go up “stairs of black rocks”, surrounded by huge forests.

For Eminescu, the mountain signifies the wonderful, the inaccessible sublime, abandonment “in a sweet and shady, vibrant atmosphere”. On the “road of clouds”, Zamolxe rode his “lightning horse”, confronting Jupiter; whole nature participates symbolically: “mountains shake, heavens tremble, the sea dies”. To the extent that the mountain means accumulation, concentration of mysterious forces, it is, through verticality, a way to transcend towards the firmament and live in a universe of miracles. Water implies the idea of passage, of unfolding, aquatic being the undulation regime of matter. For Eminescu, the spring, the river and the sea symbolize a rotation in three times, the metamorphosis of the stages of existence. That eternity is a succession of stereotypes, repetition in a closed circle, is evidenced by the wave, a sign of perpetual mobility.

Although the water ripples, being a musical accompaniment or crying with metaphysical resonances and not a principle of tonic stability, the aquatic more than once favors self-forgetfulness or at least the acceptance of a destiny. The moon, hovering enigmatically, over the “great solitary indifference,” marks the rhythms of a universal horology from whose law no one can escape. “In Baudelaire we find the symbolic river of oblivion metaphor, close in tone to an Eminescian “river of oblivion”, as Constantin Ciopraga observed. Oblivion at Eminescu becomes a song, but let’s remember that in “Memento mori” we are in full mythology, as in this painting of an enchanting Dacia.

“The river of song passes through the fairy-tale forests. Sometimes between the woods it gathers, like a Great Mirror, blocked by black rocks and mountains. It forms a gigantic lake in whose sunlit breast Flows all the gold of the day and fills it with splendor...”

Taken in a symbolic sense, the cosmogonic principles of archaic mythologies intertwine in a broad osmotic movement translating, despite man’s crises, universal harmony between the subparticles of the small universe and the world of the stars, between the waves of the sea and of time, between the oscillations from dream to reality, man has the consciousness of the original unity. Eminescu pathetically returns to the original meanings of the words, so that earth, fire, water, whatever

tragic vibrations they may have in the subtext, are unified in charming paintings of the mythical Dacia.

Statistically, the moon, marble, sky, water return in hundreds of associations. They are obsessions. Wood and water on one side, the moon and stars on the other have become, through pain and death, instruments of initiation into the mysteries of the universe. The structure of Eminescian poetry belongs to the romantic type. Feelings, questions, answers confirm, under the guise of the individual, broadly human attitudes.

“The lyrical resonances are deeply Romanian. Until today, no one has revealed himself to us more brilliantly than Eminescu!” (Ciopraga, 1974, p. 29).

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