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## MIHAI EMINESCU'S TRANSITION FROM ROMANTICISM TO MODERNISM (ILLUSTRATED BY THE POEM MELANCOLIE)

Arina CHIRILĂ

Ph. D.

(Richard Wurmbrand College, Iași, Romania)

[branisteludmila@yahoo.com](mailto:branisteludmila@yahoo.com), <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5258-7511>

### Abstract

*The present article is centred around Mihai Eminescu, the best-known Romanian 19<sup>th</sup>-century writer, often called Romania's greatest Romantic poet. However true this statement might be in the case of his early works, his later poems realize a transition to another kind of literature – the literature of Modernism. In this paper, our aim is to demonstrate the way this transition takes place as exemplified by one of Mihai Eminescu's most emblematic poems, and namely Melancolie. This lyrical elegy, at first glance, may be perceived as a purely romantic work; however, as shown in the present paper, in reality it attests to Mihai Eminescu's departure from the typical Romantist inventory. A later work by the poet, Melancolie marks a transition to a different type of literature, with a profound symbolism, full of significant metaphors and new themes for the Romanian literary space.*

**Keywords:** Mihai Eminescu, romanticism, modernism, Romanian poetry, 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry

### Rezumat

*Articolul de față se concentrează asupra lui Mihai Eminescu, cel mai cunoscut scriitor român din secolul al XIX-lea, adesea numit cel mai mare poet romantic al României. Oricât de adevărată ar fi această afirmație în cazul primelor sale opere, poemele sale de mai târziu realizează o tranziție către un alt tip de literatură – literatura modernismului. În această lucrare, scopul nostru este de a demonstra modul în care are loc această tranziție, exemplificat de una dintre cele mai emblematice poezii ale lui Mihai Eminescu, și anume Melancolie. Această elegie lirică, la prima vedere, poate fi percepută ca o lucrare pur romantică; totuși, așa cum se arată în lucrarea de față, în realitate ea atestă îndepărtarea lui Mihai Eminescu de inventarul romantic tipic. Lucrare mai târzie a poetului, Melancolie marchează trecerea la un alt tip de literatură, cu un simbolism profund, plină de metafore semnificative și de teme noi pentru spațiul literar românesc.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Mihai Eminescu, pașoptism, modernism, poezia românească, poezia secolului al XIX-lea

Mihai Eminescu, the best-known Romanian 19<sup>th</sup> century writer, is often called Romania's greatest Romantic poet. However true this statement might be in the case of his early works, his later poems realize a transition to another kind of literature – the literature of Modernism. In this paper, our

aim is to demonstrate the way this transition takes place as exemplified by one of Mihai Eminescu's most emblematic poems, and namely *Melancolie*.

The poem *Melancolie* appeared in *Convorbiri literare* on September 1, 1876. Characterised by a high degree of lyricism, it provides us with rich material for studying the themes and motifs exploited by Mihai Eminescu, as well as the philosophical vision that marked his creation. The last great Romantic of the Romanian cultural space, Eminescu is situated at the border between Romanticism and Modernism: in his creations, the characteristics of Romanticism such as melancholy, the break with political, social and cultural reality, the feeling of alienation, non-conformism, the poetics of deviance and the intransitive use of language, combine with certain features of Classicism such as the elimination of picturesque, the essentialization of lines and the laborious effort of the chiselling of his work (Cornea, 1992). In what follows, we will analyze how Mihai Eminescu combines the above-mentioned attributes of poetic language, moving away from the Romantic tradition.

First of all, we will refer to the artistic imagery used by Mihai Eminescu in the analyzed poem. In this respect, *Melancolie* is an eloquent expression of Eminescu's visual and aural sensitivity and intuition. The poem begins as follows: we are shown the funeral procession of the moon passing through the clouds to a blue tomb, a proud mausoleum. The earth is clothed in a deathly veil; the air shimmers and the walls glow in the shadows of the night landscape, creating a contrast of light against the dark background:

„Bogată în întinderi stă lumea-n promoroacă,  
Ce sate și câmpie c-un luciul văl îmbracă;  
Văzduhul scânteiază și ca unse cu var  
Lucesc zidiri, ruine pe câmpul solitar”.

From the very first lines of the poem, Eminescu creates a mysterious but also tragic atmosphere that envelops all the objects depicted. The theme of death represented by the ritual funeral is augmented by a series of images: the cemetery with crooked crosses, the cuckoo as a harbinger of death, the sound of the drum announcing death. Everything around the poet is in ruins: this is probably a village that was once alive, but its time has passed. The village church stands in ruins, deserted and sad, and the wind whistles through windows and broken doors, bewitching the beholder. No sermons are heard in that church anymore – instead of a priest, only thought remains:

„Biserica-n ruină  
Stă cuvioasă, tristă, pustie și bătrână,  
Și prin fereste sparte, prin uși țiuie vântul –  
Se pare că vrăjește și că-i auzi cuvântul –  
Năuntru ei pe stâlpii-i, păreți, iconostas,  
Abia conture triste și umbre au rămas;

Drept preot toarce-un greier un gând fin și obscur,  
Drept dascăl toacă cariul sub învechitul mur”.

The second part explains the powerful metaphor of the abandoned church. Faith has so far been the pillar of the lyric character's life: it has painted the icons of the church, but it has also created a meaning with which it has endowed his life. But time has passed, faith has died, and in its place only sad outlines and shadows remain:

„Credința zugrăvește icoanele-n biserici –  
Și-n sufletu-mi pusese poveștile-i feerici,  
Dar de-ale vieții valuri, de al furtunii pas  
Abia conture triste și umbre-au mai rămas”.

The lyrical character desperately tries to find the old world with the help of reason, his tired brain. To prove his own existence, he puts his hand on his chest to feel his heartbeat, but his heart is nothing more than a cart beating in a coffin. An even more shocking revelation follows: the poet contemplates his life, but it begins to seem to him that it is not his own, that it is being re-enacted by someone else, that in reality he did not even exist:

„În van mai caut lumea-mi în obositul creier,  
Căci răgușit, tomnatec, vrăjește trist un greier;  
Pe inima-mi pustie zadarnic mâna-mi țiu,  
Ea bate ca și cariul încet într-un sicriu.  
Și când gândesc la viața-mi, îmi pare că ea cură  
Încet repovestită de o străină gură,  
Ca și când n-ar fi viața-mi, ca și când n-aș fi fost.  
Cine-i acel ce-mi spune povestea pe de rost  
De-mi țin la el urechea - și râd de câte-ascult  
Ca de dureri străine?... Parc-am murit de mult”.

In what follows we shall begin our analysis of the poem's main themes and motifs by setting it in its original context. The first version of *Melancolie* appeared as part of the historical drama *Mira* – an unfinished drama written around 1867. It develops the theme of conflict between two generations – “two ages of the spirit” (Petrescu, 2001, p. 42). On the one hand, the elders, “apostles of the faith”, trust in the military virtues of the people. On the other hand, the young boyars, “alienated from the nation, from history and from themselves, touched by the desolating breath of the age”, do not share the same sentiments, contaminating Stephen the Great's grandson “with the venom of unbelief”. *Melancolie* is thus integrated into one of the monologue-confessions of Ștefăniță-vodă – “a tortured and complex being” with the opposite temperaments of melancholic and sanguine. The world that Ștefăniță contemplates has taken on a new state: without faith, without love, without the old heroic status, it dries out the heart of the main character of

the drama (*ibid.*). According to Ioana Petrescu, Ștefăniță's confession reveals a "hallucinatory perception of a sick self", and the nocturnal universe of the poem seems "a huge coffin of the dead world" (*idem*, pp. 42-43). He reminisces about his life and tries to make sense of it. At the end of the poem, his own existence is revealed to him as alien; he views it with detachment, as if it did not exist, as if it had simply been narrated by someone else.

In order to understand the theme of estrangement from one's own life, present in the poem under analysis, we will talk about the cosmogonic models of the Eminescian universe. It should be noted, in this regard, that the poet's artistic journey has gone through several distinct stages. Thus, Eminescu's first poems were marked by the Platonic cosmogonic model, especially in his social and historical poems. *Melancolie*, however, appears in the later stage of Eminescu's poetry, which acutely reflects the crisis of modern thought due to the loss of faith. The relationship between the being and the universe breaks down; as a result, the individual experiences a sense of alienation. At the same time, it is not the feeling of alienation experienced by the romantics exiled "from a heavenly homeland", but the loss of the "cosmic homeland". Existence loses its meaning and becomes absurd, thought "no longer discovers the divine musical reason of the world", and the poet experiences nostalgia for the lost paradise (*idem*, p. 12). We find that estrangement is also the basic concept for *Melancolie*. The individual becomes detached, becoming "an alienated witness" (*idem*, p. 42) to his absurd, meaningless existence, doubting his own existence. The title of the poem, on the one hand, reflects this state of being "who has lost his sense of identity" (*idem*, p. 43). On the other hand, it also reveals the weariness of human thought, which tries in vain to reach the essence of the lived life: "în van mai caut lumea-mi în obositul creier".

Another characteristic theme for Mihai Eminescu, also explored in *Melancolie*, is the lost paradise and man's longing for it. Many of Eminescu's works are full of nostalgia for "the world beyond", longing "for another homeland, for the sky pierced by angels", which would provide a refuge for man's soul and thought (Del Conte, 2003, p. 133). By living his life, man has the sense that he is "building his eternity", but in reality his existence is nothing but vain and broken fragments, "little deaths" (*idem*, p. 134). Eminescian pessimism is, at root, Gnostic; the poet regards life as failure - "a painful but uplifting consciousness" (*idem*, p. 135). In this mentality, man's escape is not suicide but an "inner revelation", the denial of God or the separation of God from the world (*idem*, p. 136). The poet sees the end of the individual, but also the end of all peoples; under his cold gaze, the world no longer makes sense - a conclusion typical of Eminescian lyric (*idem*, p. 171). Eminescu's reaction to this state of affairs can be described by two opposing impulses: on the one hand, he contemplates the world peacefully and

pacified; on the other, he presents a “rebellious protest” that “calms down into renunciation”, into “the convinced acceptance of nothingness” (*idem*, p. 182). Thus, the theme of paradise lost demonstrates, as eloquently as possible, the overcoming of the Romanticist stage in Eminescu’s work. The poet reaches a depth not yet reached in Romanian literature, and conventional poetic figures, once mere ornaments of the literary text, acquire new meanings, a particular depth emerges— what Ioana Petrescu calls “motivation of poetic language by recovering its original meanings” (Petrescu, 2001, p. 22).

The theme of the passage of time is also important in the poem under analysis. In terms of time, for Mihai Eminescu there are two distinct categories: the time of life (which coincides with stellar time or the time of nature) and the time of death (the time of the earth). The first is the time of permanence and fulfillment; it brings the universe “to maturity and completeness”. The other is “the time of wear and ageing” (Del Conte, 2003, p. 182): man grows old and his body becomes, metaphorically, a coffin (a figure found in Plato and Plotinus). Melancholy shows us how the passage of history touches all human creations, once great in our conception, and destroys them, turning them into “ruins on the lonely field”. Everything tends towards the “original abyss”, “an immense tomb” (*idem*, p. 187) whose representation we also find in the metaphor of the blue tomb.

In the following lines, we will refer to the rich inventory of symbols that contributed to the consolidation of the “metaphorical harmony” of Eminescu’s verses (Irimia, 1979, p. 42). The first point to be made in this regard is that, unlike the early works, in which Eminescu employs a conventionalized Romantic imagistic repertoire, adopting the Platonic cosmological model, in *Melancolie* there has already been a shift from a mere perpetuation of the prevailing poetic props to a notable stage in Romanian literature. Even if at first glance Eminescu exploits the typical Romantic symbols and motifs, in essence they mirror other themes – alienation, paradise lost, lack of faith and the absurdity of existence.

One of the most important symbols in the poem is the ruined church. According to Ioana Petrescu, it constitutes “the core of a spatial metaphor”, representing “the centre of an icy cosmos”, where a dead star passes through the cloud gates to the mausoleum of heaven. And the plains, and the “world in the promontory”, and the old cemetery with the glowing demon, and the church – all symbolise the death of faith (Petrescu, 2001, p. 42). Once the church was the centre of village life – the bell rang, the drum beat, marking the most significant moments in man’s life. But, like any human creation, it has a finite duration; instead of iconostasis only shadows remained. So happened with faith too: a human creation, it has not survived the passage of time.

The damp and dense shadow also acquires a symbolic significance (Del Conte, 2003, p. 245), which permeates all the spaces of the poem – a typical feature of Romantic poetry (*idem*, p. 256). There is shadow in the deserted church, instead of saints there are only shadows in the iconostasis; there is shadow in the funereal sky. Night – the time of day for which Romanticism developed a particular predilection – functions as a revealing time of metaphysical truth (*idem*, p. 268). At the same time, we notice a visual contrast created by Mihai Eminescu: against this gloomy background appear the sparks and the glow of the walls – Eminescu’s shadows “are penetrated by the latent presence of light, which lives in their depths” (Petrescu, 2001, p. 25). Although clearly highlighted in the text of the poem, these lights fail to bring hope to human life, because the celestial star, the queen of the night, the main source of light in the nocturnal shadow, is falling. This play between shadow and light is also reinforced by the combination of two chromatic spectrums: blue (blue tomb) and white (silver sails, world-in-promotion, dull cuckoos).

Against the background of this struggle between light and darkness, the figure of the demon appears, passing through the air and touching the plough with its wingtips. The demonic presence in the poem is also symbolic. Humanity becomes an object of divine irony, and the divine is demonised, in an ethical sense, becoming an evil creative force. The existence of the individual is destroyed: man is nothing more than an actor performing “a predetermined script”, a puppet, a blind instrument of “the will to perpetuate” (*idem*, p. 66).

The Gnostic worldview is also reflected in the symbolism of brain and thought. The lyrical character strives to rationally grasp the essence of the new state of affairs. Where there is no more faith, where the church is in ruins, there is no longer the priest who would normally explain the meaning of the surrounding world to man lost in the enigmas of life. So it is the brain and the thought of the poet who take its place, trying to interpret what he sees and feels. But man is a creature of limited powers: his brain is tired of futile searches.

Another important symbol of the poem is the funeral. The poet contemplates the ‘dead queen of the night’ asleep in her blue tomb, in a proud mausoleum – the arch of heaven – with thousands of stars. In these verses we notice that the metaphors are freed from their anthropomorphism (“the pale queen”, “the sad and adored monarch of the night”) in order to “elevate them to the image of an intuition” (Del Conte, 2003, p. 268). At the end of the poem, we also witness the burial of the lyric character: the human body is transformed into a coffin in which a desolate heart beats in vain.

In what follows, we will also look at the formal aspect of the poem. At the phonetic level, the expressive-musical harmony of the verse stands out, in

which “the signifier sensitizes the signified” (Irimia, 1979, p. 42). By contracting two types of relations (with neighbouring sounds and with the semantic plane of the word), the sounds in Eminescu’s poems become powerful instruments in his poetic arsenal. For example, the choice of the term *țințirim* over its synonym *cimitir* deepens the bleakness of the atmosphere due to the first sound of the word – the affricate *ț* which subconsciously associates itself in the mind of the native Romanian speaker with “the strange silence of the night” (*idem*, p. 45). The effect is deepened by the repetition of the consonant *p* in the first lines: *părea, printre, prin, nopții, pace, pânze*. In what follows, the poet imitates the hissing sounds he hears in the nocturnal graveyard through the repetition of *ș* and *s*: *trosnește, stâlpi, izbește, și, străveziul, să*. The final part of the poem is marked by an abundance of vowels; thus the sense of alienation the lyric character experiences is deduced.

In terms of aural imagery, we notice that sound effects are also produced in *Melancolie* at the semantic level: the cuckoo sitting on the cross (it does not sing, but its voice is evoked in the reader’s mind), the bell tower ringing, the drum beating, the demon touching the plough with its wing, the wind shrieking (and apparently bewitching), the poet’s heart beating, and his life being re-enacted by someone else. This abundance of sound impressions creates a second plane to the text, allowing a clear visualisation of what is being described.

On a lexical level, we see a rich arsenal of epithets, metaphors and comparisons present in the poem. As mentioned in the previous pages, their use goes beyond Romanticist practices because they take on new meanings and deepen the themes of the poem. For example, we note the use of the epithet ‘bogat’: in the Eminescian context, the adjective suggests not only the idea of abundance, but also of completeness and perfection. Turning to the text of the poem, we encounter the description of the world as ‘bogată în înținderi’ – a visual image that contributes to the perception of desolation and solitude.

A conclusive example of Eminescian metaphor (of the implicit type) lies in the syntagms used to describe the dead star: “Tu adorat și dulce al nopților monarh!” and “Prin care trece albă regina nopții moartă”. The end of the poem contains two “revealing” comparisons (*idem*, p. 315), which enrich the somewhat opaque statement: “Pe inima-mi pustie zadarnic mâna-mi țiiu, Ea bate ca și cariul încet într-un sicriu” mirrors the theme of death’s implacability, and “De-mi țin la el urechea - și rîd de câte-ascult/Ca de dureri străine? ... Parca-am murit de mult” reflects the theme of alienation. An important metaphor is also the plain, the field and the expanse – these represent cosmic nothingness and the passage into non-existence, but also the desolating soul tension (*idem*, pp. 379-380).

Another important aspect that differentiates Mihai Eminescu from his predecessors is rhyme. New rhymes are characteristic of the Eminescian style, creating semantically novel word pairings (Petrescu, 2001, p. 178). Thus, with the help of rhyme, the words toacă and to pass, ruin and old woman, wind and word, obscure and wall, churches and feeries are combined, thus highlighting the main themes touched upon in the poem.

In conclusion, the present paper has demonstrated that the poem *Melancolie*, a lyrical elegy which, at first glance, may be perceived as a purely romantic work, in reality attests to Mihai Eminescu's departure from the typical Romantist inventory. A later work by the poet, *Melancolie* marks a transition to a different type of literature, with a profound symbolism, full of significant metaphors and new themes for the Romanian literary space.

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