

EMINESCU AND THE PATTERN OF ROMANIAN ANTISEMITISM

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Abstract

After the Congress of Berlin (1878), the international pressure to eliminate from the Constitution the exclusions based on religious criteria produced an ideological battle, which raised the Romanian antisemitism to a new level. Of the representatives of the Romanian antisemites, Mihai Eminescu is the figure that has the widest public recognition. We can find in Eminescu's writings a pattern of discourse which it was used later (without any nuances) in the Romanian antisemitic discourse. Eminescu contributed to the development of a specific Romanian antisemitic understanding of the Jewishness, as a cultural product – a function of religion, of economic interest and of ethnicity.

Keywords: antisemitism, citizenship, Jewish identity, racism, ideology production

The making of the Romania was intertwined with the 'making' of the Romanians, as the invention of institutions was intertwined with the development of the national ideology. Tradition, religion and many prejudices constituted a part of the framework of this complex process – the international relations constituted the other part of the frame. Politicians and enthusiastic ideologists, working in this framework, produced a specific pattern of antisemitism. We may say that the 'Jewish question' followed like a shadow the birth and the development of the Romanian State from the perspective of the relationship with the European powers and that of the territories and populations which could constitute Romania as a national State. The various peace treaties, which guaranteed Romania's different forms of existence, implied that Romanian rulers should take into account *the entire* population. Due to the persuasive Jewish lobby,

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Romanian politicians were able to see (or were forced to see) a kind of inappropriate intervention behind European universalism.

Retrospectively (from the perspective of inter-war discourse), we could notice that the events accompanying the birth and the international recognition of Romania as a State generated a number of discussions and solutions regarding the Jewish question; and the way in which these problems were perceived and resolved constituted a pattern for the following developments of the question. One could notice that, regarding both the antisemite understanding of Jewishness (either as a religious problem, or an ethnic one, based on the language criterion) and the antisemite political measures (focused on the citizenship issue), the inter-war discourse owes a lot to this period.

The citizenship issue and the Jewish question took its form in the second half of the XIXth century. Marta Petreu offers a general presentation¹ in a study dedicated mainly to the relationship between the citizenship issue and the xenophobic discourse characteristic for that period. Marta Petreu draws essential distinctions from the discussions regarding the 'Jewish question' in the *Junimea* literary circle, by giving a scale of the tolerance/intolerance descending from P. P. Carp to Titu Maiorescu, Mihai Eminescu and Vasile Conta. In this comparative presentation, one could notice that, on the one hand, these thinkers are absorbed by the European general discourse of the time, and, on the other hand, the local nuances were produced through a continuous dialog between intellectuals such as P. P. Carp and Vasile Conta. Therefore, the making of Romanian xenophobic discourse included, as a hardcore, the common field of these discussions: the Conservative critique of the *forms without substance*, and the importance given to the socio-economic aspect of the question.

The involvement of these intellectuals in the political issue of citizenship produced a 'cultural aura' around the old and the new European antisemitic folklore and, therefore, antisemitism became a

¹ Marta Petreu, "'Chestiunea evreiască' la Junimea", in Ladislau Gyémánt, Maria Ghitta (eds.), *Dilemele conviețuirii. Evrei și neevrei in Europa Central-Răsăriteană*, Institutul Cultural Român, Centrul de studii transilvane, Cluj-Napoca, 2006, p. 71-90.

respectable trend in approaching the national ideology.² Referring to the instant popular success of these intellectuals, we could mention Vasile Alecsandri's play, *Lipitorile satului* (*Village Leeches*) which created a popular stereotype of the Jew – sometimes used by some politicians, like Mihail Kogălniceanu, as being the image of reality³ – or philosopher Vasile Conta's political discourse, *Chestiunea evreiasca* (*The Jewish Question*) which produced a 'scientific aura'. Vasile Conta introduced a scientific framework, by using concepts like "the race sympathy"⁴, and introduced new conservative patterns of understanding of the democratic regime. According to Conta, this regime could achieve progress only through uniformity⁵; and the cultural uniformity, or the ideological consensus, is linked to family life – the institution responsible with education.

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From the voices of that time, we chose the discourse of Eminescu, not for his few personal innovations, but for his style that could make the analysis less boring, and for his posthumous celebrity. For example, I rediscovered at Eminescu the ideas of Vasile Conta, excepting one subtlety, which I mentioned. Nevertheless, from a scientific point of view, Eminescu's antisemitism is the most interesting because his literary fame endorsed his political perspective on the Romanian social reality. It is also a difficult issue because of its ambivalence. For almost every violent antisemitic statement from one article, another less violent one, which reevaluates and even contradicts the former, can be found in another article or, sometimes, in the same article. We could say that Eminescu is very consistent in his inconsistency. In this respect, Eminescu sees himself as a balanced and lucid patriot, not as a Jew-hater, nor as a Philo-Semite, only as one who loves his nation and is a friend of true patriots – and patriotism "does not include the use of the sticks or the brawl of different

² Leon Volovici, *Ideologia naționalistă și 'problema evreiască' în România anilor '30*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1995, p. 31.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

⁴ Vasile Conta, "Chestiunea evreiască" (September 4-5, 1879), in Vasile Conta, *Opere complete*, "Librăria școalelor", București, 1914, p. 642.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 643-645.

individuals”⁶. Eminescu often sees the violence of language as a form of freedom: “Every time the Israelite matter is discussed, the Romanian writer is afraid to see his words interpreted as race hatred, as national or religious prejudice.”⁷ This affirmation also reveals the fact that, at the time, there was a significant, internal or external, trend, which disrupted the antisemitic current.

It is very possible that, apart from the Jews being the most numerous religious minority, Eminescu’s xenophobia took the shape of antisemitism precisely because of the international mobilization of the Jews and intellectuals with conceptions consistently democratic against antisemitism. Maybe it is not true that “the Israelite Alliance... made us aware of the danger which threatens us and awoke the instinct of national preservation in us”⁸, as Vasile Alecsandri says, but it is extremely plausible that the Israelite Alliance made the xenophobic monologue more interesting and more complex. Any writer who has a minimal respect for his image would avoid repeating himself regarding a matter, in the case when he does not have any novelties or nuances to add, or at least an imaginary partner who occasions the repetition.

‘The Universal Israelite Alliance’ created previously (in 1860) through the interventionist policy of its president, Adolphe Crémieux (1867-1880),⁹ became a good monologue partner for Eminescu. Hence, the difference in the approach of the Jewish question compared to the moments when Eminescu was preoccupied only with the “Greek money lender monster”¹⁰. The Jewish question, unlike other ethnic issues, gave the opportunity of an endless ‘general discussion’. In addition, the international aspect of the issue encouraged Eminescu to look for similarities regarding the legal or spontaneous maltreatment of the Jews from Prussia, Austria-Hungary, and Russia etc.

I would recommend considering Eminescu mainly as a conservative politician, at least from the perspective of his writings published in the

⁶ Mihai Eminescu, *Chestiunea evreiască*, Ed. Vestala, 1998, p. 199.

⁷ ***, “București, 31 Octombrie 1881”, *Timpul*, V no. 238, Novembre 1, 1881, p. 1.

⁸ Vasile Alecsandri, apud Volovici, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁹ Carol Iancu, *Bleichroeder și Crémieux. Lupta pentru emanciparea evreilor din România la Congresul de la Berlin. Corespondență inedită*, Ed. Hasefer, București, 2006, p. 17.

¹⁰ Eminescu, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

journal *Timpul* (*The Time*). In this context, Eminescu's xenophobia can be understood, at least partially, as political activity over-fuelled with strong metaphors. The Jewish question, from Eminescu's point of view, represented a *matter of Romanian Liberalism*, from the outlook of Eminescu's complex loyalty to the Conservative movement.

On the one hand, Eminescu was afraid of a liberal domination in a political system that favored the rich, because, according to stereotypes, Jews are rich and "Jews from all countries are Liberals, Ultraliberals, Republicans etc."¹¹ Nevertheless, we must say that, at least at a manifest level, both liberals and conservatives, both friends and enemies of Eminescu were not at all philosemites. One can notice in this kind of consensus and controversies that the 'fighters' from the journalism's arena mutually control themselves. And this mutual control of the vigilance and authenticity, which operated with accusations of philosemitism, illustrates the fact that the 23,584 electors from the 1st to the 3rd Constituency and the 12,657¹² representatives with franchise for the 4th Constituency were already educated to negatively sanction the attitudes that could seem reasonable to the Jews. In other words, it already existed something that Eminescu called, in another context, "the capital of hatred"¹³ – and the parties must take into account when they made their political offer.

[...] our main accusation for the reds is not that they were and still are friends of the Jews; in the end, everyone is the master of his thoughts and of his will. But they do not have any right to mislead the people and to present themselves sometimes as opponents of the Jews.¹⁴

On the other hand, Eminescu was concerned about the rhythm of the political reforms. It was too fast according to a conservative point of view. Liberals, or others under their pressure, introduced something that was called *forms without substance*. So, Eminescu's concern focused on the 'young country', which was unprepared for the fluid reality proposed by Liberalism in order to meet the new standards of European civilization,

¹¹ ***, "București 30 Aprilie/12 Maiu", *Timpul*, IV nr. 94, 1 mai 1879, p. 2.

¹² Keith Hitchins, *România. 1866-1947*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2003, p. 34.

¹³ Eminescu, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

¹⁴ ***, "București 30 Aprilie/12 Maiu", *loc. cit.*, p. 2.

because of its educational system, and because of the slow accumulation of capital and skills. Therefore, "the danger of revising the 7th article does not consist in the Israelite matter itself, but rather in the condition we were in when this issue was raised."¹⁵

This application of the theory of *forms without substance* to the 'Jewish question' produced a kind of Trojan horse effect, which weakened the fortress of the critical spirit in the case of a great number of valuable intellectuals from the inter-war period. Playing the score of Eminescu, both Emil Cioran and Mircea Eliade agreed with the notorious antisemite A. C. Cuza on 'the critical thinking seen as a luxury for the developing nations'. Eminescu showed that the intellectual could leave his ivory tower decorated with humanism and critical thinking to descend in the "muck of the time"¹⁶ together with the common agitators, on condition that this descent be motivated by love for the nation and care for the future.

However, Eminescu was not a reactionary, as few of his reactionary successors saw him, but a Conservative who understood all the changes, good or bad, on condition that these changes would be internalized by the tradition or at least irremediable: "The church from Curtea de Argeş cost also too much, but this is not a reason to pull it down and to build another one, cheaper."¹⁷ After the event or the situation passed (we speak about time related to the number of generations), there are enough elements to double the melancholy with pragmatic elements: "No matter how bad was the administration of those unfortunate landowners, it had an *asset* valuable for every agrarian, poor in other words, country: it was cheap, as cheap as possible."¹⁸

In exchange, the new administration, full of public servants, was expensive, without soul and did not offer any compensation for the transformations that the contemporaries had to experience. We may say that Eminescu only wanted 'to put a soul' in things; the only limitation being the fact that he couldn't imagine that soul as a product of the present. And it was the problem of an entire century that moved too fast, suffocated

¹⁵ Eminescu, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

¹⁶ Eminescu, apud George Călinescu, *Viața lui Mihai Eminescu*, Ed. Litera, Chișinău, 1997, p. 216.

¹⁷ ***, "București 21 Februarie/5 Martie", *Timpul*, IV nr. 41, 22 februarie 1879, p. 2.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

by memory and assaulted by the transformations generated by the new means of production. Eminescu seems to join the movement that contaminated (with the efforts of John Ruskin, for example) inclusively a part of the England, the engine of the new world.

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Selecting only the unambiguous writings of Eminescu, we can say that Eminescu's antisemitism is a product of his violence of language, in the moments when the writer's verve does not fit into regular words:

[...] one should abandon the role of the writer and assert the role of the executioner"¹⁹. "We know too well that three days will be enough to regulate so definitively the Israelite question that the 'Alliance' wouldn't have for whom to intervene anymore. We know the nation. Apparently, it is so gentle and manageable, but its gentleness has a limit that is dangerous to cross."²⁰

In his antisemitic articles there are, punctually, almost all the 'original' ideas and the analysis directions or the pattern of conception used by A. C. Cuza; and through this, the pattern of the radical Romanian antisemitism.

(1) The most interesting aspect is the general framework which Eminescu proposed for the approach of the problem, eliminating from the theoretical portfolio of antisemitism the perspectives which appeared to him too complicated – the question of race, monotheism and other fashionable explanations of Jewishness. The exotic perspectives on antisemitism "would not help us advance, socially and economically."²¹

(2) From this cultural perspective, the conception of Jewishness and of the difference between Romanians and Jews as a religious problem, or as an ethnic problem, is based on the language criterion. From this point of view, "there is no Romanian of Israelite religion, since there are no

¹⁹ Eminescu, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

²⁰ ***, "București, 12 Noembrie 1881", *Timpul*, VI nr. 248, 13 noiembrie 1881, p. 2.

²¹ ***, "București, 29 Octobrie 1881", *Timpul*, VI no. 236, Octobrie 30, 1881, p. 1.

Israelites who speak Romanian within their families.”²² These affirmations are not valuable so much for their truth value but for their capacity *to generate truth*; this capacity was proven by the fact that, throughout the following century, within the cultural frame, antisemites such as A. C. Cuza continued to see Jews different from Romanians, for example considering Jews unable to write correctly in Romanian.

(3) Similarly, an idea pervades, one which could be seen as part of the solution for the Jewish question from 1879, and according to which the Jews “are not – cannot be”²³ and should not become Romanians. The difference exists and must exist:

[...] it could happen that a human being, totally Romanian through its feelings and thoughts, to found in that article an obstacle against its participation to the life of the State. They could be baptized – some would argue. But, as far as it concerns us, we wouldn’t be glad exactly for the naturalization of those who, easily and unscrupulously, would convert without a profound change of their religious beliefs.”²⁴

“The Jews do not have to be denationalized, because we don’t care if an entire consuming and unproductive race would speak or not Romanian; they have to be forced, through a strict economical organization, to work, to physical work, to production. Then, they will denationalize by themselves or they will immigrate.”²⁵

However, Eminescu does not clearly state the difference anywhere, leaving the issue unsettled. Sometimes, he uses concepts such as *the people* or even (with a certain amount of irony) “the most remarkable people [...] God’s chosen people”²⁶. On other occasions, he considers the religious difference, but he prefers not to approach the matter from this perspective and he does not see an obstacle in this difference.

²² Eminescu, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

²³ Eminescu, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 121.

²⁵ ***, “București, 19 Octombrie 1881” *Timpul* VI nr. 228, 20 octombrie 1881, p. 1.

²⁶ Eminescu, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

(4) Nevertheless, there are moments when Eminescu ignores these cultural elements, using, for lack of something else, the concept of 'race'; still, this concept is used rarely and inadequately.

The true antagonism is not the Mosaism as an antithesis, but the modern nation with its working classes as an antithesis of the ancient, dissolvent and egoist race, which has no concern for the public welfare.²⁷

Eminescu does not understand "race" as a type of biological conditioning which makes a group exist and behave in a specific manner. He seems to understand it generally, in the same way as Vasile Conta: "race" is the unseen face of social solidarity, and the Jewish race is a kind of "theocratic social organization"²⁸, an informal economic organization "bound together through race solidarity, interests and religion."²⁹

(5) Eminescu revealed few of the instruments which could facilitate the application of the 'diabolical' objectives so that "the Romanian [became] the servant of the Jew"³⁰. Beside Liberalism, already discussed, other poisons are also taken into account. A vaguer (and less discussed) poison was the Jewish spirit, "because everywhere in Europe, the emancipated Jews, interfering with the culture of the country, falsified and corrupted it"³¹. Nevertheless, this poison was not considered dangerous during the time, especially because Romania was presented as having a "semi-culture so corrupted and radical through all its tendencies that another drop of poison would not change it"³².

(6) The proper poison was alcohol – and what it was thought to contain (vitriol) in order to be an effective poison, with an improved power to kill. That is why "the equal distribution of 600.000 leeches and street vendors is... a matter of life and death, and I think that our people would

²⁷ ***, "București, 12 Octombrie 1881", *Timpul*, VI nr. 223, 13 octombrie 1881, p. 1.

²⁸ Conta, *op. cit.*, p. 645.

²⁹ ***, "București, 12 Octombrie 1881", *loc. cit.*, p. 1.

³⁰ Eminescu, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 77.

prefer to quickly perish by the sword rather than slowly die by *vitriol*³³. Vitriol became an antisemite leitmotiv, used by all the patriots. A. C. Cuza and N. C. Paulescu dedicated one of their most delicious writings to vitriol.

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These six elements became a kind of 'canon' in the following approach of Romanian antisemitism. One could say that similar problems produce similar solutions; but I believe that *the stock of solutions and methods* produces or reproduces the problems, in the way they are lived. Thus, from the general perspective on the Jewish question, disregarding collateral problems with little significance, the doctrinaire descendants of Eminescu the politician – who either cited him, or forgot to state the source – did not try to improve the discourse, only to copy it, sometimes meeting the same problems. Therefore, these descendants do not even try to solve the inconsistencies regarding the use of such terms as 'race', but they usually limited themselves to awkwardly varying the themes and the motives proposed by Eminescu. In this way, these themes and motives became classic. The re-editions of Eminescu's journalistic works, especially those edited by A. C. Cuza, diminished the contradictory complexity of Eminescu's political discourse through the position stated in their introductions. The antisemite quotations left only the caricature, which nourished from the poet's reputation. Transposed into another era, Eminescu's unscrupulous ethnic and political concerns lost their content because the presumed 'Jewish political domination' did not make any sense *outside the census vote system*. We could say that Eminescu generated epigones in areas in which he probably would not have expected it.

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