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**MAGIC IN THE WORKS OF MIHAI  
EMINESCU**

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## Outline

**Keywords: magic, myth, enchanter, sorcerer, magical rituals, magical agents, magical plants, magical animals, divination, magic words, magic tools, etc.**

Magic is a phenomenon present in the most diverse civilizations, within which it occupied a prominent place, constituting a form of very high thinking. Those who practised magic had a different status within the group, more often than not they were spiritual and political leaders of that particular society. Although it has been analysed by a number of researchers belonging to different fields (philosophy, anthropology, history of religions, ethnology, etc.), an exhaustive definition of magic is nearly impossible. As Malinowski also argues, the word *magic* itself seems to reveal a world of mysterious and unexpected possibilities. Therefore, the agents that facilitate our understanding of the phenomenon of magic are precisely the characters (prohibited, pragmatic, and public), their underlying elements (efficacy, faith and sacrifice), as well as the laws guiding them (similarity, contrast and contiguity).

Similarly important for understanding the magic are the relationships it establishes with the witchcraft, the art, the religion and the science. There are differences between magic and witchcraft, even if the latter was classified as a sub-branch of the former. Although both were defined as techniques to control or manipulate supernatural forces, researchers believe that the differences are outstanding. In other words, while the magic is scholarly, book-bound, connected to the city world, and based on genuine knowledge, the witchcraft is vulgar, linked to orality and to the rural world, uttered mechanically, outside all claims of a general theoretical nature. This also explains the differences between enchanters and witches. We have identified both these forms in the works of Mihai Eminescu but, while the magic is present in the lyrical works and in *Sărmanul Dionis* [*Poor Dionis*] and *Avatarii faraonului Tlâ* [*Pharaoh Tlâ's Avatars*], the witchcraft rituals are present in his drama (*Grue Sânger, Bogdan-Dragoș*) but also in some poems, such as *Rime alegorice* [*Allegorical Rhymes*], *În căutarea Sherezadei* [*Looking for Scheherazade*], *Ondina*.

Despite the multiple similarities between them, magic and religion also reveal some differences; for instance, not

accustomed to the institution of the Church – as Émile Durkheim also noted – magic is guided instead by a taboo system involving many prohibitions and it thus becomes nothing but mere “superstitious credulity”.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, not even the scientific side of magic was recognized by scientists, because science is based on rational thinking, the principle of causality, while the magic complies with other laws and principles. Some consider magic to be a *pseudo-science* (Bronislaw Malinowski), while others see it as a *pre-science* (James George Frazer, Marcel Mauss). Magic can be understood as a science, but a science of imagination, that it “explores by its own means”.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, the phenomenon of the magic was seen instead as an art (understood as an occupation, a primitive understanding of the forces that govern the universe), and called *Ars magna* during the Renaissance as Culianu argues. The magical art consists in the primitive ability to manipulate supernatural forces and reach the intended goal. The primitive man was not interested

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Eros și magie în Renaștere [Eros and Magic during the Renaissance]*, 1484, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

in the development of the science or the technique, but rather in the pragmatism of the phenomenon of the magic.

Fewer problems arose when we discussed the relations between literature and magic; unlike the dichotomies magic-religion, magic-science, with the subsequent debates regarding the primacy of one over the other, or the identity of magic, in the case of the magic-literature dichotomy things are more clear. Magic and literature are just as old, magic formulas being considered “literary pieces” by Traian Herseni; however, they only grew together up to a certain point, when magic began to decline, and poetry started to develop and turn into literature. In the process of its formation, literature has borrowed a few elements specific to magic: tropes, domineering attitude of man towards nature and the solemn and hieratic character that creates a terrifying atmosphere, giving poetry a high emotion.<sup>3</sup>

Present in literature from early times (Homeric and Indian legends, the *Bible*, Greek and Latin literature, etc.), magic experienced a period of prosperity during the Romantic period, when writers began to reappraise and give new

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<sup>3</sup> Edgar Papu, *op. cit.*, p. 22-24.



meanings to the magical elements. Moreover, throughout this period, the university milieu from Vienna and Berlin – where Eminescu also studied at the time – was the spring of several books on occultism, magic and mysticism. As we have seen, the Romanian poet comes into contact with the phenomenon of magic not only through the magical beliefs present in the mentality of people and popular literature, but also through the European literary and philosophical writings. Therefore, we find in the poet's work both **popular magical practices** (charms, spells, evil-eyes, witchcraft rituals, erotic magic), and **cult magical practices** (divination, necromancy, moon magic, transmigration of the souls, etc). Unlike the poets belonging to the 1848 generation, who only use elements of the vulgar magic, Eminescu assigns an important place to the cult, elevated magic. The two types of magical practices are not separate, and, thus, elements specific to each category may appear in the same work. The most prominent example is the *Strigoii [The Ghosts]* poem, where the poet presents an amalgam of apparently unrelated magical items. Besides the image of the enchanter holding the book in his hand, that of the temple where the dead souls evoking ritual is performed, or the

elements taken from different mythologies, there is also the theme of the lover who, after losing his beloved, resorts to magic in order to recreate their union beyond death; the theme of the ghost, the presence of the mole rat, the invocation of God Zamolxis, motifs taken from the autochthonous folklore.

In Eminescu's work, magic can also be classified according to the intentions of those who use these practices; we can thus talk about *white magic* and *black magic*. Unlike the Romantic writers, black magic does not appear very often in Eminescu's work. Except for the *Avatarii faraonului Tlâ* [*Pharaoh Tlâ's Avatars*] short story, presenting the relationship with the devilish, and the two poems, *Strigoii* [*The Ghosts*] and *Gemenii* [*The Twins*], where the spirits of the dead are invoked, the other magical rituals belong to the space of white magic. Cornelius Agrippa divides his work in three, based on the type of magic it presents: *natural*, *heavenly* and *ceremonial*. These three forms of magic are also present in Eminescu's work. *Natural magic* includes those magical practices that value the magical properties of the plants, the stones, the minerals or the animals (poppy, linden, amethyst, crow, earth mole, etc.) and those belonging to the forces of

nature and climate phenomena (the enchanter mastering the storm in the *Povestea magului călător în stelestory*, or the unleashing of the nature forces during the magical evocation in *Strigoi [The Ghosts]*). *Heavenly magic* includes astrology, musical magic, space travelling, the importance of numerology, as well as the influence of the moon in the magical rituals. The magical practices used to evoke the spirits, the demons or the souls of the dead are also part of the *ceremonial or evoking magic*.

Mihai Eminescu 's work is ingrained with magical terms, the magical vocabulary present in the poet's work including words used both in the popular and the cult magic. Magical terms can be classified as follows: *magical agents* (enchanter, witch, healer, astrologer, disciple); *divination acts* (rhabdomancy, palm reading, astrology, hydromancy, card reading); *magic plants, animals and stones* (the poppy, the linden, the incense, the amethyst, the raven, the owl, the earth mole, the cat etc.); *magical actions* (cursing, exorcising, singing, blessing, bewitching, fortune-telling); *terms that refer to the practice of magic* (magic, enchantment, charm, evil eye); *magic tools* (the wand, the mirror, the cup, the book, the circle,

the living water, the dead water, the tripod); *invoked supernatural beings* (gods, ghosts, demons, genii, souls of the dead). In his work, the poet makes use of rich synonymic series, some words appearing in both the popular and the cult form: *blestem, blestemă, blesteme, blastămă, blestemuri, blăstămată, blăstemată, blestemat, a blestema, sau vrajă, vrăjit, a vrăji, vrăjitoare, vraja etc., sau magie, mag, magică.*

Also, as we have seen in the Chapter on *The magical agents and rituals in Eminescu's work*, the poet introduces us with complex magical rituals, taking into account the three stages of the ceremony (preparatory rites, actual rites and ending rites), as well as all the elements necessary to carry out the magical act. Equally important in any magical rituals are the compliance with the magical calendar and the celebration of the ritual in some specific places. In Eminescu's work, magic rituals take place at night when the full moon shines in the sky (*Strigoii [The Ghosts], Egiptul [Egypt], Povestea magului călător în stele [The Story of the Magus Reading in the Stars], Sărmanul Dionis [Poor Sionis] etc.*); the poet's favourite places are the grottoes, the pagan temples, the “black cave”, i.e. those

places away from people's eyes, where they could carry out their work without being disturbed.

Also, we notice the importance of the magical agents (the enchanter, the witch, the doctor, the astrologer) within the ritual, as well as the detailed initiation steps the disciple has to go through. The magical agents are those who commit the magical act consciously and deliberately (the enchanter or the pagan priest), but also those who have not been initiated yet (the emperor's daughter in *Luceafărul [The Evening Star]*), or those who only participate in magic rituals (Brigbelu and the soldiers who accompany the priest, Arald etc.). The magical practices performed by non-specialists are vulgar practices, old woman's remedies, agricultural rural practices, hunting or fishing /rituals, etc. However, non-specialists cannot practice the rituals of higher magic to invoke the souls of the dead or to predict the future. The practices they carry out have a preponderantly propitiatory, apothropaic or therapeutic role.

We encounter in the works of Eminescu several types of initiation: magical (the prince), metaphysical (Dionysus), thanatic (Angelo, Făt-Frumos din lacrimă), cyclic. The magical initiation involves a certain period of purification and

preparation of the disciple before passing from an inferior stage to a superior one. These stages are presented in more detail in the unfinished poem *Povestea magului călător în stele* [*The Story of the Magus Reading in the Stars*]: the journey, the overcoming of certain barriers, the listening, the obedience, the patience and the desire to be initiated.

The magical rituals present in the work of Mihai Eminescu are diverse: from simple ritualistic formulae, such as curses, blessings, spells, charms or the magical rituals of the eye and premarital magic or other witchcraft, to the most complex ones, such as magic evocation, astrology, magical initiation, all contributing to shaping the poet's vision of the phenomenon of magic. In addition, the complexity of the magical elements present in the poet's works prove his concern with this topic, his vast knowledge of various cultures, and, more precisely, their harmonisation in shaping the image of the enchanter, the magic rites, the magical elements used during the ceremonies, etc.

The magic is, in Eminescu's works, a gate to other worlds, giving the poet, and the reader, a chance to draw away from contingency and explore other areas of the existence and

the unknown. By means of magic, Dionis is able to travel vertically, in various times and spaces, as well as horizontally (the voyage to the moon). In order to further deepen the mystery, the fantastic, Eminescu uses various symbols: magical numbers (generally number 7, which is actually also the key to deciphering the magical book of Zoroastru), magical elements, ciphered writings (Arabic letters, hieroglyphs, crooked signs), which are “legile-n semne din ăst univrs” [the laws in the signs of this universe] , as well as the relationship between magic and dream. Thus, the poet gives a new dimension to his created universe, that of discovering and comprehending the spiritual world.

Among the magical practices present in the poet's work, there is also the divination. The image of the enchanter with the magic wand and book in his hand is frequently used by the poet. Additionally, in most magical rituals, the mirror and the glowing surfaces play an important part, since, besides mirroring, they also possess magical properties, hiding worlds that can only be reached by magical means. Analysing the three instruments that represent the authority of the enchanter and his power, we identified in the work of the poet several

divinatory practices: rhabdomancy, hydromancy, card reading and astrology. In Eminescu's work, the enchanter is an astrologist, priest of the old civilisation, a wise man, a necromancer, etc. acquiring magical knowledge ever since the birth of civilisations, when he wrote magical formulae on the stones (*Memento mori*).

In the work of Mihai Eminescu, evocation is used to summon supernatural agents, either the dead, or the good or evil genii, determining them to abandon their natural environment. Love is what determines both the emperor's daughter and Arald to resort to evoking supernatural agents. The difference between the conjured spirits can be identified in their own words. While the emperor's daughter is aware of Hyperion's superiority and she asks him to descend from his sphere, the enchanter in *Strigoii [The Ghosts]* invokes the soul of the dead queen from the hearth of the earth. Hyperion is immortal ("Noi nu avem nici timp, nici loc, / Și nu cunoaștem moarte." [We have no time, nor space/ and we don't know what death is]), but Queen Marie has known both life and death. The magical ritual in *Gemenii [The Twins]* is enacted to see whether King Sarmis is dead or alive.



The magical rituals in the work of Mihai Eminescu are complex, the poet bringing together several magical elements that are crucial to the narration, borrowed both from the autochthonous folklore and Nordic mythologies: knowledge of the name, the use of magical elements (the wand, the altar, the mirror, the lights, the smoke and the spices, etc.), the consequences of the conjuring, etc. The detailed description of such rituals gives rise to a strange beauty, touched by the uncommon, terrifying atmosphere of magic, inducing unique states of mind and emotions.

The poet's work also comprises rituals of the erotic and moon magic. During these rituals, the Greek and Latin (Eros, Cupid, Amor, etc.), Indian (Kamadeva) or autochthonous Gods (Saint Wednesday, Saint Thursday, Saint Friday or Saint Sunday) interfere, helping the young lovers. Both magic and mythology have been a rich source of inspiration for Romanticism, providing themes and motifs. Eminescu granted the myth a great literary value, since he did not stop to the exterior form of the myth, to the story itself, but he went deeper, looking for its hidden meanings.

The purpose of the erotic magical practices is to provoke, stir and preserve the love of the beloved person, but also to end

an unwanted love. The spell can be cast both through simple gestures (the look, the evil eye, the smile, etc.), and magical rituals: witchcraft, premarital magical practices, spells, the conjuring of supernatural agents, etc. The magical rituals are actions that require compliance with certain strict and well defined conditions that cannot be ignored by practitioners. Analysing the erotic stories in Eminescu's works, we notice these take place as a sacred, magical ritual, without drifting away from pre-established rules: respect of the time and space, the presence of magical agents, the music, the hallucinatory magical plants, the magical discourse, the combustion, etc.

Similarly, the moon does not have a mere decorative, ornamental purpose, the poet assigning it deeper meanings as well. The moon is present in most magical rituals, having an ambivalent role: both a good and an evil one. The full moon nights favour the realisation of the magical practices, especially the evocation ones, since the moon is like a catalyser, a gate towards the other world. During this night, it is easier to communicate with the dead or the superior beings. The moon turns the souls of the dead, it “resurrects” them, as Eminescu wrote in one version of the *Strigoii [The Ghosts]* poem, and the sun rays bring back the souls to their initial state: “Căci luna, al nopții blândul soare / Învie-al nostru suflet, ce înspre ziuă

moare!” [For the moon, gentle sun of the night/ resurrects our soul, dying in the morning] (I, 437).

Recovered during Romanticism, the dream represents the gate towards the land of freedom and imagination, where the poet can create new worlds. Through the dream, the poet can enter unknown spaces; he explores various areas of the unconsciousness. Therefore, many magical rituals occur in the dream (the magical experiences of Dionis, the magical flight, the duplication, the initiation and the transmundane journey of the prince, the metempsychosis, etc.), and it is also provoked by certain magical plants having a soporific role or by magical liquors.

Analysing magic in the works of Mihai Eminescu, the richness of the magical terms, the diversity of the rituals, the variety of the magical elements and situations in which they occur, the various types of magic practised by the magical agents, the contexts in which they resort to magic, all these allow us to infer that magic is not a mere literary motif, but it constitutes a vast literary and ideological program. Nevertheless, Eminescu did not just conform to take some magical themes present in the works of his Romanian precursors, or the European Romantic writers, but he enriched instead the magical motifs and poetry by introducing cult

magical rituals and magical elements present in different cultures and mythologies.

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