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LITERARY HISTORY AS BESTSELLER: THE LIFE AND OPINIONS OF A FRAUDULENT PHILOLOGUE

ABSTRACT

In this article we reveal the publishing ventures of Octav Minar (1886-1967), one of the Romanian authors that was disesteemed by fellow literary historians on account of his counterfeiting acts such as forgery, plagiarism, plastography or trick photography. Related to the book market of interbellum Romania, Minar was frequently branded as the “man-of-the-day” while his publications followed the logic of the “hand-in-glove” ephemerides. Notwithstanding the challenges of the term “bestseller,” we turned to it so as to better describe Minar’s cultural products as multiple-layered offers, catering for both low-brow and high-brow readership and seizing signals from both public’s expectations (myth-making, melodrama, sensation, narrative simplicity) and enormous patrimonial gaps (editing the classics, writing the recent authors’ biographies). After a careful examination of Minar’s works, we reached the conclusion that he was an exceptional entrepreneur of letters and, nonetheless, a literary historian endowed with a “melodramatic imagination” as well as with a playwright’s and a genre novelist’s plume. A swift intuition of marketing basics helped him realize, quite rapidly, that historical facts and documents could be merchandized: this is how his impressive collection of Romanian writers’ miscellanea was wrapped as a commodity for the public. If the juridical and moral aspects of his literary ventures were put in between brackets, we would discover an astonishing and ingenious personality who glided between different speech registers, and popularized literary history as a genre belonging to the big tent of mass culture. We should thus take into consideration that the logic of the paraliterary circuit can also be applied to literary history. Boiled down to essentials, counting on citations and on minimal critical comments, spiced with images (facsimile and pictures), Minar’s literary histories had their share in speeding the process of cultural literacy of average Romanian readers and in institutionalizing literary ideas.

KEYWORDS: plagiarism, fake, literary history, bestseller, popular fiction, mass culture

INTRODUCTION ON PETTY CULTURAL CRIMES: FORGERY AND BESTSELLING LITERARY HISTORY

In this article we reveal the publishing ventures of Octav Minar (1886–1967), one of the Romanian authors who was disesteemed by fellow literary historians on account of his counterfeiting acts such as forgery, plagiarism, plastography or trick photography. What has drawn our attention was not Minar’s fading away from our literary memory – for various reasons, a lot of Romanian writers have been dismissed and are still waiting for empathic interpreters –, but his own lack of reaction to the frenzied attacks of authority critics. Why has Minar’s curious silence been interpreted as a guilty plea, growing, as time passed, into unanimous moral sanction and into cautiousness when citing or even mentioning his works? After his last book’s success (1936), Octav Minar mysteriously vanished from the literary arena. Thus, his death is also enigmatic: the month, day and place have never been recorded, while the year still remains debatable (Dulciu 2014: 36; Simion 2019: 415–416).

Related to the book market of interbellum Romania, Octav Minar was frequently branded as “the man-of-the-day” while his publications followed the logic of “the hand-in-glove” ephemerides (Sutherland 2007: 2–43). It is precisely this phenomenon of turning the grand style of literary history into popular writing that might yield a few suggestions for future theoretical extrapolations. The juxtaposition between popular fiction and literary history was also inspired by a casual finding: navigating through various antiquarians’ sites, we came across a library catalogue, in which Minar’s publications are advertised as “the books of the day” (Sutherland 2007: 35), by using enhanced headlines and a keyworded content in order to foreground his indisputable authority in matters of philology (*Catalogul* 1926: 8–15). Is 1926, the year of the catalogue, *the annus mirabilis* for the now-forgotten VIP Octav Minar?

Instead of applying the all-encompassing concept of “literary success,” we chose to meet with the challenges of the term “bestseller” as it might better describe Octav Minar’s cultural products as multiple-layered offers, catering for both low-brow and high-brow readership, thus feeding both the public’s expectations (myth-making, melodrama, sensation, narrative simplicity) and some patrimonial must-do-s (editing the classics, writing the recent authors’ biographies). Our first argument for using the adjective “bestseller” instead of “popular” or “mass” culture (Gelder 2004: 3–12) lies in the porous-ness and quantitatively-open nature of the context we will henceforth describe. To the date, the Romanian interbellum literature has not been researched in terms of market data, e. g. number of copies vs. actual sales, bestselling lists vs. professional critics’ lists, paperback vs. hardback printing, cycles of novelty, authors’ productivity, spotlight series, etc. But the explorations of the Romanian novels’ generic typology and topical variety (Terian *et al.* 2020: 53–64; Borza, Goldiș, Tudurachi 2020: 205–220) have already yielded rich suggestions for introducing Romanian bestsellerism – with all entailed textual manifestations – as a matter of reflection and further analysis. The second argument derives from Minar’s self-branding as a humble antiquarian and not as an authoritative critic or literary historian: while it has been proved that authority and celebrity influence books’ sales (Bloom 2002: 1–28, Sutherland 2007: 35–43), this might also be true for instances when authors advertise their own marginality or private objects. The discussion on the public’s biographic phantasmas should be richer

than these introductory remarks, but for the purpose of the present article we would just keep the idea that an antiquarian's fame has something esoteric and mysterious compared to a literary critic's fame; briefly put, selling a private instead of a public posture makes all the difference. In Minar's particular case, the figure of the antiquarian, of the owner of unpublished miscellanea, stands for the potential surprise and for the "make-it-new" effect, which always has been the engine of good and fast sells. The third argument for considering bestsellerism comes from Jodie Archer and Matthew L. Jockers' experiments on "(the) bestseller-ometer" (Archer & Jockers 2016), all in all an algorithm to detect, measure and operationalize the deep textual mechanisms that bring about high sales. Beyond any algorithmic considerations, "the bestseller code" seemed fit to us when reverting the analysis of bestseller-ism from historic-sociological factors to textual features; shortly said, it was applicable, even in the absence of factual, concrete data, to small markets and to pre-consumerist periods such as the time of Minar's fame.

After a careful examination of Octav Minar's works, we reached the conclusion that he was an exceptional entrepreneur of letters and, nonetheless, a philologist endowed with a "melodramatic imagination" as well as with a playwright's and a genre novelist's plume. A swift intuition of the marketing basics helped him realize, quite rapidly, that historical facts and documents (and the posture of the passionate antiquarian derived therein) could be merchandized conveniently: in fact, this is how his impressive collection of Romanian writers' miscellanea came to be wrapped as a commodity for the public. Most of all, Minar's editorial activity decisively contributed to the crystallization of the national poet's myth, a popular phenomenon which, during the interbellum period, stimulated the literary critics to reevaluate Mihai Eminescu's life (Călinescu 1932; Lovinescu 1935).

Moreover, Octav Minar counts himself among the first authors of fictional romantic biographies that were issued in popular series. By "romantic biography" we define a biography built on the ideology of the individual poet in his imaginative world as well as on the Romantic traits of the biographical genre itself, irrespective of its subject of analysis (Bradley & Rawes 2016). Romanticism might also be the gist of Minar's amateur philological initiatives, chiefly the allegedly "scientific" editing and publication of the Romanian "classics." Beyond his own quest for success, Octav Minar was enthralled by the mysterious mechanism of human creativity. The preference for a psychological approach to literary phenomena should thus be integrated with his personal predispositions: a subtle psychologist himself, Minar had the talent to produce reliable fakes, that is, to mimic the original's spirit and letter and to act according to the public's expectations. However, as proved recently, the number of his philological "crimes" is not by far as big as to obscure Minar's merits as editor, publisher, script writer, novelist, critic and literary historian. In fact, if the juridical and moral aspects of his publishing ventures were put in between brackets, we would discover an astonishing and ingenious personality who easily glided between different speech registers, and popularized literary history as a genre belonging to the big tent of mass culture. Taking Minar's work as a case study, we should take into consideration that the logic of the paraliterary circuit can also be applied to a high and dignified genre such as literary history. Counting on a florilegium of significant excerpts and on minimal critical comments, sometimes spiced with images (facsimile and pictures), Minar's literary histories had their share in speeding the process of cultural literacy of average Romanian readers and in institutionalizing literary ideas.

FORENSIC SCENOGRAPHY:
UNVEILLING THE SECRET DOCUMENT AS “COUP DE THÉÂTRE”

Son of an Armenian bookseller from Iași named “Popovici” (Dulciu 2014: 36; Suțu 2015: 520), Octav Minar was given a very good education, which allowed him to specialize in juridical sciences, letters and philosophy. This enabled him to work as a lawyer and to boastfully sign on the title page of his books “Bachelor of Laws” or “Doctoral Student in Letters and Philosophy.” Far from being an illiterate or a *semidoctus*, the young publicist earned an honorable place among his fellows (Dulciu 2014: 36), the most significant books from the first part of his career being focused on iconic cultural figures such as Mihai Eminescu, Ion Luca Caragiale, Vasile Conta or Veronica Micle; then, turned into an experienced literary entrepreneur, Minar drove his attention to Vasile Alecsandri, Ion Creangă or George Coșbuc, none of the prodigious personalities of Romanian literary tradition being neglected. The industrious man of letters stepped on the public stage at 23 with the “literary-artistic album” entitled *Eminescu comemorativ* (*Commemorating Eminescu*) (1909), which, in spite of reservation concerning “arguable interpolations,” was hailed by historian Nicolae Iorga (1871–1940), chiefly for the value of revealed documents: evocations of the poet’s contemporaries, musical scores of several songs composed on Eminescu’s verses, facsimiles and pictures. Browsing through the press of the time, one can find the debutante’s name in numerous newspapers and journals such as “Adevărul Literar și Artistic,” “Cele trei Crișuri,” “Cosînzeana,” “Curierul Judiciar,” “Dimineața,” “Facla,” “Gazeta Transilvaniei,” “Luceafărul,” “Lupta,” “Rampa,” “Revista Idealistă,” “Scena,” “Tribuna,” “Universul,” “Viața Literară și Artistică.” It was not only Iorga who appreciated the young colleague’s documentary efforts, but also Perpessicius (Dumitru S. Panaitescu), who cites Minar’s contributions in the complete critical edition of Eminescu’s works, and the Italian professor Ramiro Ortiz, who describes him as *un modesto e valoroso publicista* (Dulciu 2014: 62–65).

Suspicion about the authenticity of documents included in the debut volume was awakened by a trick photography that pictures a pensive Mihai Eminescu during his stay at the psych ward of Târgu Neamț, sitting in an emphatically theatrical hypostasis, pen in hand and written papers on his knee. The character is dressed in gown and slippers and placed under an old linden tree, which is a symbol frequently used in Eminescu’s works. The poet’s real face, the last of the four well-known pictures, is pasted on another body (what if Minar’s own body was borrowed for this figuration?), placed in the decorum described above. Beside moral rebuttal, the viewer should also wonder whether this *mise-en-scène* really contradicts the historical facts; on the contrary, we think that Minar’s “album” fake catches a glimpse of a striking biographical moment, whose importance would be underlined by scholars later on (Cioabă 2014: 408–409). Moreover, the recipe of the incriminated picture (real face and fictional decorum) anticipates the recipe of all Minar’s following productions: a relatively accurate info would always need to be immersed in a dramatic and sentimental script, spiced by sensational notes and Belle époque vignettes.

The album also contains another frame where the author enters his own misti-fiction: it is another photograph showing the ruin of Ion Creangă’s famous “hovel” and, as the side-explanations provide, three people standing on its porch – “Mrs. Deliu-Creangă, journalist Octav Minar, on her right, and professor Eugeniu Revent, on her left” (*Eminescu*

comemorativ: 21). Best friend of Mihai Eminescu and one of the Romanian classics, Ion Creangă (1837–1889) “encouraged the poet to write the [ballad] *Doina*” (21). Why precisely this reference to *Doina*? The controversial history of Eminescu’s poem and Minar’s figuration in the frame suggest a subjective disruption of the patrimonial and testimonial intentions. The humble and slightly-mustached young man, standing behind “Mrs. Deliu-Creangă” (known by contemporaries as “Tinca, Creangă’s mistress”) and “professor Revent,” is witnessing the decay of good old times but he is also thinking of something beyond this state of affairs: always theatrical, the young spectator’s look is directed at the background (the Cîrc Hill of Iași) and not at the elements in the foreground. It is neither the porch nor the other present characters that hold his interest, but the absences in the picture (more precisely, the absent Eminescu), which call for the public’s emotional filling.

The early success spurred imagination and courage for other similar pursuits, which were hailed by the readers who would appreciate dynamism and the effect of authenticity (cf. *Cum a iubit Eminescu*). Octav Minar’s inclination for visual arts and theatre¹ turned the illustrative apparatus into a must have of a bestselling literary history and this feature would probably inspire G. Călinescu when strategizing the publication of his own monumental history (Patras 2017: 80–87). Compared to Călinescu, who would run a longer race, Minar’s contributions were humbly titled “albums,” which suggested a series of images knitted together by a minimalist, even simplified, commentary. The clichés from the pictures corresponded to the commonplaces phrased in the comments. If correctly put in the social and technological context, the “melodramatic imagination” (Brooks 1996: 1–30), the shorthand explanation and the visually-framed document were meant to meet with the public’s new entertaining habits: to the point, adapting cinematic devices to text and practicing a sort of cinematic criticism would push the young man of letters to the top of the most-published Romanian authors. Nevertheless, the new “bestselling code” of literary criticism did not rule out Minar’s blatant pretensions of objectivity; on the contrary, he would repeatedly declare that his criticism was “scientific,” because grounded on “documents” and historical contextualization (*Filozoful Conta*: LIV–LV).

People spending more and more time at the cinema would also encourage Octav Minar to direct the first documentary about Mihai Eminescu’s life, entitled *Eminescu-Veronica-Creangă*, produced by the Movie Studio “Pathé,” and launched in January 31st 1915 at Ateneul Român in Bucharest. This was, in fact, a filmic adaptation of the formerly published material. To keep record of big-frame historical moments, this happened a bit before Romania’s entering the World War I: therefore, the intellectual elite was ready to receive Minar’s movie under the auspices of the Romanian *ethnos*. Unfortunately, the film roll would vanish for many decades to be discovered only in 2007 by Ion C. Rogojanu and Dan Toma Dulciu (Manega 2009). The event did not seem to interest the self-referential world of Eminescu scholars, even if the metadata of the film roll indicates that the amateur director spent consistent resources in order to remake the poet’s itinerary through Bucharest, Iași, Neamț, Agapia, Ipotești, Humulești, Dumbrăveni, Czernowitz,

¹ Is it worth mentioning Minar’s interest for theatre, which is obvious in works on modern playwrights and actors such as Sardou, Rostand, Ibsen, Grigore Manolescu, but also in comments on novel dramatizations such as *Umbra lui Crist* and *Quo vadis* (after Senkiewicz’s novel) or *O făclie de Paște* (after Caragiale’s novella) (Dulciu 2014: 42–47).

and elsewhere. All movie frames were shot in the autumn of 1914. A fun fact is that the much-incriminated trick picture (Eminescu in the psych ward) served as a proof for correct identification in 2007.

Getting at the deep message of Minar's "composition," one might notice the same obsession with making the absent present: the number of Eminescu statues and the melodramatic scheme, already indicated by the movie's emphatic title (Eminescu between his friend and his lover), are devised in order to stimulate the public's feeling of immersion into the exposed (romantic) life. Already advertised via the album *Eminescu comemorativ* and other previous contributions, the visual apparatus was now "commented" only through a chain of lyrical chunks, the presence and the discourse of the amateur director being even more reduced to occasional "figuration." Instead, Minar chose to exploit the immense recycling potential of cinema: in order to dramatize Eminescu's poems, he borrowed sequences from foreign movies, for instance shots from exotic places like Venice or Egypt.

As we have mentioned above, both the album *Eminescu comemorativ* (1909) and the documentary *Eminescu-Veronica-Creangă* (1914) contained *in nuce* the devices that would scaffold all Minar's contributions. All were made to look like popular almanacs or like readers' digests. For a thorough understanding of "minar-ism," it is necessary to expand our analysis on the following two books *Cum a iubit Eminescu (How Eminescu loved)* (1911) and *Dragoste și poezie (Love and poetry)* (1924), in which the amateur biographer connected the romantic lives of Mihai Eminescu and Veronica Micle by using the couple's sentimental letters and many other "unpublished documents and pictures." Aimed at the average readers' taste, the result was a sentimental narrative spiced with forensic elements. Because it had been a time of true friendship and love, Octav Minar focused on the period the poet had spent in Iași (1874–1877) and deemed Mihai Eminescu's activity in Bucharest as the true cause of his nerve-wrecking.

While the previous books contain only a few conventional mentions of the "Junimea" circle² and of their says in devising the poet's career, the two popular biographies underwent a melodramatic stylization: the critics Titu Maiorescu and Iacob Negruzzi were pictured as the villains of the story who thwarted the lovers' intentions to get married and to live happily ever after (Fahraeus & Yakalı-Çamoğlu 2011: VII–XII). Indeed, "the fabricator" Minar claimed that the members of Junimea deliberately destroyed the correspondence between Veronica Micle and Mihai Eminescu, who had never considered himself a part of the cultural circle of Iași (*Dragoste și poezie*: 36). In exchange, his comments stressed upon the candor of feelings and upon Veronica's ideal profile, "the most beautiful and cultivated woman of her times" (*Dragoste și poezie*: 94). All in all, this was the portrait of a literary muse, a *donna angelicata*, who sacrificed literary talent and lived in the shadow of her genial partner. Trained as lawyer, the biographer defended Veronica's morality by bringing three arguments: her love for Eminescu had been platonic until her husband's death; after Eminescu's first fits of illness, "the muse" behaved as a devoted nurse and even declared that "she would rather be Eminescu's mistress than the wife of a prince"; she was a dedicated mother who would invest time and money in the education of her children (*Dragoste și poezie*: 81).

² Junimea ("Youth"), the literary circle Titu Maiorescu founded in 1863, reacted against the prevailing interest in literary form at the expense of content and pointed toward a later reassessment of the uses of literature.

The circumstances of the poet's tragic death enhanced the forensic scenography and the romantic air of Minar's following books on Eminescu: *Cum a iubit Eminescu. Pagini intime. Scrisori, poezii și amintiri inedite* (1911), *Dragoste și poezie. Ale lui pentru mine, ale mele pentru dânsul* (1924), *Eminescu. Aspecte din viața și opera poetului* (not dated), *Patriotismul lui Eminescu (Geneza)* (1914), *Eminescu în fața justiției* (1914), *Cum a murit Eminescu* (1922), *Mihai Eminescu. Probleme și analize filozofice descoperite și commentate de Octav Minar* (1924). Of course, inserting minimal critical comments in-between cited poems and documents was a legal scheme against plagiarism allegations and copyright infringement. Rebutting the official version about Eminescu's death (caused by a despicable venereal disease), the biographer argued that the poet was actually murdered by the actor Petre Poenaru who threw a rock at his head. Then, Veronica Micle's suicide was also rebutted, Minar's version being that, after the poet's death, the sad lover suffered from "a brain congestion" (*Dragoste și poezie*: 97). Supported with a lot of "psychologic documents, valuable and important for a correct understanding of Eminescu's personality" (*Dragoste și poezie*: 40), the last moments of Mihai Eminescu's life would also be garnished with fabricated letters and poetry. The forensic *mise en scène* becomes a very dynamic narrative device of literary history, so we should perhaps ask what reason triggered Minar's idea to invent a poem and to present it to the public as if composed by Eminescu while in the psych ward at Târgu Neamț³. Rejecting all pathological mentions concerning the body and mind of national genius, the biographer reiterated the idea that neither Eminescu's creativity nor his love for Veronica faded away at the end of his life; on the contrary, the poet was still able to write a poem for his lover, which fully proved that had not gone mad (*Dragoste și poezie*: 62). But the strings of the sensational subject were pulled even stronger in a pamphlet called *Cum a murit Eminescu* (1922): the tragic death caused by murder and not by illness, the enemies from the Junimea circle, the martyrdom for the national cause, the unfading creativity, the platonic love, the lover's angelic profile provide the solid narrative blocks of a bestselling story.

Beside the melodramatic scenography and the forensic plot, Octav Minar availed of a rhetoric of "eye-witnessing" (Burke 2001: 9–19) and, inspired by caselaw, would always introduce himself as a testimony or as a confessor of people who had had direct contact with the biographical subjects. His need to insert make-believe instances drove to a funny use of the "found manuscript." Like the revelation scenes in crime stories, the moment of bringing to the fore the manuscript/ the document functioned as a biographical climax: if the antiquarian did not actually have the necessary manuscript, he would fabricate it no matter the risks. Claiming "minimal" intervention and always playing the role of the humble shadow, Minar inserted some "real-life" dialogues in the storyline: like all other fabrications, the oral histories (presented as "recollections" or "memories") as well as Minar's personal archive were meant to fill in a lacunary documentation and to feed in a hungry melodramatic imagination. In order to recover Veronica Micle's "awkward age" or the genius's boyhood – not necessary to insist that they also count among the tropes of the popular fiction (Radway 1991:

³ "Așternut în iarba verde/ În poiană, către seară,/ Aștept luna cea de vară/ După deal ca să răsară.// Și privescu cu drag la valea/ Ce se-ntinde, hăt departe.../ Pân-ce munții-nchide calea/ Unei lumi ce ne desparte.// Și tot trec gândiri, o mie//, Prin o minte amăgită...// Ce va fi în veșnicie/ Dacă clipa-i urgisită?" (*Dragoste și poezie*: 62).

19–45) –, Minar brought forth a certain Mrs. Macri who allegedly knew the young girl and future genius' mistress (*Dragoste și poezie*: 14–17) or a certain Costache Crețu, a servant in the house of Gheorghe Eminovici, the genius's father (*Aspecte...*: 6). While all our literary historians doubted about the existence of sentimental correspondence between Mihai Eminescu and Veronica Micle (Călinescu 2006: 897–901; Cioculescu 1972: 624–626; Bucur 1973: 228–229), Octav Minar would argue, with all philological rigor he could prove, that he read and analyzed the couple's love letters (Minar 1924: 57). Posthumously, the biographer took his revenge when this “minar-ism” was proved as the real deal, and the love letters, that had been concealed by Veronica's inheritors, were finally handed to a publisher (Zarifopol-Illias 1999).

A BESTSELLER CODE: THE DARK SIDE OF THE ROMANIAN INTERBELLUM LITERARY CANON

The fictionalization and the narrativization of documents on Eminescu's life were also techniques used by novelists like Cezar Petrescu, who published a trilogy between 1935–1938, or by literary critics like Gheorghe Călinescu, who authored a life in 1932, and Eugen Lovinescu, who also planned a fictional trilogy from which only two novels got published between 1934 and 1935. In a context particularly influenced by psychoanalysis (Vlad 1932), the interbellum exegesis was marked by the critics' attempt at breaking the code of Eminescu's personality and genius. While Călinescu introduced the poet as a healthy representative of the under-Carpathian Romanian type (Bot 2001: 9–107), E. Lovinescu, who thought to have fished a key in the deep pool of erotic psychology, introduced Eminescu as a sexual inhibit and as a masochist (Patras 2013: 113–220).

Just because the representative of a healthy ethnotype could not have been represented as ill or mad (Minar *dixit*), the public's rejection of pathology seemed to be in line with the Romanian's Academy's verdict on E. Lovinescu's “pornography.” In the same year when Lovinescu's application for Academy membership was dismissed, Minar came around with a new “novel” that celebrated the unfaltering purity of Eminescu's genius and love life. Contrariwise to Lovinescu's psychological assumptions from *Mite* and *Bălăuca*, *Simfonia venețiană. Romanul unei mari iubiri* (*The Venetian Symphony. The Novel of a Great Love*) (1936) caught the readership's signals with regard to cultural myth-making. Alas, the VIP of the Socec Publishers decided to turn out a novel, thus a form with a higher aesthetic organization if compared to his previous miscellanea! In actual terms, this novel was a textual retroversion of the filmic production from 1915. Unfortunately, *The Venetian Symphony* shared its author's fate, with only one notable exception: this is the only book that got republished after 1989 (*Simfonia* 1991). The strange destiny of this last novel resumes Minar's story of fame, which determined Sorin Alexandrescu to read his entire work under the sign of successful romance-writing and to lower the tone of allegations. *Mutatis mutandis*, both the fictionalization of documents applied by professional writers (C. Petrescu, E. Lovinescu or G. Călinescu) and the falsification of documents applied by amateur philologues (Octav Minar) draw from the same root: the subjective treatment of factual truth (Alexandrescu 1964: 375–384).

Instead of incriminating “fakes” (ironically, many of them proved to be authentic proofs) or faulty literary talent, we prefer to address the reasons and the conditions that propelled Minar as a bestselling author of the Romanian interbellum period. But in order to breach the enduring prejudices, we have to turn to Mircea Anghelescu’s theory of “misti-fictions” and to assign fake and mystifications with a positive value, that is, to understand them as a form of excessive emulation, even identification, between imitators and models. While the product of imitation or plagiarism belongs to the realm of criminal law, the process of imitation belongs to the sociology of prestige because it contributes to the dissemination and to the survival of the original (Anghelescu 2016: 5–17; Zarifopol qtd. in Coloşenco 2011: 22–24). Minar’s contributions to Eminescu’s myth-making should be read in this positive and constructive key, as they reflect, albeit in a simple form addressed to masses, one of the dearest ideas of Eminescu exegesis: the psychic personality should and could be used as a code to hack the mystery of genial creativity (Caracostea 1987; Negoîtescu 1968; Noica 1978; Creția 1998).

Despite thematic conservatism (e.g. issues such as sexuality and illness), Minar’s arsenal of formal techniques is quite astounding: the probatory system of his books contains, as we have already noted, elements from visual arts and cinema as well as techniques such as photo hacks, tricks, collage, stencil and so forth. At the crossroad of traditionalism and free-enterprise, the man of letters knew the secret of addressing different audiences and of teasing the fans with an illusion of “newness” and “originality” (Sutherland 2007: 26–28; Archer & Jockers 2016; Gelder 2004: 15; Patras 2020: 139–142). Browsing through the aforementioned Socec catalogue⁴, we noticed that Minar (and not other famous critics) was shown off as a top authority in matters of literary history. Beside “the critical edition” of Caragiale’s theatre, the same catalogue advertised other books bearing Minar’s singular trademark: volumes “in print” such as *Veronica Micle. Dragoste și poezie* (*Veronica Micle. Love and Poetry*), *Cultura filozofică la Eminescu* (*Eminescu’s Philosophical Culture*), *I.L. Caragiale* (*I.L. Caragiale*), and *Moftul Român* (The journal] “*Moftul Român*”); translations such as *Doamna Crisantema* (*Madame Chrysanthème*) by Pierre Loti, translated by Panait Cerna; popular series such as *Clasici români și străini pentru copiii și tineret* (*The Romanian and foreign classics for children and youth*); and, last but not least, “COLECȚIA MEA [MY SERIES]” (read “Minar’s series”) printed in “artistic format” and including popular lives like *Caragiale (omul și opera)* (*Caragiale (man and work)*), *Delavrancea (omul și opera)* (*Delavrancea (man and work)*), *Creangă (omul și opera)* (*Creangă (man and work)*), *Filozoful Conta (omul și opera)* (*Philosopher Conta (man and work)*) (*Catalogul* 1926: 1–96).

Additionally, we consider that Octav Minar’s predilection for kitsch and mass culture are signs of a modern sensibility (Călinescu 1995: 189–220). His “mistifictions” and “fakes” fit in the definition of cultural products that “mystify their own identity” and “provide the reader’s imagination with an extra possibility” for real agency. In line with Sorin Alexandrescu’s remarks on Minar’s fakes and developing ideas from Jean Paulhan or Umberto Eco, Mircea Anghelescu argues that writers are falsifiers par excellence, the

⁴ Socec is probably the most enduring publishing house in Romania, being on the market between approximately 1850 and 1948.

difference between a good and a bad fake being given by the authors' ability to create the illusion of truth and to look reliable (Angelescu 2016: 17).

The Venetian Symphony... results from the addition of floating fragments, originally published in Octav Minar's previous productions devoted to the national genius. The narrative schema contains an enjambment of anecdotal scenes, the narrative voice being almost absent; here, Minar discards the orality devices (questioning the readers, asking for their affective involvement or moral judgement) and focuses exclusively on retrieving the genius's psyche. However, the excerpts from and about Mihai Eminescu's work and personality have carefully been sifted through. Like the film launched in 1915, the novel documents the poet's life before the first illness strikes and emphasizes the contrast between the sweet and idyllic life of Iași and the tormenting and exhausting life of Bucharest. The Havas wires in which Eminescu confesses disgust and contempt for the profession of writing certify that the poet's return to Iași in 1883 represents a retrospective moment but also a spur for a tired creativity (*Simfonia*: 26). By far the most interesting detail of Minar's narrative is the fact that, despite the paradisiac decorum, the "characters" Mihai Eminescu and Veronica Micle are not meant to reunite in Iași. Their liaison is resumed only after the poet's falling into illness.

Unconstrained by authenticity limitations, the novelist imagines here a passionate epistolary in which the lovers reconcile and confess, without much protocol, their affection. Once declared, the poet's love might be consumed in imagination and exclusively through writing, which also justifies the novelist idea of staging the reconciliation in outlandish, even exotic places (Venice, Viena). Octav Minar's "Eminescu" does not actually need to return to Veronica Micle, hence his lover must resign to a kind of "angel-ism." In Venice, the genius rediscovers the joy of life and feels like home. The novel ends with an ample excerpt from Marcus Aurelius, whose *Meditations* become the character's favorite reading. Discussed in a previous pamphlet by Octav Minar, Mihai Eminescu's philosophical predispositions make his love "a curious thing" to experience and understand (*Simfonia*: 45). So the argument *pro domo Veronicæ* goes like this: if she could understand a man craving for a woman who was miles away and, when right beside him, showing apathy, then Veronica's love for Eminescu was surely greater than his. Minar insists on this affective logic, and finally underlines the sacrifice of a woman who could have gained a voice in the Romanian literature but chose to express herself as an epigon. Veronica Micle's option for imitation is given here an unexpected moral justification, which resounds the positive value it gets in the sociology of prestige.

The love affair's setting connects tightly with the psychic profile of the genius. Venice, which provides an exotic escape place, also appears in Octav Minar's film as a key frame. Inspired by one of Mihai Eminescu's sonnets, the amateur director speculates the symbolic resonances of the lagoon city. Thus, the tragic liaison between the Romanian national poet and his mistress happens in a place marked by decayed splendor and melancholy, in a cityscape that blends all contrasts: Eros and Thanatos, love and death, sea and land. By matching some edited images with the poet's oxymoronic phrases (e.g. "farmec dureros"/ [painful charm], "suferință dulce"/ [sweet suffering]), Minar has a very keen intuition of Eminescu's decadent taste, an aesthetic feature that will arrest the critics' attention only later (Andone 2002: 5–60, Patraș 2017: 111). Beside these formal and aesthetic considerations, the literary entrepreneur must have also known that exotism sold well.

As shown above, the dialogue between Octav Minar's film (as filmic adaptation of biographic documents) and his last novel (as textual adaptation of film) does not lack complexity and, this time, soft accents *pro domo sua*. Its gravity center consists in the suggestion that Mihai Eminescu's originality delves in a kind of secondary creativity, a creativity inspired by a model and boosted by expressive performance. Veronica Micle, in her turn, manifests the same type of secondary creativity when she decides to imitate Eminescu. For instance, "the ballad" *Doina* results from filling the folkloric form with an urban sarcasm that contaminated the poet's soul while working as a journalist for a political gazette in Bucharest; vice versa, in *Veneția* the borrowed foreign form (the sonnet) is impregnated with a contemplative mood, which is typical for the Romanian people. It is for these reasons that, in Octav Minar's puzzle of images and texts, one may find a surprising correspondence between the provincial city of Iași and the decayed Venice: the first represents the place where the poet reconnected with his deep Self and wrote *Doina*, the second represents the place where he tried to alleviate physical decay by resorting to the mechanics of prosody in the manner of *Veneția*.

Clumsy and unrefined, Octav Minar's critical discourse looks indeed like a tragic caricature when compared to the elevated and professional approaches of Gheorghe Călinescu, Dumitru Caracostea, Eugen Lovinescu, Nicolae Iorga, and others. But as soon as we accept that this type of discourse belongs to a kitsch expressivity, and particularly to popular literary history, we might be ready to reconsider this kind of contributions.

THE AMATEUR PHILOLOGUE'S CONUNDRUM: PLAGIARISM BEYOND ETHICAL AND JURIDICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Drawing to the conclusions, we would like to enlarge the discussion on originality and newness by analyzing the contexts of translation/ imitation/ localization of Mihai Eminescu's sonnet *Veneția* and by briefly introducing other contributions in which Octav Minar either developed the same ideas or applied the same strategies: *George Coșbuc. Biografia și opera poetică* (not dated) and *Delavrancea apărând pe Caragiale. Procesul de calomnie prin presă* (not dated). As mentioned above, Venice and Eminescu's text on Venice (the sonnet entitled *Veneția*) are key points to understanding Minar's conception of secondary creativity. The story goes as follows: the Romanian poet chooses a poem from the Italian-Austrian poet Cajetan Cerri (1826–1899), translates it from German pretty leisurely and creatively, and the final product outshines the original. Not as familiar as Eminescu's story of imitation is Cerri's own literary profile: Italian-born, he learned German only at 13 in order to read Goethe's *Werther* in original; his writing in a language that was not his might also be suspected, regardless of Cerri's later proficiency in German, as a kind of intimate translation, briefly put, as a kind of secondary creativity. Judged by intentions and not by final results, the matter of imitation, borrowing or even plagiarism remains open in all these particular cases.

Octav Minar selected *Veneția* in order to seize the exile's state of mind and to illustrate the national genius's creative borrowings from the universal literature. But while Mihai Eminescu indicated his source, this was not applicable to George Coșbuc (1866–1918).

One of the most praised Romanian prosodists, Coşbuc never found necessary to refer back to original texts. Minar was fascinated by Coşbuc, whose exotic poetry also raised issues of plagiarism, even in a context when Lovinescu's theory of imitation was popular among the Romanian intellectuals (Lovinescu 1920: 137–139). The amateur and antiquarian Octav Minar perceived Coşbuc's poetry in a lightly comprehensive manner and claimed that imitation and even plagiarism in translation and adaptation should be accepted as a *sui generis* assimilation of universal literature to the autochthonous content. Hence, in the commenter's opinion, the autochthonization of exotism represented the leading feature of Coşbuc's works. Like Eminescu's poetry, they had been nurtured by both traditional folklore and multiple foreign influences. At the same time, Minar noticed that Coşbuc had a classical temper that would rework and recycle everything that seemed suited in his personal frame of mind, without stressing about originality issues. Indeed, originality and copyright came under the public eye only once with Romanticism and Modernism. Fugitively, Minar mentioned that the issue of plagiarism needed a deeper and ampler analysis because it was... "picturesque" and relevant for the Romanian culture as a whole (Coşbuc: 39). The adjective "picturesque" indicates, in line with Minar's enhanced visuality, a topic that is rich, representable and dramatic at the same time.

Guided by Minar's logic, we could rest our case with the conclusion that plagiarism lies in the heart of Romanian literature – and such bad memories are probably the reason why the topic's recent takes are less radical than some would expect (Şercan 2017: 15–73). Perhaps it would be useful to restage the context of another famous trial of plagiarism. In 1902, Constantin Alexandru Ionescu-Caion, an aspirant columnist accused the great writer Caragiale that he had copied the plot of a Hungarian play by Kemeny Istvan. Caragiale sued Caion and proved that both the name and the original play's title had been Caion's mystifications. Yet, after a second trial, Caion was acquitted. The lawyer Octav Minar, himself suspected of such crimes, exhibited a particular interest in this case, which was retold, from his perspective and with his own techniques, in a separate pamphlet (*Delavrancea...*). As he had done before, he provided the general audience with documents from the archives of the County Court of Bucharest. Finally, Minar emphasized the cynical argument served by the defense:

Mr. Caragiale should not be angry, because he is in good company; in Romania, those who copy are admitted to the Academy and University, and become MPs... Don't our Romanian authors copy, do they? (*laughter*) Don't our bankers copy, do they? Don't our VIPs copy, do they? (*Danielopol*) One should not hit a young man's career aspirations and future... An event should be judged according to the social environment... Caion is the victim of his own social environment (*I. Tanoviceanu*) (*Delavrancea*: 19).

Such twisted logic proved convincing enough for the members of the jury who, by taking this decision on a case of plagiarism and slaughter, were voicing the level of public tolerance as far as these crimes were concerned. In a nutshell, Caion was a poor victim of his own culture and environment, which, because of massive imitations and adaptations, should have been accused *in toto*.

Even if the case "Caion" was re-trialed *hors de la loi* and the culprit sentenced guilty by a symbolic jury composed by the critic Şerban Cioculescu (Cioculescu 1972:

624–626, Anghelescu 2016: 176–213), Octav Minar contributes with a surprising insight that might have been skipped over: the relationship between Caragiale and Caion was based on furibund imitation on Caion's side. Caragiale, the envied model, realized only later that his decision to sue the young aspirant had been too hasty. His exile to Berlin, comments Minar, was not caused by the trial's sorrowful verdict; on the contrary, the next day after the denouement, Caragiale expressed publicly his compassion for Caion (*Delavrancea*: 19). The information has not been confirmed by any other sources and it is easy to track down Minar's little "trick" when launching such arguments: as in Eminescu's case, Caragiale's face is pasted on a Christian background, suggesting that forgiveness and not revenge should be the key of his personality and genial creativity. Minar's rough commentary gets him closer to the spirit of Caragiale's comedies, whose plots are always resolved in general reconciliation. And if Caragiale himself would have forgiven Caion, why wouldn't we? By accepting the argument of Caion's defenders, Minar problematizes structural imitation and plagiarism and distinguishes between the process of emulation and its results.

To conclude, Octav Minar pleaded for himself by daring to address difficult and controversial topics. Both his own writing strategies (collation, transcription, etc.) and the antiquarian's sensibility result, paradoxically, from the limited possibilities given by an essentially mimetic culture. Quite frequently, he would support the editors' legitimate right to unveil and even to invent the writers' most intimate documents, which were considered as necessary steps in deciphering their psychic profiles (*Cum a iubit...*: 13). Solving the mystery of the creative self for the benefit of the general public would also justify the forgery of proofs: images, persons, stories, dialogues, places. But the main achievement of Minar's contributions remains the art of portrait, which is a feature shared by all the Romanian critics of the interbellum, given their broader interest for psychology.

While none of Minar's ideas are original, we should perhaps acknowledge his extraordinary capacity to give them some speed and, in nowadays terminology, to turn them into "open access" assets. Most of all, the cultural enterprises of this "strange character," as Sorin Alexandrescu labelled Octav Minar, should provide us with a contrast for the enduring aesthetic reductionism and for the stiff moralism that have always haunted the Romanian culture.

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