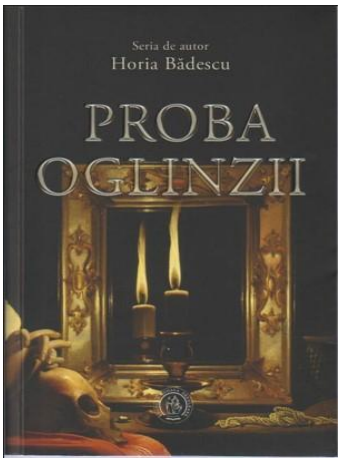

The power of metaphor: Between erotetic bait and exhortation-imperative

Carmen Cozma *

Horia Bădescu. *Proba oglinzii* / *The Mirror Test*. 2024. Cluj-Napoca: Școala Ardeleană Publishing House. Pp. 419.

With a captivating title, which leaves no room for delay in-to a not at all easy but fascinating reading, Horia Bădescu collected - as he states in the Note on the last page of the volume – "texts that were published in *Curtea de la Argeş*: *Culture Magazine*", as well as some revised and augmented papers that, over the years, have appeared in the magazine of Romanian literature, culture and spirituality, *Steaua*, and in the centuries-old tradition culture magazine: *Tribuna*.

One of the most valued Romanian contemporary poets who, among other things, enriched literary species through the *ronset*[1], Horia

* Carmen Cozma (✉)
Department of Philosophy, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, Romania
e-mail: carmen.cozma@uaic.ro

AGATHOS, Volume 17, Issue 1 (32): 673–682, DOI 10.5281/zenodo.19941248
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[1] See Horia Bădescu. 2013. *Cărţile vieţuirii* / *The Books of Life*, in three volumes, namely: I. *La poarta cuvântului* / *At the Gate of the Word*. II. *Furcile caudine* / *The Caudine Forks*. III. *De la o zi la alta* / *From One Day to the Next*. Cluj-Napoca:

Bădescu is an outstanding novelist and translator (with a predilection for Francophone literature); he himself being translated abroad.

As a refined thinker and gifted master of *metaphors* – "these nano-myths [that] only translate existential genetics through poetic imagination" (Horia Bădescu 2024, p. 190) -, with an acute sensitivity to social, historical and cultural transformations at both the individual and societal levels so needed expecially in our present troubled times marked by the phenomenon of digitalization that brings the deepening of man/woman's self-alienation, Horia Bădescu is also a 'man of the *polis*' keenly anchored in tangible issues; and he does courageously assert his own value judgments, as is clear from the contents of his impressive essays[2]. He always proceeds so with an insistence on *sapience*, encompassing both 'practical wisdom' and 'soundness of mind' (the very concepts of the ancient Greek philosophers' *phrónēsis* / φρόνησις and *sophrosyne* / σωφροσύνη); that are nothing but the 'active intelligence' and 'moderation' manifested in full resonance with the defining trait of the Romanian 'man/woman of the earth', namely the "tsăran" - actually, his/her particular moral state and, at the same time, the defining feature of the Romanian moral identity. To the author's attention is precisely "the wealth of wisdom of the earth that keeps itself in the temper of nature and in the moral state of the Universe, preserving together with itself the being and decency of the *tsăran*" (Idem, p. 352) in his/her core authenticity. Moreover, it is worth emphasizing that Horia Bădescu "has made a profession of faith towards the *rural world* and the *Romanian tsăran*", expressing *with pride* his profound *love* for them [emph. ours]. "Because – in his words – I believe that great loves are those in which the mind and the heart

Eikon Publishing House; continued with: Horia Bădescu. 2021. *Dinaintea ta merge tăcerea* / *Silence Goes Before You*. Cluj-Napoca: Școala Ardeleană Publishing House; Idem. 2023. *Rana ascunsă a fiecărei zile* / *The Hidden Wound of Each Day*. Cluj-Napoca: Școala Ardeleană Publishing House.

[2] See for example some of the essay books published by Horia Bădescu: 1996. *Ieşirea din Europa. Eseuri* / *Leaving Europe: Essays*. Bucharest: Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House; 2015. *Dacă Orfeu* / *If Orpheus*. Cluj-Napoca: Limes Publishing House; 2022. *Între Scila și Caribda, încotro?* / *Between Scylla and Charybdis, Whereto?* Cluj-Napoca: Școala Ardeleană Publishing House; 2025. *Cafeneaua îngerilor. Schițe de portret pentru un istoricon literar-sentimental* / *The Angels' Café: Portrait Sketches for a Literary-Sentimental Historicon*. Cluj-Napoca: Școala Ardeleană Publishing House.

ask and answer each other equally"[3]; feeling himself to be closely tied to those ("tsăranii") to whom the poet dedicated such verses, of a genuine *requiem*: "Only the flowers lead them to the vow / and they pass through countless borderlines, / flayed saints, with their skins on their shoulders / the *tsărani* descend into the earth / to get hold their other settlement; / Like the stars, you see them and they are no more" (Horia Bădescu 2024, p. 356).

It should be noted that most of his poetry and prose already makes up in a devoted "Author Series", within the editorial project carried out by Școala Ardeleană Publishing House; the project of which the book we are referring to here, *Proba oglinzii* / *The Mirror Test*, is part.

Through this book, Horia Bădescu reveals himself once again in the power of an in-depth and subtle philosophizing upon the great and serious problems of life, of *human beingness-in-becoming*, of Being, of human participation-in(to)-Being, of the „sacredness' utterance", and, not lastly, of meaning and the world. The bulk of his works focuses on the idea of *human being as the creator and bearer of Meaning* in life; ultimately, the "bearer of the sacred"; seeing that man/woman "participates in the transcendence of the world, ... a world that is value; more specifically, it is an ontological value" (Horia Bădescu 2024, pp. 115; 112). Hence, in the assumed status of a writer, "as a *sapiens* belonging to the humanistic culture", he is always accompanied by the erotetics with regard to the nowadays' role of poetic creation. In the words of the author, "The role of poetry would be to restore to man/woman the awareness of his/her limits and to guide him/her towards a revelatory approach, towards the idea that what is important is not the definition of the *ultimate truth* but the awareness of the fact that this *ultimate truth* exists; and that he/she, the human being, participates into it - but who ever listens to the voice of poets?" (Idem, p. 114).

Beyond the accents of sadness and bitterness, in several places of the book, in reference to the real situation in which humanity in general and Romanians in particular find themselves at present, nevertheless the dominant trust persists that there is a certain strength of the *human(ity)*; and there are possibilities of its recovery, of *human*'s permanent restoration. Because, at least "every year, at the beginning of the year", the earthlings feel, more acutely, the presence

[3] Horia Bădescu. "Moromete și Kant" / "Moromete and Kant", first published in *Curtea de la Argeş: Culture Magazine*, No. 11 (156), November 2023, p. 3.

of the "God's eyes and hand" [again, a saying used by the writer in its metaphorical-metaphysical meaning] (Idem, p. 247). And the Romanians' wisdom / *sapience* crystallized in a history spanning thousands of years taught them that "it is not the times that are under man, but the poor man is under the times" – as the chronicler Miron Costin ([1675] 1961, XVIII.12) wrote[4]. But also, they learned that "under the burden of the times, you can only resist if your sources remain deeply enrooted. Because, where the cross of the winds is, you need stubbornness and deep roots so that the storms don't uproot you." (Horia Bădescu 2024, p. 247)

Reading the essay book entitled *Proba oglinzii* / *The Mirror Test*, we discover something of the poet and, at the same time, of the philosopher concerned with the specifically *human beingness-in-becoming* in a phenomenological approach, in terms of the Husserlian triad: *Auslegung*, *Aufklärung und Verstehen* / interpretation, clarification and understanding; or even more appropriately in the manner of phenomenology of life established by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, through the stances of the metaphysical *wonder(ment)*, aesthetic *fabulation* and moral *idealization*, always dealing with the intimate connection between the *po(i)etic* and *moral* senses, which are linked to the *intellective* sense[5].

Horia Bădescu (2024) also unveils the strength of a clear awareness as regards the significance of historical events upon "world orders" (pp. 211-216) and the "horizon of memory" (pp. 12-13); without which is impossible to understand what really matters for the *human(ity)* we are / we become.

Thus, in a phenomenological key we reach to comprehend the challenge (and, no less, the call-exhortation alike) to *wisdom*, that shines throughout every page of the book; that is even explicitely formulated as starting point in the sequence entitled "The eulogy of wisdom" (Horia Bădescu 2024, pp. 14-19).

Actually, the very title chosen for this volume, *The Mirror Test*, it itself places us in the fullness of philosophical thought; bringing back

[4] Miron Costin. [1675] 1961. *Letopiseţul Ţării Moldovei de la Aaron Vodă încoace / The Chronicle of the Country of Moldova from Aaron Vodă onwards*. Edited by P. P. Panaitescu. Bucharest: Publishing House for Literature, p. 193.

[5] See Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. 1990. *Logos and Life*. Book 3: *The Passions of the Soul and the Elements in the Ontopoiesis of Culture*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers; Idem. 1995. Measure and the Ontopoietic Self-Individualization of Life. *Phenomenological Inquiry*, Volume 19, pp. 26-51.

to the forefront one of the oldest apophtegms inscribed on the pediment of Apollo's Temple at Delphi: Γνῶθι σεαυτόν / *Gnothi seauton* ("Know thyself"); and, as a result, the exhortation-command to become capable of appreciating / of judging yourself accurately! From the Seven Sages of Ancient Greece we have to learn how much the self-knowledge does mean in a *human life*, with its ups and downs, with the achievements and joys, but also with failures and sorrows, constantly having to cope with the existential trials and, no less, with the yearning for the necessary balance in life; and this, merely by deciphering the 'meaning of a life that is worthy to be lived', as we must reflect on it, according to Socrates and Plato.

In fact, our author warns, from the beginning, the reader: "Mirroring is self-searching, the mass of absolute loneliness. Looking at yourself in the mirror is an act of courage and an exercise in moral hygiene." For, "the obsession with mirroring, above all, lies – or at least it should be - under the rigor of self-judgment" (Horia Bădescu 2024, pp. 9; 10); and this, by resorting to the expressive power of metaphor.

And it is natural that, for a creator, for a *po(i)etic* (taking the concept from the Greek ηοίησις) *master* like Horia Bădescu, who is moving "in the realm of words", advocating for the *human(ity)* within man/woman; who ceaselessly meditates on 'human condition in the world' and emphasizes that "Opposing humanity to man/woman is as absurd as opposing water to a river" (Idem, p. 25). And, further, he never stops wondering about the meaning of *to be*, about the being(ness) and the Being: "*To be*! A truly fundamental problem; but, how exactly, *to be*? For each one, *to be* means something different. *To be*, therefore, in accordance with oneself [emph. ours]. To be oneself in a world that encompasses everyone with the same right to be! Almost impossible! Isn't it?" (Idem, p. 26) It is a legitimate question once, for the witer, a permanently expressed thought is that *poetry* represents "the very state of Being of the self, that is, being existing in itself, understanding through this, both the human self and the self of the universe."[6]

So, in the tonality of the call to activate "the mirror test", a whole *ontology and gnoseology* emerge, being grounded on ethics and aesthetics, inasmuch as our own moral and po(i)etic senses will not

[6] Horia Bădescu. [1994] 2015. "Poezie şi Fiinţă" / "Poetry and Being". In vol. *Dacă Orfeu* / *If Orpheus*. Cluj-Napoca: Limes Publishing House, p. 7.

have atrophied – considering the artificialization (and together with it the shallowing) of 'being in the world' that is facilitated, even imposed, by the aggressive process of digitalization in which it seems we have become captives during the first quarter of the 21st century. And they stand as foundation for Horia Bădescu's *concern for the human(ity) within man/woman*, for the world we live in nowadays. The author relentlessly expresses it, trying to awaken the human consciousness and, no less, to urge it to self-protecting and self-cultivating; by exploring the metaphorical but charged with lucidity language.

Beyond any contradictions of his guiding thought, taking into account the truthfullness of a very suggestive erotetic verse belonging to Friedrich Hölderlin, from the last elegy *Bread and Wine*: "what poets are for in a poverty-stricken time?"[7], yet, our author exhorts and encourages us, somehow together with the German poet-philosopher, to "Seek out and find our own, however far it may be."[8]

The architectonics of the book we are focusing on is structured in three sections, as follows: "The Mirror Test"; "Nasreddin's *Kayak*"; and "The Safety Net" ("The Seat Belt"). In the essayist's own metaphorical style, each of them integrates reflections, comments, arguments, etc. on topics of interest in the socio-cultural area considered within the experienced historical fact; and everything is unfolding in connection with themes in the tonality of the intention conveyed from the start.

Many ideas, concerns, questions, doubts, worries, attitudes towards life's and literature's happenings, either admirable or otherwise factual loaded with meanings' encounters – even though exclusively in the peculiar reading span; and especially within the Romanian language's beingness –, find their place in the very own interpretation of Horia Bădescu; contributing to the development of an allegorical exposure (eventually, the Tymienieckan phenomenological "fabulation"); and, by consequence, facilitating the development of understanding and explanation of his overarching thought, of his core aesthetical and ethical principle behind the entire structure; always in-to the "idealization" (so speaking in Tymieniecka's ontopoietical terms, too).

[7] See Friedrich Hölderlin. 1801. *Brod und Wein* / *Bread and Wine*, the 14th line of 7th stanza: "wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?" / "Who wants poets in lean years?" (Most often being translated as "What are poets for in a destitute time?")

[8] Idem, the 6th line of 3rd stanza: "Daß ein Eigenes wir suchen, so weit es auch ist."

The essay entitled "The Sheep of Thought" [paraphrasing Jean Szlamowicz[9]] is very telling in this regard (see Horia Bădescu 2024, pp. 125-183).

The reader senses a dominant thread that can be uttered in the simple short Romanian wording, in accordance with a thousand-year-old tradition that finds its roots in the Geto-Dacians' spirituality, and that sounds as an exhortation and commandment alike: "Be a total and harmonious human being!" The *dictum* means precisely that "you have to be born not just once, but several times in the same lifetime. Not denying the one you were, but completing yourself every time. By adding you(rself) to yourself. By reborning in a different way; but, nevertheless, always being the same" (Idem, p. 222).

We would like hereinafter to highlight that, within the book, a pertinent analysis is made on the *Eminescu case*, under the heading: "The Defamation of Eminescu" (pp. 310-347) - which says a lot about the degrading level of some noisy people but certainly otherwise anonymous values.

Sine ira et studio, Horia Bădescu approaches the matter that seems to be obstinately practiced from time to time against the "Absolute" in the Romanian spirituality, as the brilliant Italian philologist Rosa Del Conte[10] called *the one* representing a pinnacle of creative genius, Mihai Eminescu. In fact, the issue at hand is that of defaming the supreme symbol, the *Archaeus* of the Romanian culture; *the one* who is recognized as being "the cultural consciousness (that was given to Romanians), from the beginning to the ultimate speculation"; "a *dārśanik*"/ the one who sees *through* and *beyond* the unseen, and, at the same time, "a *kavi*"/ poet-sage [so using the Bengali terminology]; *the one* whose "personal synthesis of poetic creation is also a synthesis of what one might call Romanian spirituality"; *the one* who, "in the plurivalence of orientations as a philosopher, like a giant writer, has bestowed us reflections and ideas of surprising originality and profoundity"[11].

[9] See Jean Szlamowicz. 2022. *Les moutons de la pensée. Nouveaux conformismes idéologiques*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf.

[10] See Rosa Del Conte. 1961. *Mihai Eminescu o dell'Assoluto*. Modena: Società tipografica editrice modenese.

[11] We quoted the opinions of some connoisseurs who have appropriated Eminescu's work in its essence, such as Constantin Noica, Amita Bhose, Alain Guillermou, and Edgar Papu.

Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889) is at issue, *the one* about whom Emil Cioran[12] says that "even a Buddha could be jealous of". Or, as Horia Bădescu (2024, p. 283) highlights, "being one of the greatest Romantic poets of universal lyricism", and "like them", Eminescu is "the poetic expression of the transcendent, an ontological idea, if we can say so"; and for Romanians, he certainly is "our safety rock, our 'seat belt' against the accidents of a history to which we fall prey with suicidal unconsciousness and carelessness" (Ibid, p. 288). The author quite rightly recalls herein the words of Mircea Eliade[13]: "As long as there is a single copy of Eminescu's poems somewhere in the world, the identity of the Romanian nation has been *projected into eternity*"; seeing that Mihai Eminescu is the *pillar of defense* thanks to whom the "Romanian nation earned its right to immortality".[14]

Critically and sometimes ironically towards self-proclaimed intellectuals, extremely vociferous (as scribblers and/or dull speakers) vehicles of inconsistent characters, on the one hand, and on the other, with deep respect and gratitude, even with love towards honest scholars relating to the Eminescianism, Horia Bădescu (2024, p. 311) points out the need of a right judgment; noticing the unjustified slippages of those who manifest "hatred, ill-will, obtuseness, intellectual inadequacy or encomiastic debauchery and aberrant wandering. Since defamation has been often committed by those who go crazy in their projections and praises, too". (Ibidem)

Under the seal of comprehending the value of Horace's famous verse: *est modus in rebus*[15] - in fact, a synthesis of the antique Greek philosophy of medianity -, distancing himself from detractors and flatterers alike, Horia Bădescu assumes the balance in commenting on and appreciating the work and personality of Mihai Eminescu; who "needs only to be read with an open mind and an open heart", as the writer stresses (Ibidem).

[12] See Emil Cioran. 1936. *Schimbarea la faţă a României* / *The Transfiguration of Romania*. Bucharest: Vremea Publishing House.

[13] Mircea Eliade. [1975] 2000. "Postfaţă" la reeditarea volumului Mihai Eminescu, *Poesii*. "Ediţie de pribegie", 1949, Freiburg / "Afterword" to the reissued 1949 volume: Mihai Eminescu, *Poems*: "Exile Edition". Our reference is to the anastatic edition republished in 2000: Mihai Eminescu, *Poesii*. Edited by Mircea Eliade. Norcross, GA: Criterion Publishing.

[14] *Ibidem*.

[15] Quintus Horatius Flaccus. 41-40 BC. *Sermones* / *Satires*, I. 1, 106.

Otherwise, the selection of Eminescu's own verses as a kind of prologue for each of the four sequences of the essay we are concentrating on is highly suggestive. Thus, we are reminded of the lyrics belonging to the Poet, as follows: "1. (*Everybody is much flattered / If you are not his superior*.) ... 2. (*They will say that all is wicked who but little understands*) ... 3. (*Furthermore, they will endeavour to anatomize your morals, / To find blemishes and mischiefs, petty quarrels*) ... [and] 4. (*High above the rest, a pygmy will then set out to discourse, / Not to emphasize your merits but to praise his own, of course, / For your name is just a pretext. That is all you can expect*)"[16].

These lyrics say it all; even more than the all, intuited by their exceptional creator, who had such a tragic destiny...

Let us always remember the *paragon* of the Romanian culture, Mihai Eminescu, with due reverence; to remember the 'essential Eminescu', with whom we must "nurture ourselves, so as not to remain hungry forever", as Constantin Noica draws our attention[17].

Regarding the "Eminescu case", all that remains for us is to express the exhortation to get to the heart of Mihai Eminescu's thinking and to understand, at least, something of his poetry and prose, of his journalism and, above all, of his 44 handwritten notebooks that bring to light the remarkable philosopher that he was and he is. And thus, we'll succeed to stay away from the intellectual defficiency and moral littleness of denigrators who, not being able to produce any value, they just endeavour to trout out themselves from anonimity by clinging to the name of a great personality.

According to Horia Bădescu (2024, p. 275), "let us remember the one [who will] never be forgotten and [who is] the never-to-be-forgotten one. If the hatreds of the world and the times have brainwashed by the memory of what we are, let's remember ourselves who we trully are. [And for this] Let us constantly remember how much we need Eminescu".

Paying attention to the author's talent for exploring the metaphorical networks of the *logos* in-between its harsh pragmatic meanings (due to some not at all encouraging present realities) and its

[16] Mihai Eminescu. [1881] 2004. *Scrisoarea I* / *First Epistle*. Translated by Leon Levițchi. In vol. *Poezii* / *Poems*. Bucharest: Teora Press, pp. 200-211.

[17] Constantin Noica. 1992. *Introducere la miracolul eminescian* / *Introduction to the Eminescian Miracle*. Bucharest: Humanitas Press.

sacrality (thanks to the freedom of human specific idealization), we end these marginalia of an exercise in honesty with oneself to which *Proba oglinzii* / *The Mirror Test*, after all, invites. And it is an invitation that proves to be very useful. Since, in its entirety, the book is a *florilegium* of reflections on the veritable questions the contemporary man/woman - who risks losing the human(ity) within himself/herself - has to meditate on.

Therefore, in our trying to talk about this book – as Horia Bădescu (2024, p. 27) himself teaches us that it would mean "to reflect on one of the possible ways of expressing one's own self" -, all we have left to say is: May the reader have the genuine *hedone* in its pure philosophical denotation (in terms of the Epicureanism's "pleasure of the mind"[18]); the *pleasure*, even *happiness*, of meeting the essayist's insight, which fully conveys a *life lesson* able to turn into an *intellectual*, *aesthetic* and *moral* challenge of constant scrutiny-meditation supported by the delight of reading. Because, undoubtedly, the reader will grasp, at last, the joy of a real *kairic* life experience to which Horia Bădescu urges us: a *deeply human experience* that, eventually, each of us needs at least from time to time.

[18] In *Letter to Menoeceus* (c.300 BC), Epicurus emphasizes *hedone* / ἡδονή as "the highest good" and a means to a fulfilling life, to *eudaimonía* / εὐδαιμονία, being founded on *phrónēsis* / φρόνησις (the practical wisdom). See Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, Book X [128] *et seqq.*