

Alecsandri and “the Hunger for Realism”

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Abstract:

This article explores the use of objective observation, descriptive narrative, and physiological analysis in the prose of Vasile Alecsandri, highlighting the rich typology and characterological depth of his works. Alecsandri's narrative style, rooted in realism and influenced by both Romanian and European literary traditions, captures a transformative period in Romanian society in the mid-19th century. His prose, often characterized as a “record of lives” in line with Balzac's typological approach, serves as both a literary and historical document, reflecting a diverse range of human experiences and social realities. Through the analysis of Alecsandri's detailed character portraits and the exploration of the social milieu, the article emphasizes how the prose of the time blends artistic narrative with documentary value, offering insightful observations on human nature and societal evolution. The study argues that Alecsandri's literary approach, blending historical reflection with emotional sensitivity, enriches the understanding of 19th century Romanian and European intellectual circles. His memoirs serve as acts of love and cognition, integrating personal experience with broader cultural narratives, while offering insight into Alecsandri's own literary style, shaped by spontaneity, humour, and a deep connection to both folklore and European literary traditions.

Keywords: Vasile Alecsandri, Romanian prose, realism, memoirs, character portrait, social realism, literary observation

Among the fundamental epic narrative structures Vasile Alecsandri chooses to use in his prose – which was considered to be more “viable than his poetry” by a considerable number of critics of his work starting with Ibrăileanu – the tool of objective observation and personal experience, thus making his prose predominantly descriptive and narrative. Another tool used by the author is physiology that describes the human nature, providing portraits of great characterological value. Some personalities are skilfully analysed as far as their somatic type, their civic, intellectual and artistic profile are concerned; it is these personalities that allows the critics to regard most of the gifted forty-eightier's epic as a “record of lives”, according to the Balzac's typological view. Among these there are “biographies and memoirs”, as the author himself calls them; they are devoted to his Romanian and foreign friends – the writers N. Bălcescu, Al. Russo, Constantin

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Negruzzi, Ion Ghica, Dimitrie Rallet, Lamartine, Prosper Mérimée, and Mistral; undoubtedly these pieces of verbal art are worthy of analysis and interpretation. They present a rich and varied typology evoked intelligently and cordially. In the end, Alecsandri's confessions concerning his friends are both an act of cognition and evidence of love.

Great changes produced within social, political, cultural and moral structures that became more prominent starting from the fourth decade of the 19th century also led to great changes in the literary world. With an insatiable "hunger" for realism, the writers of the time, especially those from the circle of "Dacia literară" (*Literary Dacia*) (1840), are urged to turn their attention and talent towards the Romanian world and mentality and to place their trust in usual everyday scenes, remembering everything that "their eyes have seen and their ears have heard". Living "outside rather than inside" – this remark made by Tudor Vianu (1966: 59) in reference to Negruzzi's work can be applied to quite a few contemporaries of the author of the classical short story *Alexandru Lăpușneanu* – they turn to the lively movements of the age, discovering "various distinctive human natures and human types of great interest for a social and historical study" with great satisfaction (here and in what follows – translation by Ludmila Braniște – Alecsandri, 1904). At a certain stage, the investigation of the social milieu becomes a constantly adopted literary procedure. Romanian tradition, as well as the critical assimilation of foreign European models combine to create a prose focused on observation, an objective prose of personal experiences which, for a considerable period of time, remains mainly narrative and descriptive. It is a "fundamental evolution" made possible by avoiding excessive lyricism and myths of subjectiveness, and by turning to types, moving from "the subject to the object". At the initial stages, the restoration of concrete experiences in their convincing aspects can be found in short pieces of prose such as the sketch and the short story, and later on in novels that, with the contribution of their authors, manage to fill literature with life due to their undoubtedly realistic works, even though they are based on the interrelations and overlapping of various literary orientations such as Classicism and Romanticism, which, however, are not incompatible. These epic forms, in which a visible aesthetic statement of everyday life is prevalent, lead to a factual literature of significant events that operates, first and foremost, in the social sphere, thus becoming a documentary literature without much fiction, which offers the image of a reality that has not been subject to any modifications regarding the imaginary. Moreover, this true "religion" of facts produces a new hero, a social man set against the background of the epic. With its interest for the anthropological issues, the prose of the time introduces a varied gallery of characters that are made alive due to the procedures most of which belong to the concept of

“objective” realism – this is what their direct characterization and detailed analysis stem from. According to the Balzacian typological view of types, the epic becomes a “file of recorded lives”.

The study of the behaviour and the mores of these “lives” results in a literature of physiology which, supported by transparent portrayal, aims at describing human types of great character value; this is achieved through an amazing mix of portraits of human beings that existed at that time – the first half of the 20th century, with less well-structured social and moral organization.

The author of the essay *Arca lui Noe (Noe's Arch)*, N. Manolescu, sees in physiology as a genre “a hybrid form of La Bruyère's characters” (1981: 73) and he places Alecsandri at “halfway between abstract moralism and social and realist study”. No doubt, typology has an internal evolution in the works of the writers of the time. The character gets a more prominent status and a more complex identity; by means of a more detailed individualization it becomes a type in which it is easy to recognise the portrait of a whole generation, of a social or physiological class, inevitably reflecting the image of the whole.

A large part of the 19th century prose becomes, therefore, an adequate field of research for observing and interpreting human identity in various images of “physiologies”, as well as in terms of special communication codes, and thus it becomes a document of genuine human nature. Description is a procedure most often used to characterize and decode a person's outer appearance and his or her inner reactions.

The above-mentioned description is by no means decorative, an end in itself; it is a significant part of the text that leads to a physical and psychological profile, as well as to the distinction of his or her specific features. The human portrait and the description of the background play an important role in the artistic representation of literary characters in the Romanian epic of the 19th century. The portrait – a physical presence – (Angelescu, 1985: 39-40) convey data about temperament and psychological of human essence. It is seen from the outside, while psychological analysis follows later on. For a long time, psychology in epic literature was based on physiology (a description of a person's physiological or physical features), thought to be capable of revealing and justifying a person's identity. Moreover, the way it is presented is a more direct way of conveying the message of an artistic work than the word. M. Kogălniceanu, C. Negruzzi, Al. Russo and I. Ghica masterly used these means to reflect the trends of the new age – so picturesque in its mixture of the old and the new and so complex in the variety of the issues raised by the accelerated social and moral progress.

The longest sketch of physiology and manner, *Istoria unui galbăn (The Story of a Golden Coin)* serves as evidence of V. Alecsandri's sharp spirit of observation and narrative talent.

Along with the transformation of objective reality in both social and psychological terms in Romania, he adds varied types from all social and moral milieus of the society to the contents of this “burlesque history”, as the author himself calls it, as he traces various aspects of everyday behaviour.

As it usually happens, practice itself finds appropriate forms to reflect Romanian reality. First and foremost, writers turn to short literary genres capable of describing real-life experiences in a condensed form, highlighting their semantic and artistic potential. At a certain point, the analysis of contemporary environment becomes a norm of artistic behaviour, whereas observation grows to be a constantly used literary procedure. The development of a literary tradition has always been primarily an issue of the material for inspiration.

The writers representing the forty-eighters’ period, such as Kogălniceanu, Negruzzi, Al. Russo and I. Ghica, masterly used these literary genres, endowing them with high documentary and educational functions.

Characterized by a strong interest of the outer world, Alecsandri starts to attentively explore the Romanian universe and human nature in all the aspects that defined the identity of the age. He does not do it passively, from the position of an indifferent spectator. He intensely re-experiences life facts and revives them with elements of stylistic emphasis in which his artistic sensibility finds its own place.

One of the most wonderful gifts Alecsandri had was that of giving interesting accounts. It was his manner of narrating, the good mood created by his memories and a number of colourful, lively and unexpected details that generated “the emotion that he had once experienced” (Manea). Thus, “without being strictly speaking a short story writer or a memorialist, but being a really good narrator, Alecsandri has a rich and varied activity as a prose writer” (Marcu, 1931: 291).

Interest in human nature in all its aspects that defined the identity of the time, as well as in the deep confines of his own intimacy, the author clearly reflected them in the *moeurs* sketch *Istoria unui galbăn* (*The Story of a Golden Coin*)¹. Substantial in its length, this piece of prose provides an opportunity to discover many human types and their main characteristics. “If the literary pretext of the short story is not invented by Alecsandri (a famous short story by Francisco Manuel de Melo written in the 17th century served him as a distant model), the main literary virtue of *Istoria unui galbăn* (*The Story of a Golden Coin*) is, however, an improved art of the dialogue, which bears the distinctive

¹ It was written in 1844 and immediately published in „Propășirea” (*Prosperity*), in 1844, in several issues, from April, 9, until October, 15, under the title *Istoria unui galbăn și a unei parale* (*The Story of a Golden Coin and of a Penny*). It was later included in the volumes *Salba literară* (*Literary Chain*), 1857 and *Proză* (*Prose*), 1876.

signature of the Romanian author” (Zamfir). Along with the transformation of the social and psychological objective reality in Romania, he adds varied types from all social and moral milieus of the society to the contents of this “burlesque story”, as the author himself calls it, following various aspects of everyday behaviour. The procedure identified is one of the most suitable for reaching the author’s purpose. The writer creates a dialogue between a Dutch golden coin and a Turkish penny, that lasts from the midnight until the sunrise. “Settled in a flexible armchair, with a ‘lighted cigarette’”, the narrator listens to funny and sad experiences and records them because living the “life” of a coin and being transferred “from one pocket to another”, the golden coin has “quite a few remarks to make in reference to people”. The golden coin can be either a participant or a witness of events, but it is always the narrator. The role assumed by Alecsandri is that of a listener – not a passive one, since he interferes in the conversation with his subjective reactions and comments. It can hardly be called a simple novel episode, similar to a great number of episodes in the Romantic literature that abound in “gypsy” topics. In this particular historical and social context of Romania, the issue of “black slavery” – like the “white” one – has a special significance for Alecsandri, a democrat whose sketch draws a detailed picture of “the most cruel barbaric times” deeply repulsive to the writer – that of the market in a square in Krakow where gypsies were sold “on auction”. The author’s generous compassion can also be seen in his poems and letters; it explains the meaningful gesture of 1854 when he liberated the serfs on his estates.

It is widely assumed that the epic structure of the sketch was borrowed from a German piece of writing under the title *Coin* that appeared in the Romanian translation in C. Lecca’s Krakowian newspaper “Mosaic” in 1838; however, the distance from a discursive “poemization” of a literary motif in circulation, taken as a foreign model, to the creation of the Romanian prose writer is great. With the help of the objective data and of imagination, Alecsandri processes the facts like a stage director, transforming a narrative into a sketch full of vivacity and drama. This “conversational” modality adopted as an artistic formula eliminates the author’s obligation to build up the text in a precise structural unity and, as it is conducted freely and colloquially, it provides the author with the opportunity to combine the realistic picture of the age with the classical characterological analysis.

Around 1820 in the Black Sea area the golden coin passes on from the pocket of captain Costiță, a famous sailor, to a man from the gentry. Fighting with “the judicial order”, he loses a case in court and the golden coin gets into a “bottomless” pocket, together with a whole “bunch of convincing evidence”. Lost in a card game, it remains, for some time, in the pocket of an “industrial entrepreneur” who lives “without a means of

making a living” and improves his art of cheating in card games every evening. From an absolutely bald (“pilug de giur împrejur”) Jew money-lender – the young man’s creditor who haunts him – the coin reaches a robbers’ captain and, later on, a greedy and cruel district police officer who “had made a fortune” by means of robbing landowners’ estates and chasing peasants’ and gypsies’ “souls”. The officer’s wife took French lessons – “because today, in Moldova, it is rather shameful to speak Romanian” with a cousin and “during the lectures all the golden coins taken from the officer passed on into the hands of the cousin as payment for his effort” (Alecsandri, 1983: 28). During a hunting, the cousin loses the golden coin in the grass where it is found by a beautiful gypsy Zamfira who attaches it to the chain on her neck. Having reached this moment, the writer puts in an episode of unhappy love between Zamfira and Nedelcu, who is persecuted by a cruel member of the gentry. The young gypsy kills him and he is hung, while Zamfira loses her mind because of the pain. “Alecsandri’s aim was to attract his contemporaries’ attention to gypsy slavery that was regarded by all forty-eighters as a sign of backwardness” (Cornea; Păcurariu, 1974: 119). The picture of putting gypsies up for an auction is drawn with stark realism:

Poor things cried so that they would have moved even a Tartar’s heart, they threw their arms around the nobleman’s legs and tugged at their hair, they embraced their child as if they wanted to become one with her body. The nobleman, however, kicked them like dogs, hitting their heads with his heel and shouting angrily. Go to hell, speckled “crows”, or I will have you whipped. And, saying this, he pulled Zamfira like a weed out of the ground. [trad. mea]

The golden coin given by Zamfira to a young man to bring him luck (and it actually does since during a duel it makes the bullet ricochet from the pocket of the waistcoat that he is wearing) reaches a beggar and, finally, a talentless poet who gives it “without paying any attention to it to a magazine that is now being brought out in Iași: “Prosperity”. The opinion of the golden coin about the young man in whose possession it meets the penny – “one of the editors of the magazine” – i.e. Alecsandri himself – is not revealed. The cock’s crow stops the coin’s narrative, unfortunately for the reader who is convinced that its opinion can hardly fail to be “just and impartial”, the coin being “the best touchstone of human nature”.

The twists and turns of the golden coin have symbolic value; they highlight the power of money in a certain society.

We, coins are a real mirror of the character; we always judge people by their purses and pockets. I also confess that this kind of judgment seems to me the most appropriate one in these times when interest reigns supreme. D. Buffon, a French naturalist, said that style reflects the man; I say that a man’s pocket reflects the man. It is the best reflection of his nature, passions and ethic. [trad. mea]

The thoughts of the fictional character are in line with the reality mercilessly presented by the writer in all its drawbacks, as the irony and humour are replaced by bitter sarcasm. Criticism is easily achieved by means of two characters that are not mere symbols. The characters perfectly imitate human behaviour, being fond of each other, fighting, discussing on philosophical, social and philological issues, reciting poems and singing arias. The golden coin and the penny are not just some outer mechanic elements used in order to complicate the action: they are lively characters that do not depend on the will of the author, who constantly offers the interlocutors in the sketch the chance to analyse formal elements of expression that belong to the structure of a literary work, namely the literary character.

All in all, this pithy sketch in all its good mood reveals Alecsandri's prose as one that offers a new perspective due to the prose writer's skill of depicting powerful human types.

There are also a number of Alecsandri's memoirs of people and their actions strongly related to his artistic interest in a great typological diversity. An organic part of his writing, they can hardly be called the mere results of outer world events: they are products of an inner reality, inextricably linked to the nooks of the writer's personality. He liked to "collect" people in his thoughts: his childhood friends, classmates, and comrades-in-arms. He would write about them not only affectionately, but also motivated by a "debt of gratitude" towards the past, as well as love for the present and future. The value of these texts as historical and psychological documents remains unique.

The anthropological view of reception, which explains and justifies the forty-eighter's interest in the life, work and other writers' creation forced him not to confine himself only to some fleeting occasional remarks triggered by his emotional state in his contemplation of the people around him. This is especially true of his views of his friends – writers – presented as a wide range of human types; here one can hardly fail to notice the effort of establishing a strong connection between a man and his actions in the essential aspects of the attitude towards himself and towards the rest of the world. Alecsandri analyses the biological and psychological structure of the portrayed characters, as well as their civil, intellectual and artistic activity without resorting to anecdotal biography, pedantic strictness and an obsession for methodology. A colourful and lively physical and moral portrayal, recollections of the historical atmosphere and cultural climate, an attentive examination of the contents and expression in terms of verbal art, as well as qualitative evaluation are aimed at defining some human physiognomies, lifestyles and writing styles. Inextricably linked with his literary experience as such,

Alecsandri's writings that depict his writer friends complete the author's artistic work and strongly highlight its content as its theoretical comment. A clear distinction between fiction and the rest of the writer's intellectual work remains both difficult and futile. Those who undertake this task make a mistake since they alter the understanding of the whole body of the writer's universe.

The rhythm and colour of the temperamental background of the author of biographies and memoirs (he calls them "souvenirs") can be easily recognised on every page. Substantial knowledge and a participatory attitude that infuse them do not necessarily imply the absence of criteria. The reminiscer adopts certain means of observation and an emotional manner, and changes the angle of observation and modifies the emphasis in writing. In essence it is an adaptation that, irrespective of the intellectual interest, allows us to differentiate between affection for a man from the appreciation of his actions – a pattern of critical examination, a thinking process of the writer whose constant concern was knowing the person next to him.

Most topics in Alecsandri's prose that aim at depicting human characters are situated on the border of genres – his works comprise memoirs and recollections, portraits and letters, commemorative texts and travelogues; all of them are of interest from both a historical and literary point of view; he provided them to contemporary writers whose artistic and spiritual essence was moulded – like Alecsandri's – in the propitious environment of the 48's period in Romanian history, in its principles and ideals. The writer's profile was individualized and his prestige increased as he proposed an uncommon typological diversity; the literary values of the epoch supported the inner structure of the literature of the time. Pieces of prose written by a real person about real people, facts and events that he or she witnessed during his or her lifetime, not infrequently taking direct part in them, raised the question of the extent to which a story can be faithful to real history. It is a well-known fact that the past cannot be recalled without proceeding from the present – the moment of recollection and narration. A perfect temporal coincidence between history and story does not exist. It is always the time and the recaller – a witness within his or her own biography – that separate the event from its expression. A number of scholars tend to believe that memoirs can hardly be called sincere, whereas fiction writings tell the truth, and the process of recollection necessarily modifies history. Tudor Vianu stated that "memoirs are the genre closest to history out of all varieties of subjective literature" (Vianu, 1946: 197). We fully agree with this statement since, raising the issue of authenticity in memorialist discourse, "it is the truth of the narration and not the truth of the history that is essential" (Simion, 1981: 178). History is convincing as far as recollection is convincing; as for Alecsandri, he

provides us with a verisimilar picture of what he recalls. This places a high educational value on his memoirs as far as history and people are concerned. According to Alexandru Paleologu, the Romanian notion of “memoirs” stems from “statement”, rather than from “memory”.

It should be highlighted in this respect that the prose writer turns an act of friendship into a cognitive process. His opinion concerning his friends reflects his efforts to establish a deep connection between the man and his actions. The biological and psychological state of the depicted person, as well as his civic, intellectual and artistic activity are subject to detailed analysis. His confessions – the result of his intellectual capabilities and sensitivity – are an act of cognition, as well as a proof of love.

As product of an inner reality, Vasile Alecsandri's pages about both Romanian and foreign writers are strongly linked, to the intimate depth of the prose writer's personality within his universe. Alecsandri's spiritual need to learn and evaluate transforms the act of friendship into a cognitive activity with a well-defined goal; it is considered to be an ideal means of getting to know a human being through his or her actions and, therefore, a way of getting closer to the essence of literature. The study of his glosses written as a comment upon the destiny of Romanian and foreign writers presents to us one of the most important issues in the process of interpreting his works from a human and artistic point of view.

The first two biographies devoted to Nicolae Bălcescu, “the man whose name honours Romania” and “his/ beloved and mourned for friend” are legitimated by both history and affection. The first pages that describe “Bălcescu's dear image” are written immediately after his death, whereas the rest of the biography was completed afterwards – at a point when Alecsandri wants to tell “the very truth” concerning the authorship of the poem *Cântarea României* (*Song to Romania*). Without any limits imposed by any “method”, he simply and spontaneously tells the reader, everything that he used to have in common with the man who, by means of “his noble feeling of love for his motherland” and his work, demonstrated a deeper understanding and a higher form of love for the country. Alecsandri made his acquaintance in 1845, in Mânjina – the estate of his wise and noble friend Costache Negri. Then Alecsandri follows him in his “sublime acts” performed for “the revival” of his people, he meets him abroad, in exile, and finds him lonely and abandoned, “suffering and dying on the flowery bank of Palermo”.

A large number of preserved memories create a classical portrait of a “dear” image of this “apostle”. “On his broad and clear forehead, one could see grand thoughts passing; a secret flame was flickering in his limpid black eyes, they seemed to float in a dew of tears when speaking about Motherland, about glory and national independence. His words

were pleasant and convincing, like the speech of many people whose fate is to die in their prime” (Alecsandri, 1983: 366). Physiognomy and physiology single out Bălcescu’s particular identity. However, in his diligent efforts to understand his dramatic earthly existence and his intellectual activity, Alecsandri does not limit himself to enthusiasm. As in all his memoirs, he presents all sides of “the object of his observation” and depicts him being aware of his own impressions so that his opinion could convince the reader, as well as arouse the interest in and inspire the respect of the posterity. In order to explain Bălcescu’s – and others’ – physical and spiritual personality, he resorts to a physical and characterological portrayal, to historical details and personal memories, which are the essential components of his writings that we have already commented upon. These means are complementarily united in a single work and do not lead to an abstract construction abounding in scholarly judgments; they result in a plea replete with kindly feelings aimed at getting to know one of Romania’s noblest sons and one of the greatest writers, a martyr of patriotism.

Among those apostles who had just reached the prime of their lives, N. Bălcescu was one of the most determined, ardent and selfless /.../. Oh, God, why did I have to see him, in the end, lonely, abandoned, pale, dispirited, suffering of an acute disease and dying on the flowery bank of Palermo where we had spent so many days in the company of grand hopes? Who can imagine the bitterness of the last hour of his life? Who knows how strong his longing for his country was – the longing that the poor man felt in the agony of his death hour? [trad. mea]

(Alecsandri, 1983: 366)

The emotional tension originating from his respect and appreciation of his friend Bălcescu accompanies every line of these pages that, drawing from the depth of human observation, makes the remembered one, in his sublime actions, reach almost physical presence, bringing him closer to the reader. Such emotional characterization does not seem to be excessive in its lyrical essence. Emotion controlled by analysis perfectly fits the pattern of characterization, helping the author to reveal his own personality rather than to obscure it. Thus, the meaning of memoirs becomes more human and, therefore, more artistic.

Two biographies devoted to Al. Russo are also aimed at the analysis of the man and his works. Here, overcoming his emotional attitude, which is present nevertheless, the author focuses first and foremost upon the civic activity of this “Romania’s free citizen” – the way he liked to sign documents and letters – and especially upon his writings, “proof of talent, logic and erudition”. From the numerous details of “a sad mockery of justice” to which this “conspirator”, one of “the most brilliant minds” of his generation was subjected (Al. Russo was arrested after the 1848 Revolution by the Hungarian authorities and

found himself at the risk of being impaled or hanged) to the concise observations concerning his writings in French and Romanian, Alecsandri always establishes a deep connection between the man and his works with a view to including this writer, his friend, into the gallery of important figures of the Romanian literature. Alecsandri's critical thinking is oriented towards essential aspects and compelling arguments, it is open to generalization; together with the emotional potential, which expressively highlights the style, it can be regarded as the characteristic features of these pages that add to the artistic value of the memoirs.

An in-depth study is presented in the pages dedicated to Constantin Negruzzi, "worthy of regret" – which fulfill the conditions of an *Introduction* to the volume *Scrierile lui Constantin Negruzzi* (*Works by Constantin Negruzzi*) – a work which appeared in three volumes in 1872-1873². The author's contemplative interlude is extended here since Alecsandri aims at explaining the status of one "of those Romanian literary pioneers who gave his Motherland such precious works; they were the result of a period unfavourable for the development of the spirit". This "contrary period" of the first half of the 19th century is analysed at all levels of material and spiritual life. The writer's works are thoroughly commented on, whereas Alecsandri's substantial observations offer the reader a faithful image of Negruzzi as a forty-eightier depicted as "a politician, man of letters and Romanian". Critical evaluations of the author of *Introduction* have a further purpose: that of producing several relevant conclusions concerning the task of judging the human and artistic individuality of a writer from the historical point of view, in the context of the set of values existing at that moment.

The memoir writer "collects" quite a few writers – his friends and contemporaries, from "the gardens of the past" in order to pull them out of "of the void of oblivion and indifference". These include Ion Ghica, "one of those who brought Romania into the age of light, magnificence and glory", Dimitrie Rallet, "a man of spirit and a generous heart, a participant in the work of the generation that prepared the introduction of great social and political reforms in the country", Costache Filipescu, "one of the most beautiful and elegant young men in Bucharest", who held a "vast treasure of patriotic feelings in his heart", and Coradini, born of a Romanian mother and an Italian father, gifted with "wit, imagination and talent" and sharing a great love for his adoptive motherland.

² The text first appeared in *Literary talks* („Convorbiri literare”), VI, 1872, no. 1, April, p. 1-15 and then reprinted as a preface to the edition of 1872-1873. Cf. Leonte, L., *Referințe despre operă și scriitor*, Constantin Negruzzi, București, Editura Minerva, 1980, p. 215.

Along with these and other names – a great variety of people that fill his biographies, letters and political memoirs – Alecsandri also similarly comments upon foreign writers (his friends, like the Romanians), with the intuition of a modern European man and artist. They are “friends of Romanians”; the author characterizes them with the help of few means of expression, but with a great power of suggestion in his brilliant article *Prietenii românilor* (*The Friends of Romanians*). First of all, Alecsandri enumerates all those “noble champions for our rights and nationalities, Romania’s apostles”: St. Marc de Girardin, Felix Colson, I. A. Vaillant, H. Desprez, A. Baligot de Beynes, A. Billecocq (the consul of France in the Romanian Principalities), Michelet, and Ubicini. They are politicians, diplomats, writers, magazine and newspaper publishers, and travellers; all of them “raised their voice in favour of Romanians”, contributing “to the future of our country by their actions and writings”. The article, as far as its main idea and its artistic form are concerned, gives praise to the friendship between peoples and its humanizing and pacifying virtues since, as Alecsandri mentions at the end of these pages, “among all human missions the noblest one is to lend a hand to the fallen nations that aspire to rise and occupy a place among the greatest, the most glorious and powerful ones”. The political message of these deep lines deserves to be remembered these days. They belong to a patriot who, at the end of this piece of verbal art, wants to add that “the heart of Romanians” never forgotten by the friends of this nation, knows how to preserve “the memories of good deeds forever”. Among other foreign writers upon whom the author mainly commented are Lamartine, “one of the greatest poets of France”, “a glory of the century” whom he met not only by reading his works, but also personally, in 1859, when he was sent to the European powers of the time in order to obtain the recognition of the double election by the people of Alexandru Ioan Cuza as the ruler of the United Principalities. In a persuasive moral portrait Alecsandri highlights Lamartine’s skills as a politician: with his “natural eloquence” he greatly contributed to “the prosperity and rise of the Romanians”. The portrayal of Lamartine, one of the greatest “friends of the Romanians”, was drafted on the occasion of the poet’s death and springs from the author’s powerful emotional involvement. “The sweet poet of young hearts, a poetic hero of the 1848 revolution [...] is crowned with the halo of a genius round his forehead. His harmonious and charming speech captures the ear and the soul. He expresses elevated feelings, sublime ideas and philosophical reflections in the most correct form, in the noblest style and with an exuberance that amazes the listener” (Alecsandri, 1983: 428). Prosper Mérimée, whom he met in 1853 in Spain and then saw on several occasions in Paris and Cannes, is presented in a long essay in which the author expresses his appreciation of his quality of style, delicacy and narrative talent of “an eminent

writer” highly interested in “the destiny of Romanians”. Mistral, France’s “greatest epic poet” who crowned him as a “poet of the Latin world” in 1878 in Montpellier for his *Cântecul Gintei latine* (*Song of the Latin Kin*), like other poets of sunny Provence whom Alecsandri personally met during the “floral games” of 1882 in Southern France, is at the centre of Alecsandri’s intellectual and sentimental interest in a large number of memorialistic pages and correspondence. It is a confession of the European orientation of the Romanian poet who created and contributed to the conditions favourable for Romanians to reach a spiritual and cultural integration with the Western European nations and to join their fate. The idea has since then been dominating the Romanians’ consciousness.

According to the writer, the data for sketching this “glory of the century” were gathered by Alecsandri in 1859, when, “arrayed in the serious attire of diplomacy”, he was sent by the ruler of the United Principalities of Romania on the difficult mission of convincing foreign powers to recognise the union and the double election of Alexandru Ioan Cuza. The mission was successfully completed in Paris, London, and Turin. The poet and diplomat’s personal charm, his literary reputation and the convincing power of his speech impressed Napoleon III, lord Malmesbury and Cavour so greatly that, according to A.D. Xenopol’s *Istoria românilor* (*History of Romanians*), he “obtained more than the world’s leaders were determined to allow”. This journey gave birth to *Istoria misiilor mele politice* (*History of my political missions*)³, an

³ The process of writing his memoirs of his diplomatic missions had several stages between the years 1859-1861. The conditions are mentioned by the writer himself in a letter to Iacob Negruzzi. In what follows we will adduce an extract that is of interest for the present research:

For some time, Romanian policy seems to require a Bismark-like behaviour, working pour de roi de Prusse [...] However, I am angry with one thing – an obvious symptom of Romanians’ ingratitude towards Napoleon, the emperor whom they owe everything they have and everything they are. In order to fight this ingratitude, I am forced to publish my memoirs of 1859 where I will revive the memory of the good deeds of the French government, describing as many details (sic) and results of my political missions in France, England and Italy as possible. The writing will not be exclusively political, it will portray great people whom I saw during that epoch, it will be in the form of a travel narration, comprising material for a range of articles. When this idea came to me, I immediately thought about the paper that you were writing. Do you want to publish it in your column *My Memoirs of 1859?* (81)

These memoirs later appeared in *Convorbiri literare* („Literary talks”) in 1878 under the title *Extract din istoria misiilor mele politice* (*An Extract from the History of My Political Missions*). In 1923, the text (fragmentary and modified) was published again in a small volume *Trei convorbiri cu Napoleon III* (*Three conversations with Napoleon III*) edited by D. Munteanu-Râmnic. It was integrally published in its initial form in the volume V. *Alecsandri. Proză. Călătorie. Misiuni diplomatice*. Craiova, 1931 (comments by Al. Marcu).

important piece of prose, a true model as far as the writer's engagement and his political and ethical choice are concerned.

As far as Alecsandri's numerous memoirs and recollections (the above-mentioned ones, as well as quite a few others) are concerned, it should be mentioned that, as has already been shown above, the author does not limit himself to some occasional and fleeting notes triggered by his feelings. The pages devoted to his friends – and the friends of the Romanians – reflect his aspiration to establish a deep correlation between the man and his actions. Their biological, psychological, civic and literary influences are analysed by the author without pedantry or an obsession for methodology. The portraits are colourful and lively, they recall the moral atmosphere and climate and aim at defining human and moral portraits. The life and works of those reminisced about are felt and experienced from within, like dramatic novels of existence. Full comprehension and a constant participatory attitude accompany them and their emotional potential is revealed by a powerful strand of lyricism at a communicative level; it neither reduces the recaller's objectivity, nor does it distort the balance of the truths communicated to the reader.

Alecsandri's confessions about his friends, so numerous not only in biographies and studies, but also in hundreds of letters, some of which present an example of genuine artistry in prose, are acts of both cognition and love. To live for cognition and love means to exist. Cognition and love form the foundations for all his prose and all his works of verbal art. The final conclusion at the end of this analysis of the writer's most representative texts perfectly fits into our integrative research.

Derived from a general (and well explained) worldview of life and people, supported by the ethical principle of social and moral progress, the literary activity of the Romanian classic writer compelled him to turn the material and spiritual existence of his time and the examination of people into an object of cognition. He never abandoned the close scrutiny of life and his contemporaries; by means of an emotional transformation both cognition and love, nurtured by the virtues of the talent, oriented the writer's interest towards the material and human universe, as well as towards some of the literary forms that allowed him to reveal his excellent power of observation and his constant affection for people: recollections, physiology, and travel diaries. These are all forms of narrative prose that allow Alecsandri to discover his own essence. This vital essence was expressed formally by means of certain particular features of his style and the style was the man himself: it meant a natural quality and fluency in the rhythm of communication, spontaneity of recollections and the dynamic pace of the narration, sedate narrative and playful enthusiasm, humour, which serves as a technique of demystification and criticism. A poet and a prose writer, Alecsandri was a master in terms of his artistic skill; oral folk literature adds to the virtues

of the style making it unpretentious, lacking pedantry and verbose syntax. Proverbs, sayings, lexis, phonetic peculiarities, elements specific of the Moldavian dialect, as well as archaisms and words originating from the Greek or Turkish languages used to create the local colour and the historical atmosphere add to the beauty of the writing, enriching the Romanian language and making it more flexible. It is true to say that Alecsandri's manner of expression is occasionally flat; however, in the times of heroic youth of literature, in the middle of the 19th century, the author had neither the means, nor the time to elaborate and improve it. A revival movement of intelligence and sensitiveness was never concurrent with that at the level of the figurativeness of language.

Alecsandri's correspondence also proved to be concerned with the recollection of "human types and patterns of behaviour". Like his contemporaries, he takes great pleasure in writing to his acquaintances, telling them about the impressions of everyday life and describing the destiny and the status of human aspects, a great number of which are representative from a physical and moral point of view. In 1923, his daughter, Maria Bogdan, publishes an epistolary consisting of 100 letters belonging to the writer and addressed to his daughter under the title *Autrefois et aujourd'hui*. In 1957, Marta Anineanu publishes a part of the correspondence with 30 recipients, which is currently at the Academy. Apart from being a document revealing an age, the most important value of the epistolary is, possibly, that of being "an artistic and political testament of the forty-eighters' generation"⁴.

Some of these memoirs were written as correspondence, when a literary letter as a kind of conversation was an indispensable part of "the life style" of a number of intellectuals of the time.

Alecsandri's private letters are a component of the "spiritual legacy" left by the author, as well as a part of his prose. They were written with no actual literary goal, a great number of them are written in a French language admired by his contemporaries for its correctness and flexibility. It reveals the man that creates, as well as the writer that is aware of his position and vocation. Many of the letters' recipients are members of the literary world themselves (Ion Ghica, Al. Hurmuzachi, Nicolae Bălcescu, French writer Édouard Grenier, Iacob Negruzzi, Petre Ispirescu, Al. Odobescu etc.); others are Alecsandri's close relatives (his wife, daughter and brother) that never ignore the sender's literary talent. They highlight the fact that the writer considered life through the perspective of a literary code, that his life blended with his self as a writer and that he often looked firstly for and found literature in life.

⁴ *Opera lui Vasile Alecsandri, sinteză a romantismului pașoptist*. <http://www.qreferat.com/referate/romana/Opera-lui-Vasile-Alecsandri-si937.php> (available at 16.05.2022).

One of these letters written from his most enduring memories (“suveniruri”) that the author kept in his mind and where he revealed another important side of his personality is the letter *Vasile Porojan*. Recollections written in the form of a letter to his friend Ion Ghica⁵ on the occasion of the death of “the last witness” of the beginning of his life emotionally recreates the image of a blissful childhood spent in the countryside in the company of a gypsy boy, Vasile Porojan. “The ups and downs of life and social hierarchy” moved the two friends apart. However, after many years, the writer returns to the world “of 50 years ago” when they were “both equal under the sun, being equally tanned from it”. Some memories kept and cherished by the author are revisited with nostalgia and melancholy: playing their childhood games, launching a kite “up to the clouds” skilfully made by Porojan, and stealing fruit from orchards. These are accompanied by the memories of the author’s period at a boarding school in Iași, particularly the lectures by Gherman Vida, a teacher from Maramureș, who commonly became the target of his students’ mischief and a holiday spent on the banks of the river Prut. These memories are followed by his leaving for Paris to study, abandoning Porojan who was sent as an apprentice to a bakery, returning to Romania, liberating gypsy-slaves from his estate because of his belief that it is “inhumane to deprive a human being of his liberty” and the last meeting with his childhood friend, whom he did not forget, in Piatra Neamț, where he saw him “bent towards the ground by the unforgiving hand of old age and world weary”.

This return to the world of his childhood is expressed, like that in the writings by Creangă and Sadoveanu, masterfully, spontaneously and naturally, in a colloquial conversational tone as in a chat with a friend from afar. The pages of his memoirs are remarkable by their lyricism, authenticity and deep humane feelings, revealing not only the image of Porojan, the maker of wooden spoons, but also that of Alecsandri, the man and the artist.

We have limited ourselves to these several convincing illustrations in a condensed overview of the essence of Alecsandri’s opinion concerning a vast typological diversity as presented in his prose.

⁵ The recollection was written with „deep sadness” („adâncă mâhnire”) on the occasion of the death of his childhood friend in June, 1880. It was first published in *Literary talks* („Convorbiri literare”), 1880, no. 5 and later included in the volume *The Letters by Ion Ghica to V. Alecsandri* (*Scrisorile lui Ion Ghica către V. Alecsandri*). *Vasile Porojan* is not the only artistic letter by Alecsandri. There are other two examples: *Here We Are with the Winter in the Country* (*Iată-ne cu iarna în țară*) and *Bitter Bread of the Exhile* (*Pâinea amară e exilului*). Alecsandri limited himself to these texts, being as constant as I. Ghica in his feelings, but even more involved in political and literary activity. The promise of a new regular correspondence will be respected only by Ion Ghica.

The life and works of the characters discussed here, as has been shown in this paper, are felt and experienced from within, like true novels of existence and creative writing. The ideas and comments originate not only from the author's reflection, but also from his affection, while the additional emotional potential of Alecsandri's prose informs the style of the texts and makes it more personal. Instead of dry didactic biographies replete with pedantic judgments we find recollections that are both instructional and pleasant. Analytical considerations are presented in associations with the author's warm-heartedness and his gratitude for a joy revealed. This element of affection the presence of which is clearly felt in Alecsandri's writings by no means hinders the objective attitude of the commentator or the quality of the truth. In this case emotions contribute to cognition and deepen it. The powerful lyricism that animates the pages written by Alecsandri deeply seep into his epic discourse; its role is both to inform and to impress.

Alecsandri's confessions concerning "patterns of human behaviour" around him are the products of his intelligence and sensitivity; we conclude by saying that they represent an act of cognition, as well as proof of love. To live and to write having a vast knowledge of the human nature and loving it means to endure both from the moral and artistic points of view.

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