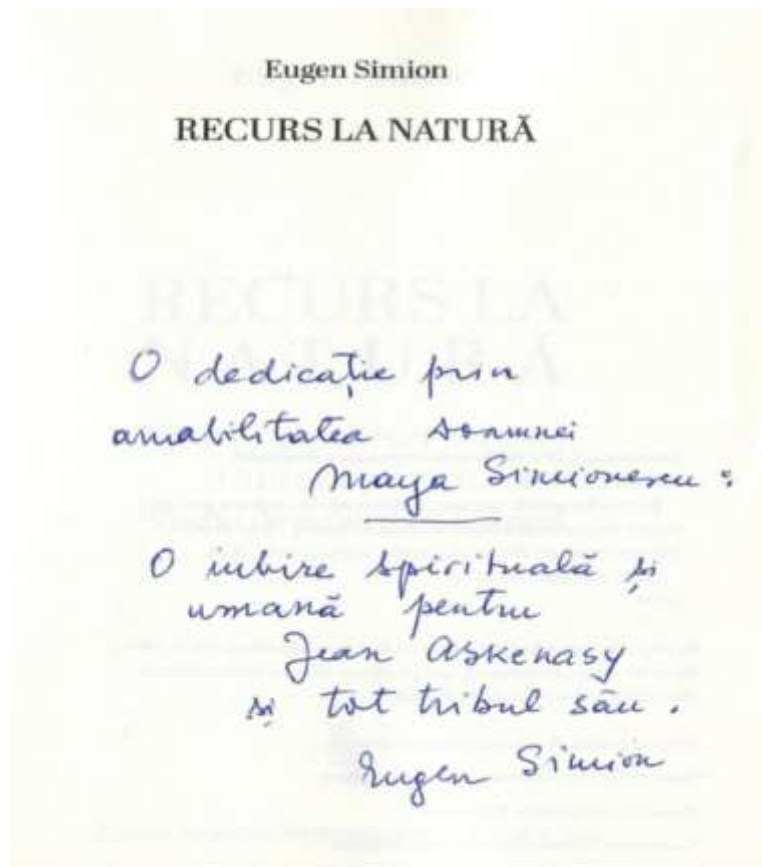


EUGEN SIMION
(25 May 1933 – 18 October 2022)

Jean-Jacques Askenasy*

Two days before stepping on the path of no return, which leads to the black hole that we call “the world of the righteous”, Eugen Simion sent me a copy of his last book with this dedication: “A spiritual and human love for Jean Askenasy and all his tribe, Eugen Simion”.



Eugen began writing as a young man and his critical work never stopped. He remained a literary critic all his life. Eugen wrote about biographical genres and intimate diaries, and about Mircea Eliade, Eugène Ionesco, and Ion Creangă. He also wrote a series of critical fragments in and prefaces to the many editions of Fundamental Works of Romanian Literature. Even as he tried to convince others that the profession of literary critic had ceased to exist, his defining characteristic was his total commitment to engaging himself and others in finishing what was started. Before saying goodbye to life, Eugen dedicated himself to nature, as if he did not taste its flavor while sitting at the writing table, as if he sacrificed it on the altar of literary criticism.

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Reading his book that he sent me, *Recurs la Natură* (Return to Nature), I understood that it could only be the fruit of a lifelong concern. For many years he recorded the geocritical aspects of the literature he read, finally creating a 529-page study about landscapes viewed in the space of nature. His appeal begins with Medieval imagery and goes through the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Henry David Thoreau. He then made an ode to nature by describing the geocritical accounts of 510 Romanian and foreign authors.

This ode encompasses the entire humanistic cosmos of nature with both the emotional and rational spaces of its landscape. It describes forms of geocentrism with a dominant presence of nature to landscapes with a discreet presence. It describes the geographical mythology of Vasile Alecsandri, the feeling of nature of Alecu Russo, the metaphysical or erotic nature of Mihai Eminescu, and the civilized nature of Mihail Sadoveanu. It also describes the rural nature of Creangă and the carnival landscape of Ion Budai-Deleanu for whom nature is heaven. *Recurs la Natură* is the "farewell" with which Eugen said goodbye to life.

I met Eugen in 1998. From this first contact, I was impressed by the uprightness of this person, a character trait through which destiny placed him in the orbit of Romania's cultural personalities. To outline Eugen Simion's personality and highlight his character traits, I will describe some of the most dramatic moments of his life.

At age 23, Eugen finished his studies in the Faculty of Philology with "head of promotion" which, according to the usual assignment rules, gave him the right to be assigned to a preferential job appropriate to his abilities. But the Communist Party was in power in 1956 under the leadership of Gheorghe Ghorghiu-Dej and the rules of job distribution in the Romanian People's Republic had changed.

Eugen Simion was assigned to a very isolated village somewhere near Măcin, far from any means of public communication. The party's decision was the consequence of a blacklist on which his name and the mention of counter-revolutionary activities were found.

Eugen Simion, like many other students, among whom I mention Alexandru Zub (imprisoned for 6 years), was accused and investigated for participating in a student assembly in solidarity with the 1956 Hungarian revolution. At this gathering, the party's counter-revolutionary hunters informed about his presence in that subversive framework. He was put on the blacklist, excluded from the Workers' Youth Union, and consequently deprived of his "head of promotion" rights. Eugen Simion refused the offered job and remained unemployed for 5 years between 1956 and 1962.

During this sad period of marginalization to which the Communist Party subjected the eminent student (as described by his former teachers: George Călinescu, Alexandru Rosetti, and Tudor Vianu), Eugen performed research at the Institute of History and Literary Theory, which later became the G. Călinescu Institute, in the "Eminescu" collective led by Perpessicius, the pen name of Dumitru S. Panaitescu.

Eugen was aware of the tragic politicization of universities and the disastrous consequences of marginalization to which proletcultism subjected him. However, throughout his life, he did not show signs of suffering, nor beat his fists on his chest, nor complain and ask for compensation. He fought for the rest of his life to prevent the repetition of abuses like those to which he was subjected.

In his speech at the Romanian Academy's celebration of his 85th birthday in 2018, Eugen abandoned his proverbial uprightness and revealed the anxiety (he called it a "ghost") he felt for

many years caused by the unjust “head of promotion” distribution in 1956. Knowing him, we were all aware of this sign of friendship for all present. With this revelation, Eugen Simion broke for the first time the concrete wall of his uprightness. It was a moving confession that brought us even closer to this gifted, altruistic man with a vocation for construction. The calm and affectionate cordiality of this former president of the Romanian Academy shows Eugen’s well-tempered sensitivity and his discreet suffering from secret turmoil, inevitable doubts, and regrets.