Mihail Sebastian and the Intimist Writings. From Theatricality to the Illusion of Reality

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Abstract: Writing his work, Sebastian had to confront a world thrown into history in the making, being forced to see what was happening around him, namely to privilege the sight and the entelechy which it animates. We almost dare to say that only in this manner – through a terrible aggression against the sight – Sebastian had the possibility to reflect, in his intimist writings, the contingent reality, for himself and for the others, with minimal styling effects. On the other hand, Sebastian’s texts reveal a purely phenomenological intention of the author. Thus, the author is no longer using the pen to fill with meaning a state of the facts or to transform everyday fiction into a significant dramatic discourse. In his case, the emphasis is on a continuous present and on the ontological message of the ideas, we would say, on the message which was freed from constraints of the past or future aspirations. Thus, Sebastian gives the events total freedom to express themselves – to utter themselves! –, with all the risks and the mortifying consequences of the decision taken. Sometimes the author reaches hidden humour areas, such as the one practiced by Pirandello.

Key words: Mihail Sebastian, theatricality, journal, ethics.

Mihail Sebastian was included by the majority of literary historians at the forefront of the so-called Generation ’27, along with Mircea Eliade, Eugène Ionesco, Emil Cioran, Constantin Noica, Mircea Vulcănescu, Ionel Jianu and Mihail Polihroniade. Following the Spanish model, Mircea Eliade was the one who – through a cycle of twelve program-articles published in The Word (Cuvântul), in 1927, and somewhat emphatically entitled Spiritual

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1 In itself, Generation ’27 is compared by Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine to the nonconformist groups Ordre nouveau and Esprit from 1930s France. V. Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco: Uitarea fascismului. Trei intelectuali români în vâltoarea secolului, translated from French by Irina Mavrodin, EST-Samuel Tastet Éditeur, Bucharest, 2004, p. 33.
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*Itinerary* – will inaugurate “experientialism” (a term invoked for the first time by Mihail Ilovici), the egotist current of the new generation, and will urge all those impregnated by such a belief to fructify the chasm separating them from previous generations, thus fulfilling, in the opinion of the future historian of religions, a spiritual destiny. And even if later some of the top intellectuals of the epoch will assert themselves in the counter current of the “Itinerary” ideas – among them appearing Șerban Cioculescu, the one who classified Eliade’s “spiritualism” as an imposture, “a painful discharge of instincts, inverted in mysticism spasms” –, Generation ’27 will continue to attract contenders or at least admirers, despite the irrationalism which characterized it: “The Young Generation phenomenon appears today as one of the most prominent cultural and political phenomena from the period between the two wars in Romania. Cultural, because it reunites the most talented and most original spirits from a country which – however backward and stiffened upon a xenophobic nationalism – experiences an intense creative effervescence.”

**From ethics to culture or about the moral shortcomings**

Being unable to stand aside, Sebastian responded to the attacks coming from all sides with the suppleness of elevated spirits, as though desiring to challenge the ideological deviations of those whose moral and cultural options he had supported until then. How could we possibly understand the acceptance of writing a preface to the diary-novel *For Two Thousand Years (De două mii de ani)* (1934) by Nae Ionescu and hence the torture provoked by the future Legionary Movement ideologue’s allegations lacking any moral respect?!

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2 Șerban Cioculescu, *Între ortodoxie și spiritualitate*, in: Mircea Eliade, *Profetism românesc*, vol. I: *Itinerariu spiritual; Scrisori către un provincial; Destinul culturii românești*, Editura Roza Vînturilor, Bucharest, 1990, p. 73. Mihail Sebastian himself ceased, after 1934 – the year *The Word (Cuvântul)* has stopped appearing –, to publish political articles in order to support the anti-democratic ideas of his mentor, Nae Ionescu.

3 Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco*, p. 36.

4 Nae Ionescu states: “Are you, Iosef Hechter a man from Brăila’s Danube? No. But a Jew from Brăila’s Danube. […] Iosef Hechter you are sick. You are substantially sick because you can only suffer; and because your suffering is clogged.” – Nae Ionescu, *Prefață*, in Mihail Sebastian, *Opere*, vol. I. *Proză*, edition coordinated by Mihaela Constantinescu-Podocea, text chosen and established, notes, comments and versions [by] Mihaela
And if the Professor, sided with the extreme right, was twisting philosophical arguments for the party’s interests (arguments undertaken, in Tudor Vianu’s view, from Oswald Spengler) and the theological ones, having the desire to justify the fate of Jews in an apodictic manner, Sebastian could not abandon his position of moral verticality and the ideas he believed in, even if this led to losing confessions for him; an example is giving the “good for printing” to a text (preface) that wronged and humiliated him. But this, in reality, proves to be the effect of an attitude adopted early, from a possible impulse of self-preservation: “Indifference, neutrality, the refuse to be revolted or to approve, this is the best of attitudes. I am old enough [sic!] for having learned at least that much.”

Of course, being unable to surrender to passivity and indifference, Sebastian will respond to his detractors with a deeply ethical essay-novel, *How I Became a Hooligan* (*Cum am devenit huligan*) (1935), demonstrating – once again – a singular lucidity and humane position, that have raised him above the social and political events of his epoch and determined him to reprehend any kind of nationalism. It is the moment of radical change of opinion and of probing the path travelled from 1927 to 1934 (the year of publishing the novel *For Two Thousand Years* (*De două mii de ani*)), by perceiving the failures and the difficulty of choosing a new road. Nevertheless, without attempting indifference, what has deepened the author’s fears did not regard his person (i.e. existence viewed in its singularity, using the Jewish symbols, the renegade status, etc.), as much as the destiny of an entire society mutilated by the radical doctrines of the European extreme-right, in whose traps he had fallen himself for a while.

It is surprising that many of the theses invoked by the Legionnaire ideologies have flowed over a large part of the intellectuals from “Criterion”, a group constituted in 1932, but strongly rooted in the previous years’ literary


6 *Ibid*, p. 34.
entourages, where Sebastian was also remarked. Unjustly, however, only he had to feel the effects of the collapse in the political chaos and of the undignified manner in which the others have redefined the notions of freedom, responsibility, and justice. However, it is surprising, from a writer with such combative determination, to receive statements full of scepticism, the obsessive resuming of the idea of failure, the lack of confidence in future justice, whatever it may be, human or divine. Working with the data of self-fiction, where “the word is only a failed formula and an arbitrary experience”, Sebastian has secured ascendancy to an environment built on the structure of life “accidents”, even if, through autobiographical confessions, there is an agreement between the fictional data and the existent reference points that no one can doubt.

Among those won over by the wave of extremism – and of an anti-Semitism to which he tried, in For Two Thousand Years (De două mii de ani), to find the “metaphysical essence” through a stream of consciousness discourse – Sebastian remarks on Mircea Eliade, fearing the collapse of a friendship that once seemed unconditional to both of them: “He also [Mircea Eliade – AN] has a naive way of becoming aggravated, of raising his voice, in order to launch, without a smile even, the extravagant things he finds out in the town, in the editorial office of The Times (Vremea) [right nationalist magazine, with a strong nationalist accent, where numerous personalities of the times have collaborated during the time period 1928-1944 – AN], in the editorial office of The Word (Cuvântul) [which has become officious of the Iron Guard – AN]. Will I lose Mircea for that much? Can I forget all that is

8 See, in this respect, Matei Călinescu, Un fel de jurnal (1973-1981), Humanitas Publishing-House, Bucharest, 2016, p. 64: “Any fiction is ultimately autobiographical (Valéry went further in saying that any theory is autobiography). Any autobiography is ultimately fiction.”
exceptional in him, his generosity, his strength of living, his humanity, his
love, all that is young, childish, and honest in him? I do not know.”11

From the perspective of traditional humanists – Max Scheler, Nicolai
Hartman etc. – ethics would assert itself as creative movement, as feeling, but,
paradoxically, outside the existential debate. Or, at a time when “the spirit of
the time” enjoyed more and more followers or supporters, Sebastian changes
the “spinning centre” of his literary creation, turning his attention towards the
horizon of existence salvation and rediscovering the profound meaning of life.
Once again, accepting the principle of non-commitment, he treated posterity
as an imminence that he has the duty to address closely, and the present as a
fiction hastening to invade the real world.

In Minima moralia, Andrei Pleșu considers ethical judgment different
from the ethical act12, separating it from the reckless attempts of the man of
assuming it in terms of attitudes, behaviour and judgment of the self or of the
others. Any attempt of lowering the ethics in the arena of daily acts would be
destined to fail. Ethics was destined to always remain isolated where
circumstances and life’s relativism cannot touch it. It is an aspect that Mihail
Sebastian sensed, reflecting it in his literature.

Confession and truth

It is spoken even in Sebastian’s case about a process of canonization,
even though – we have this conviction – the author has never desired it
deliberately. Somehow, if we translate the canon as “authentic literary

11 Mihail Sebastian, Jurnal. 1935-1944, text cared for by Gabriela Omăt, foreword and notes
journal, Eliade’s membership to the Iron Guard does not appear clearly, even though today it
is an indisputable fact. But we can only believe in Sebastian’s honest thought to protect, as
far as possible, the image of his friend despite the fact that after 1937 their relationship
cooled considerably. Moreover, after this fateful year, the state of “confinement” is felt more
and more acutely each day.
12 See Andrei Pleșu, Minima moralia. Elemente pentru o etică a intervalului, second edition,
originality”\textsuperscript{13}, we are obliged to place ourselves outside of Sebastian’s work, a work considered, by a significant part of the criticism, on a level of secondary values. Thus, Mihai Iovănel states – in an otherwise admirable work from the perspective of documentation and subtle in terms of analytical approach –, with a slightly sententious tone, that: “Mihail Sebastian is a canonical author in a canon that is no longer the aesthetic one [...]. Indeed, the distance from Sebastian’s secondary literature to the central place that the author occupies in the cultural discourse of the last and a half decade can only be explained through factors which are external to the aesthetic value; and, in fact, so it is.”\textsuperscript{14}

Without any doubt, if we consider Sebastian’s writings’ originality, we must remove him from the Romanian literary canon space. The novels and its plays are, obviously, indebted to the numerous currents of the epoch and to several important European writers (more precisely French), including Proust, Gide, and Stendhal et al. On the other hand, in order to be fair to our author, we must recognize that “the aesthetic value is, by definition, generated by an interaction between artists, an influence which always means interpretation”\textsuperscript{15}, which changes the perspective of the interpretation. Moreover, we are wondering if the aesthetic content of a discussion about canon can be excavated, in general and about Sebastian’s work in particular. Hence, what is the canon (starting with the nineteenth century until today, namely in a period of explosion of the genres and our almost impossible capacity of ordering values) and when does it come out from under the dome (and the protection) of literature, in order to embrace life in its nude form? This question is valid as long as the central criterion to which we must resort is the aesthetic one, and by no means a social, ideological or ontological one? And mainly if we wish to avoid a useless \textit{mélange} of values, structures and functions.


\textsuperscript{15} Harold Bloom, \textit{Canonul occidental}, p. 51.
Furthermore, we are wondering if, through Sebastian’s confessional literature, valued today more than his fictional works, we are actually dealing with the author’s “anti-canonical” response to the obsession of literature (and art), by its varied creators, to protect itself? In this latter case, is it still necessary to bring up a concept that serves, eventually, a construction and cultural “opening”, aesthetic in the best case, and less the establishing of the authority of the word, or even of ethics? Lastly, let us point out – as a consequence of the anamnesis process – and the difficult tracing of the literary-artistic “canon” boundaries, a concept which, by the force of circumstances, appears fragilely structured, confusing, “protoplasmic”, and the control we may have upon it remains still uncertain: “All canons, even today’s fashionable anti-canons, are elitist and none of the laic canons is ever ‘closed’. Thus the operation known as ‘the opening of the canon’ is a completely redundant one. […] There are also the immense complexity and contradictions that constitute the essence of the Western canon, which is anything but a unity or a stable structure.”

The issue of the mimesis is mostly involuntarily raised by Sebastian in his theoretical writings. It constitutes part of a broader debate regarding representation and the necessity to connect the principle of verisimilitude to the recognition principle, as Aristotle indicates in Poetica. Through the two segments of mimesis, the reader (or spectator, in theatre) makes the translation from the possible meaning of fiction to the mediator effect of the real world. The author of The Star without a Name (Steaua fără nume) tried, for his part, to detach a sense of mimesis through chronicles to the editorials of the time, along with several “fashionable” theoreticians, such as Mihail Dragomirescu and his disciple, Scarlat Struţeanu.

In one of his books, Maurice Blanchot wrote in 1959 a chapter dedicated to the diary. Here are a few lines which concern the confessional “doctrine” of the twentieth century writers, transforming the diary pages as documents of life: “[...] to a diary sincerity is the requirement that it should attain, but not exceed. No one ought to be more honest than the diary keeper,

\[16\] Ibid, p. 63.
and sincerity is this transparency that allows him not to overshadow his limited daily existence, to which he otherwise limits his concern of writing.”

Before focusing on Sebastian’s diary, we will recognize among the French critic’s lines some of the “aspirations” of any author of confessional writings, including guarding himself against “oblivion and the despair of not having said anything.” Inattentive to the contours of life, he who “keeps” a diary captures the dynamic, movements, excesses, breaks, delays, men’s fantasies, bursts of enthusiasm or the indifference of the others. And all these mandate the diary keeper to set new contours to the events which he attends, without making the truth an obsolete notion, negotiating with his own self over what the expression (word, deed, etc.) hides. In a sense, the diary represents the “shadow” that spreads on the page’s “soil”, according to the “time” when the writer meditates, giving him back the pleasure of looking in the “mirror”, of self discovery: “[... ] the true pleasure – noted Sebastian in 1935 – is to re-read my work.”

It is true; in the diary we meet people whom we call real and facts that complement the everyday life network, but the diary “characters” are not different from fiction heroes because of the reality of the former and the virtuality of the latter. We could even believe that such a distinction joins them together, brings them onto the stage of life, helping the author “to avoid the shipwreck.”

Followers and detractors

The flashings of the imagery/ imaginary awaken in the reader the same desire to escape the silence of the words and the vanity of the history. The current theme of the diary is the theatre of life, the presence, namely the authenticity of someone or something that the being needs urgently in its self-

17 Maurice Blanchot, Cartea care va să fie, translated from French by Andreea Vlădescu, EST-Samuel Éditeur, Bucharest, 2005, p. 255. Bringing Maurice Blanchot into the discussion has no connection to the fact that the French writer had to face accusations of anti-Semitism and sympathy for the extreme right. Our focus is strictly on the literary and philosophical thinking of the author.
18 Ibid, p. 257.
19 Mihail Sebastian, Jurnal, p. 35.
constructive moral actions. Answering his inner voice, closed in the area of an ethic indifferent to whatever the quotidian requires, the author gives us the impression that he would continue, knowingly or not, the European classicism ideas, such as those that, by the “sense of existence” at Rousseau and of “self measure” at Herder, outline an ethic of authenticity.\(^{21}\) Self-dialogue, ad integrum confession of what the Being requests, refusal of parasitisation of the discourse with elements foreign to the self, even an attraction towards the land of solipsism, these all lead to the abandonment of specific patterns of social communication.

From this moment, the reverse way is also opened, in which the theatre borrows the stringency of the diary. Thus, to give an example, Madame Pace from *Six Characters in Search for an Author* (*Șase personaje în căutarea unui autor*) is not “invoked” by the author, but by the other characters, even if she appears to the audience to be “born just like that, out of nothing”\(^{22}\) and that is because the scene – in fact, the entire theatre of Pirandello – expressed the desire to free itself from the roughness of aesthetics, to invade the existential space the way it is, mundane or extraordinary, gentle or poisonous. The Italian author’s humour confers to the theatre a substantially ethical content, but also encounters the desiderata of the diary, within it deep ruminations of the self are privileged: “Life is a continuous flow that we try to stop, to fix into steadfast and determined shapes, inside and outside of us, because we ourselves are already shapes moving in the middle of other immovable forms and which can still follow the stream of life until, stiffening little by little, the movement – also gradually slowed down – stops.”\(^{23}\)

Sebastian’s diary between 1935-1944 followed the French writers’ model, reminiscent of those of André Gide and especially the diary of Jules

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\(^{23}\) Apud, Florian Potra, in: Luigi Pirandello, *Șase personaje în căutarea unui autor*, p. 15.
Renard, of that “cruel irony that only children have”\(^{24}\), life being rendered with the utmost sincerity by also removing the limits of conveniences. Without passing through the suffering caused by Gide’s affective complications (whose *marriage blanc* will mark the volutes of his writings\(^{25}\)) or those of Renard (with notable inner adventures), Sebastian will experience his own personal crisis, relative to a corrupted time, threatened by radical changes and overwhelmed by a confusion which became “in our public discussions almost a method.”\(^{26}\) Despite the tensions he experienced, the writer restrained his egocentrical tendencies, being attentive either to a posthumous which could discredite him, or to the beliefs and opinions of his fellows, but also to the grim politics, shrouded by the distorted nationalism of those years. Naturally, starting with 1937, Sebastian’s diary frequently mentions the discriminations that Jews were subjected to, and also the author’s difficulty to be detached from social life and to create in a hostile, invasive environment.

However, despite the moments of despair – “Never more than in a day like this have I felt how useless my entire life has been”\(^{27}\), we read in a confession from March 14, 1937 –, the author continued the fight with the self, with his own spiritual determinations, so as to be able to understand as well as possible, and, maybe, in order to try to accept the truth about a world in full drift. Even though we still cannot state that Sebastian embraced decisive options, but only that he marked possible routes of moral conduct and affirmation of authenticity. On the other hand, as Marta Petreu shows in a study so lucid and detached that it appears rather mimicked, Sebastian’s bizarre attachment to the Romanian right wing ideology (and not to the left one) is due to the writer’s transformation into Nae Ionescu’s disciple, that is –

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\(^{26}\) Mihail Sebastian, *Cum am devenit huligan*, in: idem, *De două mii de ani*, with a preface by Nae Ionescu; *Cum am devenit huligan*, word to the reader by Z. Ornea, Editura Hasefer, Bucharest, 1995 (1934), p. 238.

in order to retrieve the author’s imprudent words – into a *disciple of the devil*.\(^{28}\)

At the time of the issuing of Marta Petreu’s book, the phrase shocked the literary environment, and afterwards it was subjected to a cautious criticism from some and trenchant criticism from others. The fact is that, a few years after the issuing of this study written by the author from Cluj, there are few who still grant credit to the analysis and to its radical conclusions, regarded at the beginning of the book as impossible to be doubted.

But things should be nuanced from both positions, from Sebastian’s supporters’ position as well as from that of the detractors. Thus, the Babeş-Bolyai academic’s thesis can easily conquer, if we consider things strictly from the perspective where the need for a “spiritual revolution” was clamored

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\(^{28}\) Marta Petreu, *Diavolul și ucenicul său: Nae Ionescu – Mihail Sebastian*, second edition, revised and enlarged, Polirom Publishing-House, Iaşi, 2010. The author resumes almost obsessively, in the writings dedicated to the interwar period, the idea of an alienated Sebastian, passed entirely on the extreme right side, by listing him among the founders of intellectual fascism in 1930 Romania. See in: *Cioran sau un trecut deocheiat*, third edition revised and enlarged, Polirom Publishing-House, Iaşi, 2011: “Sebastian was the first important representative of Generation ’27 who was seduced by the extreme right [...]” (p. 26); “[...] Mihail Sebastian was the first of his generation who, starting with the year 1929, has made extreme right political journalism, being a supporter of the idea of revolution, dictatorship, absolute leaders, corporate employment of the population and a declared adversary of the liberal declaration [...]” (p. 103) etc. etc. Nicolae Manolescu largely assumed Marta Petreu’s trenchant opinions. Thus, he considers, without noticing the palinode, Sebastian “never foresaw, they would say ever, [my underline] that extremism, right or left wing, inevitably leads to anti-Semitism”, nearly forgetting a remark made only a few lines back, that the essence of the novel *For Two Thousand Years* (*De două mii de ani*) “consists in Sebastian’s refusal of any nationalism, Jewish or Romanian.” – Nicolae Manolescu, *Istoria critică a literaturii române. 5 secole de literatură*, Paralela 45 Publishing-House, Piteşti, 2008, pp. 870, 871. The number of people who lined up – directly or through volutes of critical language – to accuse Sebastian of opportunism and even of an alliance with the right-wing extremism (or the left-wing, things being taken to the point where he was accused of sympathizing with the Bolsheviks, and shockingly, of having written the 16 page booklet *The Red Army Is Coming* (*Armata Roșie vine*), published by C.C. of P.C.R. Publishing-house in 1944) is greater than we expected. Among these – alongside Marta Petreu, converted into a loudspeaker of the accusers – we find Gheorghe Grigurcu, Dan Culcer, Dan C. Mihăilescu, Aurel Sasu etc., hurrying to portray a deflected identity. Resorting to the method of induction, and after a quick acceptance of the accusations made by Marta Petreu, Gabriel Dimisianu rhetorically wonders: “if we exempt Sebastian from the right-wing position, then why not do the same for Eliade or Noica, his close friends?” – see Gabriel Dimisianu, “Posteritatea lui Sebastian”, in: *România literară*, nr. 17, 26 April 2013. We find surprising this proposal of treating destinies uniformly…
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by an entire generation of intellectuals, the one entitled Generation’27. However, in the same thesis we will find doubtful elements, if we position ourselves on the side of existences with unexpected meanders and numerous changes of perspective, such as that of Mihail Sebastian. We consider quite self-righteous Marta Petreu’s categorical opinion that nothing could correct the “description of him that I made for this period [1927-1935] or could question the conclusions I reached.” Similarly, we don’t understand why the author considered it “unnecessary” to continue documenting after 1935. In 1927, Mihail Sebastian was 20 years old; he was in full formation and was eager for a recognition which would place him at least in a relationship of equality with the intellectual opinion leaders of the interwar years.

Additional understanding is generated by the integrating function of the authorial speech, a speech that (if we follow the intertextuality thesis as formulated by Julia Kristeva, but also by Roland Barthes) appeared, in the case of Sebastian, prior to the period (1927-1935) put under Marta Petreu’s distorting magnifying glass, in a vast project of cultural assimilation, and it was consolidated before the outbreak of the Second World War by means of a remarkable synthetic and analytic approach. Naturally, Nae Ionescu’s texts played an important role in Sebastian’s formation, in many of the young writer’s articles being visible, like a “filigree”, the way of thinking and even the stylistic of the Professor. We must bear in mind the fact that during the time when Sebastian confessed his admiration for Nae Ionescu, the latter had not yet disclosed his anti-Semitic beliefs and he had even attended (and we ask ourselves, what was the purpose?) several academic meetings, lecturing on Zionist themes.

Contradictory, paradoxical, often with errors of judgment, sometimes almost insolent – perhaps from a spirit of opposition –, other times benevolent – submitting to his feelings –, Sebastian’s political publishing, but also the

29 Marta Petreu, *Diavolul și ucenicul său*, p. 5.
30 See *ibid*, p. 6.
literary or cultural one, cannot be detached from the social and political context. The author does not exhibit his beliefs in order to justify himself, but also, noticing the futility of human actions, to deny a way of life which was parasitical to an entire world. On the other hand, we notice that the tone of the articles written by the young author was conforming to the “fashion” of the epoch. Just like Sebastian, in 1934, Eugène Ionesco had irritated many of the literates of his time with his volume No (Nu), from where we quote randomly one of his bellicose statements thrown at Camil Petrescu and his literature: “[…] the originality of Procut’s Bed (Patul lui Procut) consists almost exclusively in deficiencies, in a wrong or unsuccessful application of the Proustian method.”

Aware of the “betrayal” implied by the act of reading (of understanding a work), but also of the criticism, Sebastian started reading Camil Petrescu with unconcealed admiration, convinced by the novelty and the vitality emitted by The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War (Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război); the chronicle from The Word (Cuvântul) marks the literary significance of the novel: “There is no doubt that, from a literary point of view, these pages by Camil Petrescu can pass in the forefront of a European anthology. But we are interested to remark here something other than their literary quality: it is precisely the sense of great drama, of essential conflict which disconcerts the entire universe, the sense of absolute tragedy of any trivial event in Ștefan Gheorghidiu’s consciousness. It is the drama of the intelligence that feels deeply attacked, at the first deviation from the ideal order of existence.” Afterwards, the critical tone changes, and becomes more radical over the years.

Returning to Marta Petreu we notice that she only observed the author of the Accident sliding towards the “extreme right”, not wishing to focus on the reasons or the social conditioning of the author, without seeing his progress, without understanding too well the transformations and the context in which the reactions of the author were produced. The massive volume

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34 Ibid, p. 263.
entitled *The Devil and His Disciple* (*Diavolul și ucenicul său*) stops its analytical approach precisely in the year when Mihail Sebastian’s existence started to precipitate major elements of conduct, attitude, and belief; exactly in the moment when his life acquired shape and rigor; exactly when uttering turned into deep confession. In a 2007 article, Dan C. Mihăilescu observed – somewhat premonitory in relation to the evolution of criticism – “with an almost physically-painful abruptness, to what extent Mihail Sebastian was manipulated, malformed, poisoned and diverted from the artistic to the political vendetta, after 1989 as well as in the era of the scandal of *For Two Thousand Years* (*De două mii de ani*)”.

**Even without theatricality?**

Eugen Simion noted in a simple and pertinent language the interval of Sebastian’s ethic from *Fragments from a found notebook* (*Fragmente dintr-un carnet găsit*), in reality the interval of the author’s ethic: “His moral is to sceptically accept what exists, good and bad at once.”

Probing a veritable cult of friendship and relations once stable, Sebastian wanted to give his fellow men, again and again, another chance to correct their ideas, thoughts, deeds, and to awaken them from the “Rhinocerization” into which fate had pushed them, which outlines an understanding and a Christian attitude that he, the Jew, put into practice before his brethren encompassed by the waves of Orthodoxy. This reminds us of Lucian Blaga and his successive “awakenings” of consciousness, in the area of philosophy and arts, but also of Nichifor Crainic, towards whom

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37 It is about a “Rhinocerization” that became the mark of the “mental metamorphosis” (Nazification) referred to by Ionesco and that Romania experienced in the interwar period years and in those of the War, during 1940-1945. See Eugène Ionesco, *Rhinocéros*, texte intégral, dossier réalisé par Olivier Rocheteau, lecture d’image par Ferrante Ferranti, Paris, Éditions Gallimard (Folioplus Classiques), 2010, p. 176.
Sebastian’s attitude was, despite the forced Orthodoxy of Gândirea’s writer (*The Thinking*), at least in the 1930s, complacent and sometimes benevolent. It is difficult today to realize in what manner the author of *The City of Acacias* (*Orașul cu salcâmi*) reported himself to Crainic’s *mysticism* and, above all, the relationship that the Romanian theologian has set between the creation born from the “paradise nostalgia” and the Orthodox existentialism.39

In his diary, Sebastian mentions Crainic twice, in passing, without any assessments or comments. Instead, in the early ’30s, in his cultural and political articles from *The Word* (*Cuvântul*), Sebastian openly defended the future author of *The Paradise Nostalgia* (*Nostalgia paradisului*) – nota bene: Crainic had already become one of the rivals of his mentor, Nae Ionescu –, of course, after an unwritten “non-aggression pact” with *The Thinking* (*Gândirea*) magazine; surely we must take into account here the fact that both editorial offices, from *The Word* (*Cuvântul*) and from *The Thinking* (*Gândirea*), were pleading for the Romanian right-wing (or even the extreme right). Despite the “naive” views of the teacher from the Theological Seminary in Bucharest, and unable to extract any “essential solutions” from his works, Sebastian says: “Mr. Nichifor Crainic addresses by the magazine ‘Gândirea’ (*The Thinking*) a manifest to the ‘creative elite’. Any appeal sounds good today, in this disoriented hour. And Mr. Crainic delivers a series of simple truths, that everybody knew, but no one bothered to answer […].”40

Understanding the gravity of the *difference* which – to borrow the words of Livius Ciocârlie – “ascends from the chaos”41, Sebastian did not seek

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39 Our attention is drawn to Crainic’s trenchant position regarding an alleged drift of modern culture: “Under the aspect of an astounding efflorescence, started from an untinging creative thirst, the modern culture represents a phase of decadence. Out of it rise the voices proclaiming a ‘culture crisis’. But this crisis is nothing but the result of its individualization, of its independency, its secularization” – Nichifor Crainic, *Nostalgia paradisului*, Cugetarea Publishing-House, Bucharest, [1940], p. 115.


to find only what distances him from the others, but also what takes him closer to them, the stabilizing similarity of life, through which he could meet again the saving *Eros* of the being. This is what Laszlo Alexandru remarks, numerous times and with complete pertinence, in his literary journals. Here is an example from the works of the well-known Italianist from Cluj: Sebastian “did not have the vanity of exclusions, but the slightly naive aspiration of brotherly hugs.”42 And another one, where Sebastian’s portrait is recovered dispassionately: “Mihail Sebastian’s complex personality acts as litmus paper, both on interwar Romanian intellectuals, and on the present ones. His lucid, calm, but relentless deposition regarding the extremist side-slips of his contemporaries, prominent writers of our culture, is difficult to bear. The sense of nuances, intelligence, and sensitivity are also indisputable qualities of the diarist.”43

Often, appalled by the defiant and self-sufficient replies of the writers, which reached a twisting of the image of reality by language, all that Sebastian dares to do is smile to himself, recording, for those concerned, with an ironical air, the loquacity and self-sufficiency they displayed, indifferent to any judgment that the future might subject them to: “Neither Reinhardt [the author quotes Camil Petrescu from memory], nor Stanislavski, nobody, no director could reach my discoveries in theatre. I am the greatest director, because I have a deep knowledge of the text, and an extraordinary philosophical culture and an exceptional nervous sensibility.”44

Any diary represents a form of display of the self. Sebastian is no exception to the rule, but in his case, his motivations singularize him in the landscape of confessional writings. Perhaps the most appropriate way would be to accompany the reading of Sebastian’s *Diary (Jurnal)* with the thoughts of J.J. Rousseau from *Confessions (Confesiuni)*, in the contingency of an elective affinity: “I want to portray for my fellows a man in all the truth of his

nature; and this man will be me. [...] Here is what I did, what I thought, what I was. I told the good and the bad with the same impartiality. I did not pass over anything ugly, I added nothing beautiful, and if I happened to add some unimportant embellishment, it is only to fill a gap occasioned by the imperfections of my memory.”45

In Sebastian’s Diary (Jurnal), the notion of theatricality is consciously avoided, the writer trying to present himself and his reality in a rough style, undistorted, with no grandiloquence, appearing to us completely different from the Romanian novel or drama, which we can rigorously credit as artificial, in the purest sense of the word. Nevertheless, theatricality will emerge from under the species of style and by the effect of hyperbolizing the reality in which the characters from his novels and plays are placed, and even his own self from Diary (Jurnal). Honesty – alongside another defining feature: loyalty – represent for the author a proof of human value, being driven through all his work, both in his novels and plays, as well as in his confessional writings. Therefore, we have no reason to suspect an embellishment (a dramatization?) of the events and facts narrated in the diary kept between the years 1935-1944, even though, quite often, they put him in a less favourable light.

Without resorting to means of subjective interpretations, we believe that the author’s confidence in the honesty of the message broke down any intention – however trivial – to “adjust” his confessions in his own favour and to transform his personal ideas in the ideology of the Criterion activists, from which he progressively separated, with the publishing of the novel For Two Thousand Years (De două mii de ani). Moreover, Sebastian’s Diary (Jurnal) can and must be read through a depoliticized grid, in order to keep the moral message (and literary one) from behind the words. The author did not spectacularly, visibly throw himself in the middle of the events, to describe the polemical accents from the perspective of reading the written text, a reading that should take place sometime. He was content merely to record the ups and downs of the literary creations, without any enthusiastic reflections,

which portrays rather the profile of a “chronicler” and less that of an analyst. Here and there, the sober confessions of the writer are continued with the ones of the nostalgic self-dreamer.

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