

The Writer's Condition and the Concept of Fear

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Abstract: This paper approaches Otto Rank's theory according to which the main cause of anxiety is the human being's separation from the loved beings and objects. Along our lives, anxiety takes two forms: the fear of life and the fear of death. The fear of life refers to the anxiety which appears when the individual becomes aware of his creative skills which could separate him/her from the existing relationships. Writers like Emil Cioran, Mihail Sebastian, Octavian Paler, Yukio Mishima, Ernest Hemingway suffered from the fear of life, they were haunted by a tragic that brought about the loneliness of death. It is what Kierkegaard named: "the fatal disease", the sin of the artist's existence. The artistic process implies a permanent move between acceptance and rejection, satisfaction and denial, life and death, loneliness and happiness.

Keywords: anxiety; loneliness; subconscious; writing; vision

This paper approaches Otto Rank's theory according to which the main cause of **anxiety** is the human being's separation from the loved beings and objects. Along our lives, anxiety takes two forms: **the fear of life** and **the fear of death**.

The fear of life refers to the anxiety which appears when the person becomes aware of his **creative abilities/ skills** which could separate him/her from the existing relationships. On the other hand, the fear of death refers to the fear of losing his/her individuality, of being swallowed by the nothingness or whole. All his/ her life, every human being is pushed forward by the need of building himself/herself as an individual and of expressing himself/herself completely; but he/she is also pushed back by the fear that, acting like this, he/she will be isolated from the rest of the society. There are two possible solutions to this dilemma: that of the "common" person who accepts the society's standards and demands and that of the creative individual, who is ready to live alone and thus, creates his/her own standards.

The latter situation is very well described by Kierkegaard: "The artist wants to begin before the other people, not with his beginning, but in the beginning; he does not want to dress up in his ego, he does not want to see his task in his ego, but he wishes to build it on his own, through the medium of the finite form" (Kierkegaard, 1998, p. 71)

Writers like Emil Cioran, Mihail Sebastian, Octavian Paler, Yukio Mishima, Ernest Hemingway suffered from the fear of life, they were haunted by a **tragic** that brought about **the loneliness of death**. It is what Kierkegaard called: "the fatal disease", the sin of the **artist's existence**. The artistic process implies a permanent move between acceptance and rejection, satisfaction and denial, life and death, loneliness and happiness.

Using Otto Rank's terminology, Mihail Sebastian suffered from the fear of life even since childhood. The writer became aware of the isolation that the Romanian society between the two World Wars condemned him because of his Jewish origin; we could call it **the loneliness of the Jewish**.

The most important Japanese writer of the 20th century, Yukio Mishima, who, in 1970 committed the traditional ritual of suicide, wrote in his first novel – **The Confessions of a Mask**: "It is possible that the tragic I was feeling may have been nothing else than the projection of the pain caused by the acute sentiment of feeling refused." (Mishima, 2003, p. 13). Therefore, it can be proved that a certain isolation imposed by society and the impossibility of a total integration, caused by some factors, can bring about that feeling of tragic (which implies the feeling of guilt).

Mihail Sebastian (his real name was Iosif Hechter) was a Romanian novelist, playwright and essayist of Jewish origin who wrote his work between the two World Wars. All of us know so many things about anti-Semitism and its disastrous consequences upon the human soul. In psychoanalytical terms, it caused frustration, loneliness, alienation, hence a certain aggression directed towards oneself, towards the ego. Actually, the concept of tragic represents a narcissistic trauma, with deep roots in the Oedipus complex.

There have been frequent discussions about the original guilt of the Jewish, a guilt which makes the super-ego (the moral censorship) continuously punish and flagellate the ego. In the novel **For Two Thousand Years**, Sebastian confesses: "Haven't we been told so many times until now that we are a dirty people? It may be true. Maybe dirtiness represents our mysticism, our holiness. It is a way of

kneeling you down, of slowly and voluptuously mutilating you, farther and farther from the white star of purity.” (Sebastian, 1990, p. 39) This is an unconscious, but tragic choice, made in the name of an accusatory history; an absurd trial seems to have sentenced the whole Jewish nation to uprooting and aggressiveness directed towards its ego, in an anti-narcissistic attitude, that is a collective oedipian complex (in Freudian terms).

In **For Two Thousand Years**, Mihail Sebastian writes about the apology of loneliness, considering that this natural and eternal datum belongs to the Divinity as well, as a condition of the whole universe, valid beyond time, space, human or divine condition: ”I sometimes feel that there is something beyond that: the God against whom I saw my elders fighting in synagogues, the God with whom I would show off a long time ago, when I was a child, that God whose loneliness I would cry out every morning when reading my prayer, God is one, God is unique. But doesn't this mean that God is lonely? Lonely as we are, a loneliness coming from him and preserved for him”. (Sebastian, 1990, p. 54) This may be considered a blasphemy, as long as the essence of faith is not feeling alone in this world governed by a protective God who listens to all his children's prayers. Therefore, should God be forgiven for this unbearable distance causing loneliness? Could this be an oedipian aspect, a kind of revolt against the Father who sentenced him to loneliness – the basic condition of the human being? Actually, even Jesus Christ felt this awful loneliness when being crucified and he uttered these words: “My God, my God, why did you leave me?”

Actually, the fragment reveals a game of mirrors: loneliness, as a universal concept, represents the mirror blurring the reflection of the human entity in the divine entity. The human being tries to look inside oneself by mirroring in God's image, but the mirror returns the human being the image of his own loneliness. In the terms of Jacques Lacan, this means losing the Imaginary (the realm where children are born). The man tries to find the Other in the mirror (i.e. God), who is and is not him; it is him because the reflection is the Father (the unity between entities) and, in the same time, is not him, as it is just a reflection (representing the image of loneliness).

Mihail Sebastian emphasized the idea of his immense loneliness: “(...) It is known that, as you can see me here, among these ten people, who think that I am their brother of suffering, I am lonely, absolutely and forever lonely.” It is a natural loneliness, as long as the essayist from **Fragments from a Found Notebook** writes that: “God's world is a failed work, everything is compromised up to the

roots, everything is despicable, mean and abject.” This is something that also Emil Cioran (Romanian writer and philosopher) feels: “The hell is represented by this stiff present, this monotonous tension, this reversed eternity which opens towards nothing.” (Cioran, 1964, p. 184) It is as though the world disintegrated, time did not define the space and the human being was sentenced to an eternal hell, with no any way out to the spiritual dimension. The measure of the authentic despair is not given by the guilt, but by the self-awareness.

In January 1939 Sebastian wrote in his **Memoirs**: “There is nothing else left for me, just a suicidal or leave. I should leave somewhere for good, in a lonely place” (Sebastian, 1996, p. 67). As it can be noticed, there is almost no boundary between death and loneliness. Perhaps this is the key sentence for understanding Sebastian’s concept of loneliness, although in his plays the choice of his characters – as they always run away from love, from life – can be interpreted as a search for their own identity, peace of mind, a balance that is, however, an illusory one. In Michael Cunningham’s novel – **The Hours** – Virginia Woolf tells her husband: “You cannot find your peace running away from life.”

The loneliness of Sebastian’s life brings the loneliness of death; this is what Kierkegaard called the fatal disease. He regarded despair as the main illness of the Christian soul; this despair belongs to the ego, to the spirit. Kierkegaard talked about the sin of the poets’/ artists’ existence: “From a Christian point of view, any poet’s existence, with his whole aesthetic existence, is a sin; the sin of writing poetry instead of living, of connecting himself with the good and evil instead of being the good and evil, that is essentially aspiring to become all these” (Kierkegaard, 1998, p. 71).

Nikos Kazantzakis marvellously and inspiringly described his laboratory of creation: “The fourth day I jumped out of the bed, I took the pen and I started writing... I was writing and I was so proud; I was a God who was doing what he wanted, was changing the reality, shaping it the way he wanted, mixing the truth and the lie; but it was no longer the truth and the lie, it was a soft dough that I was shaping according to my own imagination, without asking for anyone’s permission.” (Kazantzakis, 1986, p. 10) The Greek writer becomes the Creator of a world of words, which is not less real than God’s creation.

Analyzing the theory of the artist’s sinful existence, who refuses to obey the laws of life, accepting only his own creations, we cannot ignore Oscar Wilde’s aesthetics which represented a real revolution in those times. Wilde elaborated his

philosophy of art in four essays: **The Decay of Lying, Pen, Pencil and Poison, The Critic as an Artist, The Truth of Masks**. In **The Decay of Lying**, Oscar Wilde defines the four doctrines of his new aesthetics: “Art expresses nothing else but itself. It has an independent life, just like the Thought, and it develops on its own coordinates”, “All bad art comes from its return to Life and Nature and turning it into ideals”, “Life imitates Art more than Art imitates Life”, “The purpose of Art is lying, saying beautiful and untrue things.”

Oscar Wilde considers nature to be totally imperfect: “My own experience has taught me that the more we study Art, the less we care about Nature. What Art reveals us is that Nature lacks beauty, its strange cruelties, its extreme monotony, its totally imperfect condition.” By contrast, “Art is our spiritual protest, our gentle aspiration to show Nature its real place. Through Art and only through Art we can achieve our perfection; through Art and only through Art we can protect ourselves against the sordid problems of the real existence” (O. Wilde, in J. Berman, **Narcissism and the Novel**, 1990:152). We do not intend to approach Mihail Sebastian’s aesthetic principles, but, to a certain extent, his aesthetics falls in with Oscar Wilde’s. In 1935, Mihail Sebastian wrote in **The Stage** (a cultural review): “Theatre is a fiction you believe in. A game you take part in. It is a delicate trick, a subtle trick which captivates you, changes your views, obliges you to leave your loneliness” (Sebastian, 1935, p. 1) In another article from **The Stage**, Sebastian wrote: “The mask expresses and satisfies this need of stepping out there. It corresponds to our instinct of escape. An instinct similar to that of hunger, thirst, love, of course, a royal instinct, but which is not less natural” (Sebastian, **The Man and the Mask**, in *The Stage*, 1935, p. 1).

In the two writers’ view, art is a parallel reality, as plausible and natural as the reality proper. The former one will never be dethroned. For Wilde, art cannot be the reflection of nature, as it is an independent reality; on the contrary, mirroring functions vice-versa: nature is the deformed, imperfect reflection of art, which is the supreme reality. For Sebastian, art seems to reflect nature, but without being subject to it. The entity in the mirror – Art – represents a bright image, different in intensity from the reflecting image, i.e. nature. “Stepping out there” means looking for your good ego, the artistic ego in the mirror.

On the 20th of May 1938, Sebastian wrote in his **Memoirs**: “It is so good not to be alone. This is another retort of Nora’s” (Sebastian, 1996, p. 163). What Otto Rank called *the fear of life* characterizes all his characters, as this is the form taken by his anxiety. That is why Sebastian desperately expressed his affiliation to the Jewish

people: "I will never stop being a Jew. (...) Has anyone ever needed a homeland, a land with plants and animals more than me?" (Sebastian, 1990, p. 196) The tragic experience of his psychological isolation made him remember that he spiritually belonged to a people that would never give him up.

Dr. Ian Suttie, in his book **The Origins of Love and Hate** (1935), lays the emphasis on the social environment, which represents what the concept of "mother" means in the classical psychoanalysis. He considers that the need for mother is perceived by the child as a need for company, coming from the fear of isolation. Later, what remains is the need for belonging, for moral encouragement and protection; all these must be satisfied by society. The need for belonging and the fear of loneliness are the unconscious expression of the survival instinct. Sebastian's confession reminds of what Emil Cioran wrote in his book - **My Country**: "The passion for my country, a desperate, aggressive passion I cannot get rid of and which has been tormenting me for years. My country! I have dreamt to cling to it at any price and there has been nothing I can cling to" (Cioran, 1996, p. 41) (as he was exiled by the communist regime). Just like in Sebastian's case, here there is a space and temporal void, a loneliness coming from his not belonging anywhere, a Paradise lost in the darkness of history; the space called "homeland" seems to be an archetypal symbol of Carl Gustav Jung's collective unconscious.

In **The Fruit of the Earth**, Andre Gide wrote: "I hated homes, families, all places where the human being thinks he can find peace, the eternal feelings and the loyalty in love affairs, everything that compromises freedom. Families! I hate you: closed doors, exclusive happiness. I taught my soul to become a wanderer, finally happy to value its loneliness." (Gide, 1968, p. 59) The same obsessive freedom; the same escape from the super-ego's power – which always causes frustration – and this seems to be the ego's supreme victory. We could consider it another type of negation in fantasy (Anna Freud's theory). But this is not an escape through dream or artistic creation, but the escape from a possibly frustrating reality into a desired reality; it is not just the dream which has nothing to do with reality, but the dream integrated in the reality. Loneliness means freedom, which has a narcissistic essence. Kazantzakis also said in his famous novel – **Alexis Zorbas** – that "loneliness is the human being's natural state."

Pointing out Otto Rank's idea according to which the creative abilities of the individual threaten to isolate him and destroy his relations, we come to the conclusion that creating means being alone. The artist sublimates his urges in order to run away from frustration and loneliness, withdrawing in the realm of creation

and imaginary. But the artist will always return to his eternal loneliness since his condition as a creator will prevent him from adapting to the external world.

In 1954, when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, Ernest Hemingway read the following discourse: "Writing, at its best, is a lonely life. Organizations for writers palliate the writer's loneliness but I doubt if they improve his writing. He grows in public stature as he sheds his loneliness and often his work deteriorates. For he does his work alone and if he is a good enough writer he must face eternity, on the lack of it, each day". (Ernest Hemingway, in Michaela Praisler, *For a Psychoanalytical Approach to Literature*, 2000, p. 194) The discourse has the value of a confession, reflecting the artist's fear of losing his future creative skills; here we can sense the tragic of the imminent forgetfulness. The fear of life turns into the fear of death, the artist will lose his individuality, will be swallowed by the whole/ nothingness.

Nikos Kazantzakis also wrote about the writer's loneliness and unhappiness: "The writer has a miserable destiny. Every word is a shell which cannot be crushed and which closes a huge explosive force inside itself. For discovering its meaning you have to let it explode like a bomb, to liberate the prisoner inside it". (Kazantzakis, 1986, p. 101) And another fascinating fragment: "You are a goat, I often tell my soul, trying to laugh, for fear I might cry, you are a goat, mu poor soul. You are hungry and instead of drinking wine and eating bread and meat, you take a sheet of paper and write on it the words: wine, meat and bread and then you eat it". (**Report to El Greco**, 1986, p. 203) In my opinion, this is the most suggestive expression of the abstract world the writer lives in. The body becomes spirit, the reality becomes illusion, it is like a journey with no return, at the end of which (if there is an end) we can find only loneliness and sadness; this is a journey towards alienation.

Loneliness can mean freedom or despair, and also existential burden. Kierkegaard considered that: "The deeper his anxiety, the greater the man." (Kierkegaard, 1998, p. 68). Could this statement be compared to Camil Petrescu's judgement, according to which "the more consciousness, the more tragedy?". Perhaps it could. It should be mentioned that the two writers fought to survive their traumas and to heal their souls through writing. The human universe proves its force through suffering and people can reach the supreme dignity only by enduring. And death with all its facets – fear, mystery, expectation, suicidal search – is the main reason of suffering. Through fiction, all these writers tried to reach a certain understanding and acceptance." Acceptance is their only revolt", Octavian Paler would have said. (Paler, 1975, p. 25)

Accepting loneliness is everything that is left for the artist. Moreover, isolation and alienation belong to the human condition. Therefore, the obsession for loneliness and death must have come from frustration and his feeling of guilt. He was obsessed with death as a threatening limit he was afraid of; in other words, the ultimate experience. Returning to Mihail Sebastian, in his book of essays – **How I Became a Hooligan** – the writer confessed: “I ask nothing else from life, but I wish I could have the right to sincerely look it in the eyes. That is why I write. That is why I exist” (Sebastian, 1990, p. 245).

Could we say that creation saved these artists? Was writing a way of dealing with their fears? It is hard to say. There is always something hidden in our unconscious... And fears never go away...

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