

**Mihail Sebastian - A Danubian Romanian
or the Writer's Triple Identity**

Senior Lecturer Alina Beatrice Chesca, PhD
"Danubius" University of Galati, Romania
alina.chesca@univ-danubius.ro

Abstract: Mihail Sebastian – the Romanian writer of Jewish origin - lived in one of the most tumultuous and frustrating periods of history, the two world wars, marked by deep social and political changes, and, last but not least, by psychological ones. He was part of a generation who experienced an age of profound changes, when instability, insecurity and alienation were the factors that led to analyzing the inner world. Mihail Sebastian was destined to be “the child of suffering”, according to a wrong mentality induced against the Semitic community along the time; and thus, his life took the shape of his destiny. Undoubtedly, Joseph Hechter’s (his real name) childhood was frustrating, the writer often evoking it as a troubled childhood, which was to mark him for the rest of his life; Mihail Sebastian recognized the enormous inferiority complex that the “lost” child had because of his Hebrew identity. That is why, Sebastian aspired to re-create a painful reality through art; his work tried a solution, a version of an autobiography marked by the awareness of loss. As far as his birth place is concerned (the city of Braila, on the Danube river), for Sebastian it represented a “mythic geography”. “Jewish, Romanian and Danubian” is how the writer named himself or “the most Romanian Jewish”. Therefore, we can talk about Sebastian’s triple identity: Romanian, Jewish and writer of the Danube.

Keywords: Mihail Sebastian; triple identity; Semitic community

Mihail Sebastian – the Romanian writer of Jewish origin - lived in one of the most tumultuous and frustrating periods of history, the two world wars, marked by deep social and political changes, and, last but not least, by psychological ones. He was part of a generation who experienced an age of profound changes, when instability, insecurity and alienation were the factors that led to analyzing the inner world. Mihail Sebastian was fated to be “the child of grief”, according to a wrong mentality induced against the Semitic community along the time. Undoubtedly, Joseph Hechter’s (his real name) childhood was frustrating, the writer often evoking it as a troubled childhood, which was to mark him for the rest of his life; Mihail Sebastian recognized the enormous inferiority complex that the “lost” child had because of his Jewish identity. That is why, Sebastian aspired to re-create a

painful reality through art; his work tried a solution, a version of an autobiography marked by the awareness of loss.

As far as his birth place is concerned (the city of Braila, on the Danube river), for Sebastian it represented a “mythic geography”. “Jewish, Romanian and Danubian” is how the writer named himself or “the most Romanian Jewish”. Therefore, we can talk about Sebastian’s triple identity: Romanian, Jewish and writer of the Danube. The social dimension is a psycho-social one, considering its very serious implications. Joseph Hechter was Jew and it is not difficult to understand the implications during that period. Everything can be summarized using the following words: grief, fear, dehumanization, in one word: frustration. Therefore, his work represented a way to overcome his loneliness and disorientation (or at least to make them more bearable), Mihail Sebastian carrying a dialogue with his destiny on the sheet of paper.

Critics spoke about confession in his work. This confession seems to refer to ideas and not to real living. At first his novels’ characters seemed to be characters from real life; as, if his life is partly intertwined with his work, this was made, as he himself realized, only as far as the lucid and true reality is related to what he calls imagination and dream. The mask is transfiguration by art and the writer feels like closing his real life under the mask of imagination. Sebastian said that “the mask expresses the need to step outside. It responds to our instinct of evasion as life is not rich enough, happiness is not large enough to close a human being in its circle for ever”. We must jump over this circle and all of us jump over it the way we can, very seldom in real life and “always in our dreams”... The man with the mask is perhaps the game of art itself in the simplest expression of this game. The relations “between man and the mask are the relations between reality and imagination, between lucidity and dream, between truth and fairy”. In the simple gesture of the human being, who “covers his face with the mask, lies the beginning of the act of creation in art”. (Sebastian, 24 Febr. 1935) An excessive sensitivity mixed with a brilliant intelligence, Sebastian is the “man from the Danube, as he likes to call himself, between his famous city fellows: Panait Istrati, Perpessicius and Nae Ionescu”. (Trandafir, 2007, p. 13)

From a genetic point of view, due to his mother, he had black eyes, long hands, pale face, poor health, early anguish, but he always had a certain resistance “due to the power of nerves more than due to the power of my body”, as he himself said. His childhood was, however, “the happy age”, especially when it gained the aesthetic “halo” of the memory; even Stendhal’s or Gorky’s very unhappy

childhood had that specific age charm. Two of his favorite authors spoke about childhood in a different way: Gide referred to the “darkness of childhood”, Alain Fournier to “the childhood credo.”

As far as the birth place is concerned, for Sebastian it was a “mythical geography”, “an acacia branch from the Danube”, as Perpessicius said. The baby, as Sebastian remembered, was thrilled with “the third poplar tree from St. Peter’s church yard, mysterious, tall, black, with the shade falling through the window in summer nights, up above my bed.” (Sebastian, *For 2000 Years*, 1990, p. 11) And it was also the time of the German occupation in the World War I, with planes, bombs and the presence of death which was not understood then. The Greek children from the Large Garden used to throw stones at him and shout: “coward Jew”. But the town of his childhood was illuminated by the mysterious “fortress” near the “big garden”, by the abundance of vegetation: acacias, chestnut trees, roses. In spring, Sebastian was delighted with the white acacia flowers, with the Danubian scenery, with the “peace of the marshes”, with crossing the river by boat towards the Lipovans’ villages, bathing in the sun and lying on the bank “beach”. In Braila he felt at “home”: “It was in vain that I walked away from my country, in vain I forgot about old things and I loved new ones, my Danube man soul can not pass without emotion by a sailboat or by a fishing boat”. (Sebastian, *For 2000 Years*, 1990, p. 11) On every occasion, he found a pretext to boast with his native “borough”: “The one who does not know Braila, who does not love it (as we, its citizens, love it), will probably find exaggerated the emotion we feel when we talk about our city.” (Sebastian, 1990, p. 12)

In *Writings on Literature and Art (Bildende Kunst und Literatur)*, Freud made the statement that in “the cases studied by me I have found a common feature referring to the first years of life. The neurosis of these patients sends to an unpleasant experience or grief from early childhood, when, knowing themselves to be innocent, they consider it as an unjust frustration.” (Freud, 1980, p. 197) In the classical psychoanalysis, childhood is very important, considering that the frustrations that will cause anxiety appear in these years and the memories of this period, even repressed, will mark the individual's later life. This is what happened to Mihail Sebastian: “A shadow of terror falls over all my memories from school and childhood” (Sebastian, 1990, p. 10), said the writer in his autobiographical novel. Mihail Sebastian considered that the antisemitic outbursts represented a humiliation of the human being. The realization that he might be rejected the right

to feel Romanian humiliated him. The space of his childhood turned into one of loneliness and alienation.

Repressing his memories, Sebastian tried to leave his childhood narcissism by "destroying" a frustrating past, full of anguish. Therefore, Sebastian the adult would often feel the social void, manifested by depression and the attempt to escape from distressing situations.

It is a hypothesis that the origin of the writer's frustration is his childhood; the starting point is the fear which, by being repressed, becomes aggressiveness that turns into anguish if it is not assumed by the I, which is weak during childhood. Karen Horney, the representative of the "left wing" of psychoanalysis (referring to the individual's cultural and social environment), considered anguish as having its origins in childhood, occurring when the child is not loved or does not have the certainty that is wanted; he ends up by being afraid of the environment, considering it unfair and cruel. According to this concept postulated by Horney in "*New Ways in Psychoanalysis*", the child not only feels the environment as a threat towards his whole development, but he feels that his individuality is threatened, his freedom restricted and happiness prohibited.

In the novel , "*For 2000 Years*", the character tried to find his real ego and to metaphysically justify his sadness. The impossibility to escape from his own life and from the censorship of his superego, the reality principle which creates frustration - unleashed only by sublimation in writing and denial in fantasy - made him state with lucidity and sorrow: "But some day, in a minute of absent-mindedness, you meet yourself in a corner of the soul, as if you met a lender you have in vain tried to avoid. You catch sight of you and then you realize how useless are all escapes from this prison without walls, gates and bars, from this prison which is actually your life. "

Thinking of his grandfather, the watchmaker, Sebastian believes that the daily attempt to understand the harmony of clocks meant for the elderly an opportunity to escape from their ego and loneliness: "The old and restless man, as I felt he was, must have envied the peace of those metal beings, created by his hands. He used to live among them absorbed for hours, days, years. His job must have been an escape, a refuge. And maybe he ran away from himself and he suffered from the fear of not meeting himself." (*For 2000 Years*, 1990, p. 51)

Joseph was born in Brăila, on October the 8th 1907, being the second child of the Hechters. His mother, Clara Weintraub, was born in Bucovina in 1883, and his

father, Mendel Hechter, was born in Buzau, in 1877. It was a modest family who earned its living from a small workshop. He spent his childhood and adolescence in the town on the Danube, in the midst of chestnuts and acacias. His grandfather had been employed at the docks: “He used to live outside between the winds, with his feet on stone and earth, watching the flooded horizon of the marsh, talking loudly to cover with his voice the sound of the river, the ship siren, the elevator rattling. A man from the Danube.” (*For 2000 Years*, 1990, p. 7) His mother's family descended from the people in the north Bucovina and Moldavia, people who lived inside their houses more than outside, bent over books: “They have always lived around the synagogues. Maybe from them I inherited the black eyes, the long and thin hands, the pale cheeks. They have a poor, restless health, which last longer due to the power of nerves more than due to the power of my body.” (*For 2000 Years*, 1990, p. 7) Certainly, the writer inherited the sensitivity and taste for reading from some of them and from others the nonconformism given only by the life spent in the middle of nature, but also the need to escape, to look for new frontiers. This contradictory inheritance was happily balanced by a unique Romanian landscape, able to balance these dichotomous features: “Everything that is fever was damped down, was ordered. I do not know how I would have been if I had been born elsewhere. But I am convinced that I had been different. Against my Jewish taste for intimate disasters, as an example, the river raised its royal indifference. Against my inner complications it opposed the simplicity of the landscapes.” (*For 2000 Years*, 1990, p. 8)

Here it is a return to the house of memory, a return making the real world fade away, “a house of dreams, the delirious house.” (Bachelard, 1999, p. 80) Returning to the native land, even on the level of memory, was characterized by the classical psychoanalysis (Jung) as a return to the womb. Gaston Bachelard speaks about the feeling of “a descent into the past”: “for us there is no past to awaken the taste for our past, but it soon becomes a distant past inside ourselves, an uncertain and enormous past, which has no longer a date and does no longer know the dates of our history.” (Bachelard, 1999, p. 103)

Although he tried to organize his life differently, since August 1927, when he first published his serial story in *Cuvântul*, Sebastian failed to escape his small town and only the constant trips between Braila and Bucharest, particularly during Law School exam sessions, represented a connection with the capital as a cultural centre. He partly got used to the conditions and the boring provincial life did not exasperate him any longer and, away from home, he would remember it with

nostalgia. The possibility of failing in the provincial towns was mentioned again in 1928 in an essay written by an intellectual crushed by the environment overwhelmed by mediocrity.

As we have previously mentioned, Joseph Hechter's childhood was undoubtedly frustrating, the writer often evoking it as a troubled childhood, which was to mark him for the rest of his life: "On the contrary, I loved in its sad distinction the melancholy of the poorly dressed boy, lost among vaporous ladies and elegant dancers, silent and really stupid in this circumstance, ridiculous and touching, compromised and aware of this enormous inferiority. That is why, the tragedy of the "parent pauvre" character was so familiar to me. I don't really know... Could it be a distant memory of a terrorized and shy childhood?" (M. Sebastian, *Letter on the Good Manners and Appropriate Behaviour in the Society*, in *Cuvântul*, no. 1199, 1928) Or another confession, made somewhere else: "You see, I lived in a world of miserable people." (Sebastian, *Open Letter to the Finance Minister*, 1935)

However, it was not primarily the material deprivation that hurt little Joseph's sensitivity, but an offensive and frustrating appellation which haunted him all his childhood: "coward Jew." In the novel "*For 2000 Years*", Mihail Sebastian confessed: "No, I do not remember to have ever been a coward, although the Greeks from the Large garden, who threw rocks at us whenever they caught us there, shouted that every day since I had known myself and thus I grew up with this shout, threw like a spit: "coward Jew." (Sebastian, *For 2000 Years*, 1990, p. 6)

Mihail Sebastian recognized the complex of "enormous inferiority" that the "lost" child had, which was justified if we consider the opinion of another Jew, Alfred Adler - who reached the conclusion that a neglected or hated child develops feelings of inferiority. It is true that the cause of little Joseph's unhappiness were not the family relations, but the social ones, as he felt rejected, insulted and hated by his fellows.

The Hechters spoke only Romanian and the parents "educated us in a Romanian way" (as the writer said in a letter addressed to Peter Comarnescu). However, he was not allowed to use some words that were related to the idea of being Romanian: "It was almost inevitable in high school, during the history class, while telling about war, that I should use the first person plural: we Romanians ... ("what Romanians?" a boy from a desk shouted, preventing me for a long time from showing solidarity with the story of Stephen the Great)." (Sebastian, *For 2000 Years*, 1990, p. 10)

It should be noted that the idea of freedom is deeply rooted in human beings and nothing is more damaging than the attack against it. Sebastian felt very intensely, for the above-mentioned reasons, the suppression of individuality or the slave-like discipline which inevitably induce fear of failure on all levels; thus he understood that the right/ obligation to be free came from the reality according to which one had to tragically look for his moral and creative freedom, without excluding the sense of solidarity. Sebastian longed for silence and solitude (not isolation, he mentioned several times), suitable for mental, moral and creative health and for the creation act.

Sebastian's reference to his childhood captured the feelings of confusion and helplessness that he experienced. Indeed, it was self-esteem wounded by a society trying to isolate and humiliate him; it was a total contradiction between his childhood and his inner feelings torn by shame and despair.

Time did not sweeten the experience of the little Jew. Under Sebastian's sensitivity there was, however, a strong waiting power, confirming Goethe's reflection that "the genius is a long patience." His vulnerability in front of life had a dual nature just like everything connected with him: love for life, but also the temptation of death; sensitivity, but also the power to endure; the desire to live freely, but also the isolation in the world of writing; search for love, but also its unconscious rejection. It was as if one of them had looked in the mirror to find the other one - probably the repressed self, a self reflection of the self in his non-self .

Sebastian aspired to re-create a painful reality through art. His work tried to find a solution by building a double, a complementary version of an autobiography marked by the awareness of loss. Through fiction he could reach understanding and acceptance. "Acceptance remains his only revolt", Octavian Paler would have said about Oedipus. Reaching artistic maturity, Sebastian was able to "cooperate" with his childhood - perceiving the world with understanding, but at the same time, sensing it bad, hostile and vindictive. He was full of compassion and love for people. Mircea Vieru addressed him in the novel *For 2000 Years* as follows: "With Jews like you peace will always be possible. Even more than peace: love." (Sebastian, *For 2000 Years*, 1990, p. 191) At the same time, inside Sebastian there was a darker side that included features associated with narcissistic traumas, including anger – the secret agony of his soul – which never allowed him to forget. In the same novel, Mihail Sebastian presented the conversation with a character who made the statement: "You have a tragic spirit" or "Jews are a tragic nation." (Sebastian, *For 2000 Years*, 1990, p. 191) In the novel *Report to El Greco*, Nikos

Kazantzakis put these words into the mouth of a young Jewish poetess: “Wherever you touch a Jew, you will find a wound.” (Kazantzakis, 1986, p. 360)

In their works, artists explore the relationship between idealization and disappointment, writing being a direct consequence of their lives. Yet, the miracle of art is illusory because it lacks natural support. Sebastian lived in an era of dissolution of all values, of relativization of all certainties. The writer himself suggested that the only certainties we can have are the immutable truths, which belong to other laws than the human ones: “Where do you find anxieties in this world full of certainties? Isn’t the mere fact that the sun rises and sets enough for our peace?” (Sebastian, 1990, p. 170) However, he desperately wanted a dialogue, a community, a spiritual unity. In this ceaseless creation of new galleries towards people it is something from the paradoxical passion of the absurd man symbolized by Camus in “*The Myth of Sisyphus*”. This is definitely a sign of lucid and alert humanity. “We are people with feelings”, (Sebastian, 1990, p. 190) said Sebastian being aware of his tragic sensitivity.

The Romanian writer believed in humanity even when its unaltered image was barely visible, covered by the unnatural lava of all servitudes and human mutilations: “There were inside me – there are still – abilities of happiness – a certain enthusiasm, a kind of lyricism, a trust in light, serenity, life, a certain warmth, an endless power to love.” (Sebastian, *Diary*, 1996, p. 486) In his deepest despair, there was always a flash of hope: “What a happy morning! Life still has some things to tell me.” (Sebastian, *Diary*, 1996, p. 107)

It can be said that, throughout Sebastian’s life, he had this triple identity: Romanian, Jewish and writer of the Danube. All these features were part of his soul and mind and offered him a complex and profound spiritual structure, thus allowing him to enter the gallery of special writers.

Bibliography

- Adler, Alfred (1991). *Cunoașterea omului/ Knowledge of Man*. Bucharest: Ed. Științifică.
- Bachelard, Gaston (1999). *Pământul și reveriile odihnei/The Earth and the Reveries of Peace*. Bucharest: Ed. Univers.
- Freud, Sigmund (1980). *Scrisori despre literatură și artă/ Writings on Literature and Art*. Bucharest: Ed. Univers.
- Horney, Karen (1992). *New Ways in Psychoanalysis*. London and N.Y.

Jung, Carl Gustav (1997). *Imaginea omului și imaginea lui Dumnezeu/The Image of Man and the Image of God*. Bucharest: Teora.

Mălăncioiu, Ileana (1978). *Vina tragică/The Tragic Guilt*. Bucharest: Ed. Cartea Românească.

Kazantzakis, Nikos (1986). *Raport către El Greco/Report to El Greco*. Bucharest: Univers.

Sebastian, Mihail (1990). *De două mii de ani.../For Two Thousand Years*. Bucharest: Humanitas.

Sebastian, Mihail (1996). *Jurnal/Diary*. Bucharest: Humanitas.

Sebastian, Mihail (1935). Omul și masca/The Man and the Mask. *Rampa/The Footlights*, XVIII, no. 5137, 25 feb.

Sebastian, M. (1928). Scrisoare despre bunele moravuri și justa ținută în societate/ Letter on the Good Manners and Appropriate Behaviour in the Society. *Cuvântul/The Word*, IV, no. 1199, 24 August.

Sebastian, M. (1935). Scrisoare deschisă d-lui Ministru de Finanțe/Open Letter to the Finance Minister. *Rampa/The Footlights* 18, no. 5095, 6 January.

Trandafir, Constantin (2007). *Mihail Sebastian. Între viață și ficțiune/Mihail Sebastian. Between Life and Fiction*. Bucharest: Fundația Culturală Libra.