

The Danubian Eros and Thanatos in Mihail Sebastian's Work

Alina Beatrice Chesca¹

Abstract: The present paper approaches two psychoanalytical concepts – the EROS and the THANATOS – which are extremely complex and, at the same time, fascinating due to their implications and the way they relate to the biography and work of Mihail Sebastian – the writer from the Danube. Art and biography meet in this danubian writer's work, who tried to fight against his traumas and to heal himself through writing. The Eros and the Thanatos are omnipresent in the fiction of Sebastian's obsessions and, when he faced destruction at an objective level, this fight resulted in anxiety and anguish. Along one's life, there are two types of anxiety: the fear of life and the fear of death. The main theme of Sebastian's work is that the human universe proves its strength only by suffering and that human beings can reach the ultimate dignity through their ability to endure. However, the instinct of death – the Thanatos – is always connected to the instinct of life – the Eros. We do not intend to reduce the latter one to the idea of love or passion, but we will interpret it in a broader sense – that of life, of creative energy, of light. Sebastian himself said: "Life starts in darkness. There is a night for every day, there is a shadow for every light".

Keywords: Eros; Thanatos; anxiety; the fear of life; the fear of death

Regarding the previously mentioned concepts, Sigmund Freud explains the instincts of life and death like this: "On the basis of some theoretical reflections supported by biological data, I imagined the existence of a *death instinct*, driving the organic to the anorganic, while the Eros aims at complicating life. Both categories of instincts act like preservation instincts, tending to restore a state which was disturbed by the emergence of life; life itself is a fight and a compromise between the two tendencies." (*Dincolo de principiul plăcerii/Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1992, p. 131).

According to Freud's theories, the human being is driven by the evil inside him. In **Beyond the Pleasure Principle**, he states that the human being has the ability to imagine more pleasure and satisfaction than he can ever achieve, therefore his fight has a tragic quality, as it cannot simplify the world, but only complicate it. Sometimes this complication cannot be accepted and, consequently, it can lead to two kinds of death: one by writing the suicidal text and the other one by

¹ Senior Lecturer, PhD, "Danubius" University of Galati, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Blvd, Galati 800654, Romania, Tel.: +40372 361 102, Corresponding author: alina.chesca@univ-danubius.ro.

committing suicide. Combining the modern psychoanalysis with the literary psychoanalysis, we will try to analyze Mihail Sebastian's biography and texts in order to understand his inner crisis generated by the permanent fight between the Eros and the Thanatos.

Sometimes the Thanatos is accompanied by peace, with no any anxiety or anguish, as if death comes naturally, like a redemption. Could this be the release of the ego from the obsessive feeling of culpability that Sebastian was "sentenced" to by the super-ego? Perhaps it was, considering that Sebastian suffered from the Oedipus complex, in other words from the guilt complex that he had after being rejected by the mother society.

Any study about these two concepts – Eros and Thanatos – should include Otto Rank, as his theory on the cause of anxiety could offer a plausible explanation regarding Sebastian's mental and writing. Otto Rank's theory refers to the individual's separation from the loved persons and objects, considering that this is the universal cause of anxiety. Along one's life, anxiety takes two forms: the fear of life and the fear of death. The fear of life represents the anxiety which appears when the individual becomes aware of one's creative skills which, if expressed, could bring about the separation from the existing relations; it is the fear of having to live like an isolated individual. On the other hand, the fear of death is the fear of losing one's individuality, of being "swallowed" by the whole.

Using Otto Rank's terminology, Sebastian suffered from the fear of life even since childhood. The writer became aware of the isolation caused by the society in the name of his Jewish origin; we could name it the loneliness of the Jewish. Critics and psychoanalysts have often talked about the Jew's primary guilt; Sebastian confesses: "Haven't we been told so many times that we are a dirty people? Maybe this is true. Maybe our mysticism, our asceticism is this – the dirt." (De două mii de ani/For Two Thousand Years, 1990, p. 39) It is an unconscious, but tragical choice, made in the name of an accusatory history, an aggressiveness directed towards his own ego, a kind of collective Oedipian complex.

In the novel **For Two Thousand Years**, Sebastian makes the apology of loneliness, considering that it characterizes the divinity as well, being natural and eternal, a condition of the whole universe, beyond time, space, human or divine condition: "Sometimes I feel that beyond this there is something else: the God with whom I have seen old men fighting in the synagogues, that God whose loneliness I would scream every morning, when reading my prayer. "God is one; God is unique." Doesn't "God is one" mean that "God is lonely"? Maybe as lonely as we are, a loneliness that we keep for Him." (De două mii de ani/For Two Thousand Years, 1990, p. 54) This could be a rather blasphemous idea, considering that the essence of faith is actually not feeling lonely in this world governed by a protective God who listens to all his children's prayers. In the same novel, Sebastian continues to emphasize the idea of his never-ending loneliness: "I am lonely,

totally lonely, for ever lonely.” (De două mii de ani/For Two Thousand Years, 1990, p. 31) It is a natural and understood loneliness, as long as the writer considers that: “God’s world is a wrong work, everything is compromised, awful and mean.” (Fragmente dintr-un carnet găsit/Fragments from a Found Notebook, 1968: 20) It is as if the world disintegrates, time no longer defines space and human beings are doomed to live in an eternal hell, with no escape. The loneliness can mean freedom or despair, existential burden. Kierkegaard considers that: “The deeper his anxiety, the greater the man is.” (Maladia mortală/The Deadly Disease, 1998, p. 68)

In January 1939, the writer from the Danube writes in his **Diary**: “In my life there is nothing else left but committing suicide or going somewhere, to a deserted place.” (Jurnal/Diary, 1996, p. 67) Therefore, there is no difference between death and loneliness. Maybe in this sentence lies the key of understanding the concept of loneliness with Sebastian, although in his plays the choice made by his characters, i.e. the escape to a lonely world, can be interpreted as a choice for peace of mind.

On the 20th of May 1938, Sebastian puts down in his **Diary**: “How good it is not to be alone. This is something that Nora could have said.” (Jurnal/Diary, 1996, p. 168) It should be mentioned that, what Otto Rank named the fear of life, characterizes all his characters. That is why Sebastian strongly expresses his belonging to the Jewish people. In the novel **For Two Thousand Years** he concludes: “I will never stop being a Jew. Has anyone ever needed a homeland, a land with plants and animals more than me?” (De două mii de ani/For Two Thousand Years, 1990, p. 196) The tragic experience of his psychological isolation makes him remind himself that he spiritually belongs to a people he will never give up on.

Considering Otto Rank’s theory according to which the individual’s creative skills threaten to isolate him, we come to the conclusion that writing means being alone. The artist sublimates his impulses in order to escape his frustration and loneliness, withdrawing to the realm of imagination and creation.

Sebastian does not see happiness like a joy, like a positive element touching the whole human existence, but like a short escape from the anxiety feeling. In **For Two Thousand Years** he writes: “But my happiness is always threatened by a fall.” (De două mii de ani/For Two Thousand Years, 1990, p. 41) As it can be seen, the two instincts – life and death – are like in a permanent game. This confirms Freud’s theory according to which life is motivated by the ultimate desire for death. Repressing his memories, Sebastian tries to get out of the childhood’s narcissism, by “destroying” a frustrating and anguished past. That is why, as a mature man, he often feels the social void, manifested through depressions and anguish. The writer’s remarks on his childhood reveal the feelings of confusion and helplessness that he really experienced. It is about a self-esteem hurt by a society which tries to

isolate and humiliate him; there is a total discordance between the magical landscape of his childhood and his inner condition, crushed by shame and despair.

However, he desperately needs a dialogue, a community, a spiritual unity. The writer from the Danube believes in humanity even if he is the victim of many spiritual mutilations: "There were inside me – there are still inside me – aspirations for happiness, a certain ardour, something like a kind of lyrism, a belief in light, in serenity, in life, an endless power of love." (Jurnal/Diary, 1996, p. 486) In January 1937 Sebastian writes: "What a happy morning! Life still has something to tell me." (Jurnal/Diary, 1996, p. 107)

Starting with 1938, the notes from his **Diary** become more serious and even desperate. He thinks of death all the time, in a strong and obsessive way: "I was wondering who would give me a revolver to end up my life. Mircea, perhaps. But will he understand? Will he agree to it, considering that he regards suicide to be the ultimate sin?" (Jurnal/Diary, 1996, p. 145) And then, later: "Is there a more complicated, stupid, meaningless life than mine?" (Jurnal/Diary, 1996, p. 194) or: "Horror, disgust, something dirty, obscene, sad beyond any limit." (Jurnal/Diary, 1996, p. 194). It can be noticed that the temptation of the Thanatos was overwhelming at that time, in other words, the Eros is an annihilated instinct. In the same way, Paul – the character from **The Accident** – referring to his painful memories (because of the Eros), tells Nora: "It is an awful fatigue. A tremendous loathing." (The Accident, 1968, p. 280) This statement sounds like those in **The Diary**, not accidentally, considering that Sebastian was having an unhappy love affair with the actress Leni Caler.

With the danubian writer, the instinct of life (the Eros) is still strong, being in a permanent fight with the Thanatos. Beyond its denial, we can feel his longing for harmony, purity, dignity and truth. Actually, his work proves an aspiration for justice and light; his characters are in a permanent search for happiness, even if they do not have the courage to go through with it.

In Sebastian's **Diary**, the "journey" of the Thanatos continues: "Yesterday evening I felt that my life was over. That I had to give up everything, with no turning back. Whether I will die or not – I don't know." (Jurnal/Diary, 1996, p. 229) There is no turning back from war, anti-Semitism, the loss of his loved friends and the whole tragism. The mechanisms of defence against frustration can no longer work as long as the death instinct becomes stronger and stronger. Although life includes death, a death which probably hides answers to Sebastian's existential questions, it does not have anything sinister; on the contrary, it seems to be understood like an experience which must be lived in order to finally die peacefully.

Learning how to die is the deepest religious and philosophical experience and this is confirmed by all great religions of the world. The writer from the Danube confesses: "I am probably one of the people doomed to wait for death with

resignation, to accept it.” (Jurnal/Diary, p. 233) Mihail Sebastian experiences a spiritual death, his ego is emptied, not being able to feel the terror of anguish any more. The loneliness of life sends him towards the loneliness of death, which seems to be the peace he has always expected.

In 1935, his mistress Leni tells him: “You have so many child-like things inside you and yet, you are so tired of life.” “Surprisingly right. Yes. The peace that I feel when I think of death is terrifying.” (Jurnal/Diary, p. 25) As early as 1935 the writer becomes the victim of the Thanatos, accepting it naturally, because of the despair and helplessness that he has in front of life. However, Freud says that: “The man makes a choice where in reality he is subject to the constraint and the chosen one is not the lady with the scythe, but the most beautiful and attractive woman.” (Scrieri despre literatură și artă/Writings on Literature and Art, 1980, p. 152) In other words, the victory of the Eros against the Thanatos; the aggressiveness is no longer directed towards his own I, but it is sublimated through love (the love for life or for a woman).

Although so far we have analysed mostly the instinct of death, the Thanatos is always linked to the instinct of life – the Eros. As we have already mentioned, we do not intend to refer to the latter one by reducing it to the idea of love, but we will approach it in a broad sense: that of life, of creative energy, of light. There is no other place in Mihail Sebastian’s work where he more clearly expresses the close connection between life and death, i.e. the dichotomy Eros – Thanatos, like in this fragment: “Life starts in darkness. There is a night for every day, there is a shadow for every light.” (Jurnal/Diary, 1996, p. 178) Sebastian permanently moved from life to death; he loved the former one but, being betrayed by it, he was pushed to a despair that only death could save him from.

The danubian writer’s life is made up of two divergent moments: joy and fall. In the novel **For Two Thousand Years** he writes: “My happiness is threatened by a fall every step of the way. I was happy three days ago. I am depressed today. What happened? Nothing. A badly repressed memory opened somewhere.” (De două mii de ani/For Two Thousand Years, 1990, p. 41) Here there is nothing else but the frustration brought about by the memories repressed in the unconscious, a frustration that causes the anguish which will send him to the Thanatos.

Sometimes, in the context of the Eros, the idea of death is directly expressed: “Last night, leaving Leni’s place, I had the feeling that, if I committed suicide that night, I would do it peacefully, almost in good spirits.” (Jurnal/Diary, 1996, p. 44) Understood as the memory of a happiness once known or as the hope for a future happiness which now seems impossible to reach and makes the pain unbearable, suicide is chosen when the deepest inner emptiness is felt or when the writing cure does not work. In this case, when there is nothing else to say or do, death is the only escape.

On the 18th of February 1935, Mihail Sebastian writes in his **Diary**: “But spring has come. It has been a long time since I haven’t felt such a strong need to be happy.” (Jurnal/Diary, 1996, p. 20) One year later, he writes again: “I feel spring has set in, I feel it due to my urgent need to be happy.” And in June 1936: “Sun and love. This is a perfect summary for my ideal of happiness.” In his **Diary**, from February 1935 to February 1938, the writer expressed the aspiration for happiness four times in a similar way; firstly, his “longing for happiness”, then “the need to be happy”, “the ideal of happiness” and “something looking like happiness”.

Mihail Sebastian’s work represent an endless fight with himself, with his ego. He was always addicted to people, friendship and love. Although his deep disappointments and despair led him to an unbearable tragism, his work will always remain a symbol of light, dream and humanity.

References

- Freud, Sigmund (1980). *Introducere în psihanaliză. Prelegeri de psihanaliză. Psihopatologia vieții cotidiene/Introduction to Psychoanalysis. Lectures on Psychoanalysis. Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Bucharest: Ed. Didactică și Pedagogică.
- Freud, Sigmund (1980). *Scriseri despre literatură și artă/Writings on Literature and Art*. Bucharest: Univers.
- Freud, Sigmund (1990). *Doliu și melancolie/Mourning and Melancholia*. Bucharest: Univers.
- Freud, Sigmund (1992). *Dincolo de principiul plăcerii/Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Ed. Jurnalul Literar.
- Kierkegaard, Sören (1998). *Maladia mortală/The Deadly Disease*. Craiova: Ed. Omniscope.
- Mălăncioiu, Ileana (1978). *Vina tragic/Tragical Fault*. Ed. Cartea Românească.
- Sebastian, Mihail (1928). Scrisoare despre bunele moravuri și justa ținută în societate/Letter about Good Manners and the Right Outfit in Society, *Cuvântul/The Word*, IV, no. 1199, 24th of August.
- Sebastian, Mihail (1929). Domnișoara de Stermaria/Miss Stermaria. *Cuvântul/The Word*, no. 3, March.
- Sebastian, Mihail (1929). Scrisoarea despre călătorii și plecări/The Letter about Travels and Departures. *Cuvântul/The Word*, V, no. 1350, 24th of January.
- Sebastian, Mihail (1930). Jurnal de vacanță/Holiday Diary. *Cuvântul/The Word*, VI, no. 1901, 17th of August.
- Sebastian, Mihail (1935). *Omul și masca/The Man and the Mask, Rampa/The Ramp*, XVIII, no. 5137, 25th of February.
- Sebastian, Mihail (1935). Scrisoare deschisă d-lui Ministru de Finanțe/Open letter to Mr. Minister of Finance, *Rampa/The Ramp*, 18, no. 5095, 6th of January.
- Sebastian, Mihail (1968). *Accidentul/The Accident*. Bucharest: E.P.L.
- Sebastian, Mihail (1968). *Orașul cu salcâmi/City of Locust Trees*. Bucharest: E.P.L.

Sebastian, Mihail (1987). *Teatru/Theatre*. Bucharest: Minerva.

Sebastian, Mihail (1990). *De două mii de ani.../For Two Thousand Years; Cum am devenit huligan/How I Became a Hooligan*. Bucharest: Humanitas.

Sebastian, Mihail (1990). *Fragmente dintr-un carnet găsit/Fragments from a Found Notebook*. Bucharest: Humanitas.

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