

Mihail Sebastian and his Danubian Loneliness

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Abstract: This paper aims at approaching the concept of loneliness with Mihail Sebastian, which is to be found everywhere in his work (and life as well). The Romanian - Jewish writer from the Danube always suffered from a terrible loneliness, this being the symptom of his fear of life, in psychoanalytical terms. According to Thomas Mann, Wilhelm Schlegel, Victor Hugo and others, writing (and creation, generally speaking) brings loneliness, being considered a narcissistic act. Therefore, it can be proved that the isolation imposed by the anti-Semitic society upon the writer from the Danube, people's aggressiveness, the lack of true friendship and love created the feelings of guilt and tragic. Sebastian projected these feelings upon his characters; thus, analyzing his entire work, we come to the conclusion that these individuals are the metaphorical expression of the writer himself. They try to fight against their isolation and inner conflicts, but it is in vain, as they finally choose to run away towards their loneliness, which becomes their escape and refuge. It seems that, both for Sebastian and his characters, life is something they dream of, but cannot have.

Keywords: Danubian writer, loneliness, creation, characters, escape.

Mihail Sebastian – the Romanian writer who had a Jewish origin - lived in a very frustrating time of the Romanian history, the two World Wars, overwhelmed by tragic social and political changes and also by psychological ones. He belonged to the generation who experienced a period of difficult changes, when loneliness, instability and alienation were the factors that led to returning to the inner world. Joseph Hechter (as this was his real name) considered himself as being "the child of grief", according to an awful mentality which had been induced against the Jewish community along the time. Undoubtedly, Sebastian's childhood was frustrating, the writer often remembering it as a sad childhood, which changed him for the rest of his life; Mihail Sebastian admitted the enormous inferiority complex that the "lost child" had because of his Jewish identity. That is why, Sebastian dreamt to re-create a painful and sad reality through art; his work was meant to be a solution, a version of an autobiography "touched" by the awareness of loss.

As far as his native town is concerned (Braila, on the bank of the Danube river), for Sebastian it was a "mythic geography". "Jewish, Romanian and Danubian" is how

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the writer considered himself or "the most Romanian Jewish". The social level is also a psycho-social one if we consider its very serious implications. Joseph Hechter was a Jew and it is quite easy to understand the consequences during the respective period. Everything can be summarized using words like: alienation, pain, fear, dehumanization, in one word: frustration. In other words, his work represented a way to overcome his loneliness and disorientation (or at least to make them less tragic), Joseph Hechter having a dialogue with his destiny in the pages of his novels, plays and essays.

The little boy, as Sebastian remembered, had been fascinated by "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." (M. Sebastian, *For 2000 Years*, 1990: 11). It was also the period of the German occupation in the World War I, with bombs and the presence of death which could not be understood then. The Greek children from the Big Garden would hit him and shout: "coward Jew". But his childhood town was illuminated by the mysterious "fortress" near the "big garden", by the abundance of plants: roses, acacias, chestnut trees. During spring, Sebastian was happy and fascinated by the white acacia flowers, by the Danubian scenery, by the "peace of the swamps", crossing the river by boat towards the Lipovans' villages 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". (M. Sebastian, *For 2000 Years*, 1990: 11). Very often he would 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." (M. Sebastian, *For 2000 Years*, 1990: 12).

Joseph was the second child of the Hechters. His mother, Clara Weintraub, was born in Bucovina and his father, Mendel Hechter, was born in Buzau. It was a modest family who earned its living from a small workshop; his grandfather had been employed at the docks: Here it is a return to the memory, "a house of dreams, the delirious house." (G. Bachelard, *The Earth and the Reveries of Peace*, 1999: 80) The fact of returning to the native place, even on the memory level, was characterized by the classical psychoanalysis (i.e. Gustav Jung) as a return to the womb. Gaston Bachelard mentioned 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." (G. Bachelard, *The Earth and the Reveries of Peace*, 1999: 103)

Everybody knows about anti-Semitism and the disastrous consequences it had on the human soul. In psychoanalytical terms, it brought about loneliness, alienation, sadness, frustration, hence a certain aggression directed towards oneself, towards

the ego. Actually, the concept of the tragic is considered to be a narcissistic trauma, with deep roots in the Oedipus complex. Many critics analysed the original guilt of the Jewish spirit, a guilt which makes the super-ego (i.e. 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 certainly an unconscious, but tragic choice made in the name of an unfair history. It is as if an absurd trial had sentenced the whole Jewish nation to uprooting and aggressiveness directed towards its ego, in an anti-narcissistic attitude, which is actually a collective oedipian complex (in Freudian terms).

In **For Two Thousand Years**, Mihail Sebastian writes about loneliness, stating that this natural and eternal datum belongs to God as well, being a condition of the whole universe, existing beyond space, time, 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). We could regard this like a blasphemy, considering that the main essence of faith is not feeling alone in this material world governed by a protective Divinity who listens to his children's prayers. In other words, should God be forgiven for this distance which causes loneliness? Could we consider this an oedipian aspect, a 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 he was being crucified and uttered these words: "My God, my God, why did you leave me?"

In fact, this paragraph reveals a game of mirrors: loneliness, as a universal concept, represents the mirror which blurs the human entity's reflection in the divine entity. The human being strives to look inside himself/ herself by mirroring in God's image, but the mirror brings back the image of his/ her own loneliness. In the terms of Jacques Lacan, this means losing the Imaginary (the realm where children were born). The man aspires to find the Other in the mirror (i.e. God), who is and at the same time is not him; it is him because the reflection is the Father (the unity between entities) and it is not him, as this is just a reflection (which represents the image of loneliness).

Mihail Sebastian emphasized the idea of his huge sense of 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 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 our Romanian writer and philosopher – Emil Cioran - feels as well: “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 broke down and the human being was sentenced to an eternal hell, with no escape towards the spiritual dimension. The measure of the genuine despair is not given by the guilt, but by self-awareness.

In January 1939, Joseph Hechter 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). We can notice that there is almost no boundary between death and loneliness. This may be the key sentence for understanding the concept of loneliness, although in his plays, his characters’ choice (they always run away from life and love) can be interpreted as a quest for their own identity and peace of mind, although this quest is an illusory one. 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. Kierkegaard talked about the sin of the writers’/ 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).

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). *The fear of life* (in Otto Rank’s terms) characterizes all his characters. 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, from the spiritual point of view, he belonged to a people that would never betray him.

Ian Suttie, in the book **The Origins of Love and Hate** (1935), emphasizes the social dimension, which represents exactly 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 we remain with the need for belonging, for protection and 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

In 1954, when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, Ernest Hemingway read the following speech: "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 speech represents a confession, reflecting the artist's fear of losing his future creative skills; here we can sense the tragic of the imminent forgetfulness; thus, the fear of life turns into the fear of death,

Nikos Kazantzakis – the famous Greek writer - also wrote about the writer's loneliness, alienation 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). Another fascinating paragraph is the following: "You are a goat, I often tell my soul, trying to laugh, for fear I might cry, you are a goat, my 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). This is the most suggestive expression of the abstract world the artist lives in; the body becomes soul, the reality becomes dream, it is like a journey with no return, at the end of which one can find loneliness, alienation and frustration; besides, isolation and alienation belong to human condition. It must be said that the obsession for loneliness and death came from frustration and his feeling of guilt. 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 come to the conclusion that writing saved this Romanian – Jewish writer? Or, was writing a way of dealing with all his fears? It is not easy to answer, as there is always something hidden in artists' unconscious...

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