

THE SPACE OF INTIMATE COMMUNICATION IN MIHAIL SEBASTIAN'S "THE JOURNAL"

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Abstract

Mihail Sebastian's literature is, on the whole, both a confessions and a personal history of a tormented spirit, influenced by the contemporary society and by his own fears. Some hidden confessions behind the mask, the self-uttering, an alternative imaginary existence of the writer, facilitated by his fictional creation, are some of the characteristics of the relationship established between the creator and the imaginary of his literary creation which has to be taken into account when analysing his entire work.

Keywords: *communication, description, journal, space.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In February 1935, when he had just turned 28, in "a difficult time" as he claim without giving to many details, Mihail Sebastian starts writing "The Journal", without the intention of having it published. Most of his energy is targeted towards the novel and theatre, and therefore the journal remains somewhere in the background. In that time, the only one who also writes such a journal is his friend, Mircea Eliade, who, unlike Sebastian, publishes his work ("The Building Site", 1935) immediately afterwards, knowing that his events and characters were not known in Romania. The author of the "The city with acacias" uses all the challenging materials offered by the Romanian environment of the '30s and '40s and this is the reason why he had never thought of publishing it during his life, or anyway he had never revealed such an intention.

"The Journal" appeared 50 years after the death of the author, which means that all its characters passed away. Its publication, a truly literary event, reveals a writer who practices a modern type of journal, even if he doesn't believe in the spiritual and literary characteristics of the genre.

2. IDENTITY AND DESTINY

During the '30s and '40s the young Romanian intellectual elite was searching for spiritual and moral certainties. The ideological struggles and the radical changes in politics influence the fundamental components of the human and lead to dramatic behavioural deviations of the people from Sebastian's social environment. A witness with a clear mind, Sebastian feels directly influenced and finds himself included, beyond his wish, in an ethnic category, which has to decide his entire existence. "Diligent columnist at work", Sebastian presents in writing "the show offered by Bucharest at that time"¹.

In the novel "For two thousand years..." which appeared in 1935, Mihail Sebastian writes about "the delight of being alone in a world which considers that you belong to it. Not the pride. Not even bashfulness. But your normal, simple, involuntary remaining in yourself. Sometimes I wish I could physically distance myself from myself and to analyse myself from a corner of the room about the way I talk, as I shake, as I am happy, sad, knowing that I am none of all these. Double game? No. Something else"² And, after a few pages he completes: "I miss the simplicity and the unconsciousness. If I could find again somewhere some simple and strong feeling - hunger, thrust, cold - if I could overcome 2000 years of talmundism and unconsciousness, to have once again, assuming that someone of my kind had ever had it, the joy of living...."³

Mihail Sebastian's life was marked by a continual and dramatic out of time, if we want to use Dorina Grasoiu's⁴ terms, whose primary characteristic is the tense complementary

relationship between existence and literature. Keeping track of the events and feeling in "The Journal" has a therapeutic effect because exercise frees the author, even if only temporary, of his anxieties.

Taken out of the country in 1960 by his younger brother, Benu, when he emigrated from Romania to Israel, "The Journal" is first published in 1996 by the Humanistas Publishing House, re-established by a copy of the editor Gabriela Omăt and with a preface from Leon Volovici. By means of daily notes, under the pressure of external events, one can notice, from the pages of "The Journal," the image of a spirit, who, in a dialog with himself, is gradually sketched and reveals itself without any hesitation, using an entire arsenal of illusions, deceptions, and limits. The writer's journal, written between 1935 and 1944, mainly expresses the personal drama at a large scale, including the collectivity - transnational, or Romanian - of the Jews.

The topic of anxiety is given by an overwhelming reality in which brutal episodes present the continuous threat, searches and concentrations, unexpected convocations, duties and toils, closure in a camp: a real moral and physical torture field which is presented in the pages of "The Journal," an era in direct connection with the places described:

"Monday, August 4, 1941

We are again facing a massive lifting of the Jews. Internment in concentration camps? Extermination? The town, at 10 am, when I came out I had a strange air: a kind of strange nervous animation"⁵

The metonymic character of the relationship between space and people, between the city perceived in "the strange and anticipating animation" and those who are exposed to all dangers, the Jews is being highlighted. It is a well-known principle of the literary meaning, that a true artist, like Sebastian, cannot avoid, on the contrary he presents and arguments it in his writing, even in the nonfictional one.

Mihail Sebastian is a witness, a direct victim, an observer with the means of a novelist and this leads to the descriptive force and to the referential quality of the writing.

A truly spatial device is involved in describing the population which moves towards the city centre, which is also a centre of extermination (likely to become sooner or later and Bucharest is at least a symbolic centre):

"Monday, August 4, 1941

From *Văcărești*, small and miserable groups of Jews are heading towards the centre."⁶

The above look, auctorial in a way, is felt within the description. At the same time, the object of this description is presented in a theatrical manner, because the writer needs to reflect in a few lines the dramatic awaiting of those who don't know what to expect:

"It looks like in front of the *Prefecture* there are a few thousand people. On *Calea Victoriei*, poor women with restless looks hover about that place, not daring to come to close and probably waiting for news from the men who had come in. I know that look, I know that expectation. I have seen them both several times, near the barracks."⁷

In comparison, referring to the above mentioned procedure, present in the literature of the Romanian novel of that time, here is a perspective offered by Lăcrămioara Petrescu, in the book "The Novel Scene." We speak about the motivation relationship between the signs of the imaginary, respectively between the habitat and the characters, cities and their inhabitants, or they are enlightened - in the world of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's novels, a writer extremely appreciated by Mihail Sebastian:

"For the world of the novel, houses in general living quarters, as well as their exterior or interior backstage, play the role of some quiet and tangible confessions of a predestined place: of history that is going to be narrated. About semiotics and in general about expressing the relationships with the human, about the nature of the "quiet eloquence" of the walls - from the primary symbolism ("There is those stairs he thought that the entire problem of the new house was kept hidden, together with its dissatisfactions and troubles") up to the substitutive analogies ("the home of feeling", "the building of a being"), Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's literature offers a dense network of representations. The relational component expressed both in a literary and in a metaphorical manner, the association "of the

house of wall" with "the house of feeling" can be considered a founding topos for the Romanian imaginary of the author"⁸

"The Journal" presents both places of intimacy and of collectivities, places marked by the importance of the events or of the institutions (as mentioned above). The writer especially presents the event in the context of the spatial arrangement and vice versa, the importance especially when it comes to the movements of the front and of the conquered space.

A case of constant information in "The Journal" is that of the destruction of the space: bombardments. The imaginary space of the novelist (and playwright) constantly doubles and accompanies the real one, and has almost the same consistency. Moreover: at the same time, there is a place without any obstacles, without spatial barriers, for the scientist's imaginary, a great fan of classical music – the one who listens to concerts on the radio or reads Balzac in extremely difficult times. These are way of escaping the horrible reality of the times, of resisting it and of surviving.

The quest for the space of creation – usually in the mountains – at Predeal, represents another face of the use of time in *Journal*. We will find, quite frequently, the escape from a very crowded Bucharest, in order to complete his literary projects. But also for relaxation and leisure. The changing of the home, as the writer moves several time throughout his life in Bucharest, represents another reason of the spatial description with meaning in the life of the diarist.

As a true novelist, the author sometimes describes interiors which reflect exactly the psychology of the landlord:

„ Wednesday, August, 6, 1941

Visit at Marie Ghiolu (...) The honest impression of entering into a sumptuous mad house, in which an entire apartment was rented for a "quality lunatic." Never before has Ghiolu's house looked more theatrical, emptier, and more purposeful. Everything is artificial, just like in a shop window. More precisely, the colour excess. In the hall, there were two giant blue-purple sofas, with small, red cushions. The living room was pale red, with a yellow light resembling an electric lamp, filtered through rectangular window. The upper lobby is red. Everywhere

there are excessive, strong colours. She herself, Marie, dressed in a dress or long gown, similar in colour to the sofas downstairs – and tied to her head there was a dark blue turban, also very showy. Never before had she looked crazier, without – this time – her previous childish ingenuity. It is not difficult to summarize what Marie thinks, believes, wants, and expects: you read *Gringoire* and you find out everything. She is with Pétain, with the Germans, she is against the British, against the Russians and against the Jews. If the Germans don't win, then there is a complete disaster, which she can't even think of. If the Germans win, then Romania will once again gain Ardeal and the Hungarians will be destroyed. Moreover, the Germans victory is for sure. Their troops are way beyond Moscow, 300 or 400 km beyond Moscow, which they have surrounded and left behind. Exactly like in a mad house, where it is forbidden to contradict the patients, I nodded my head approving everything."⁹

It isn't difficult to imagine the connection that the viewer establishes between the habitat (the house in bright colours) and the inhabitants of this space. More precisely, in the eye of the reader a noisy and animate scene opens, not only due to the colours of the extravagant domestic décor, or by the chromatic repetition in the outfit of the host, but also due to her liveliness speech, which the visitor doesn't stop. For the diarist, the woman's insanity is related to the showy space. Her theory is opposed to the hopes of the character. That is why this look cannot remain neutral and leads towards a caricature. The ideas and the political partisanship are reflected in this chapter through a free and indirect style.

Mihail Sebastian's *Journal* (which encompasses an intense period from the writer's life, up around his death in 1936-1944) is one of those writing that don't only display an intimate picture of the personal life, but dramatically interferes with the movements from the helter-skelter parts of the city, country, Europe and the rest of the world, in the middle of the World War. Overlapping this catastrophe, the Jew condition of the author, in the plight of official persecution of the Jews under the alliance with Hitler's Germany, becomes the leit motif of an immediate disaster, associate with the daily

anxiety. In other words, it is the journal of an "outlaw" who is completely humiliated day by day.

The anxiety and the bleak picture of damnation is reflected in Sebastian's daily notes, mixed with the other components of everyday life, at an intimate, professional or cultural level, correlated with the touching image of the front's reality, in its dispersion (not just temporal, because the timeline is spatial).

Looked at as a book, despite its unstructured character, *The Journal*, opens itself in *medias res* to all of Mihail Sebastian's readers. The beginning shows, on just one page, of Tuesday, February 12, 1935, the diarist who has initially got over December, motives and fragments that will have an incredible echo in the immediate life of the author, they will compose and especially decompose it with cruelty.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Through its alert daily notes, under the pressure of the outside events, from the pages of "The Journal" one can notice the image of a spirit who, in dialog with itself, gradually reveals itself nude, without any hesitations, with an entire arsenal of illusions, deceptions and limits. "The Journal" represents a big site of notes, news and information from where we can extract the script for a possible romantic, historic or politic novel, because the writer achieves here, in a syncopated rhythm, a fresco of the most significant events of the era, mainly focusing on his personal drama, also including at a large scale the collectivity

- transnational, or, according to the situation, Romanian - Jewish.

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3. *Ibidem*, p. 49.
4. Dorina Grăsoiu, *Mihail Sebastian sau ironia unui destin*, Ed. Minerva, București, 1986, p. 5.
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