

UNDERSTANDING AND MISUNDERSTANDING IN THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY SPACE OF THE 27S. MIHAIL SEBASTIAN'S POSITION

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Abstract

The structure of a generation is based on a series of events, states and facts, common to a particular space and to a well-defined period of time. Romania's Young Generation of the 27s ends up being a representative cultural identity in the development of the inter-war literature. Mihail Sebastian's position as a key representative of his generation, lucid, rationale and balanced spirit, is one that is opposed to the outlook which denies the value of rationalism and of the desire to live in adventure.

Keywords: *generation, narrator, inter-war period, Criterion, novel, evolution, autochthon, identity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

A generation is structured by its exposure to the same series of events, moods and facts, at an age when the conscience is emerging. This exposure has to take place in a common environment (because between an Indian and a Frenchman the geographical distance automatically leads to a completely different experience of events), but it must also include people of close ages (because a seventeen year old teenager can live together with an octogenarian, but the way in which the two perceive similar events makes their perception deposit in entirely different layers of experience). However, this is not enough for the youngsters of a country (such as Romania) to be exposed to a terrifying event, with major repercussions on the mind and morality of the individual (such as World War I), so that they build a perfectly compact and equable generation: inside every generation there are differences between classes (through class one can understand “the current place” – Legerund – that an individual has in its property, in the power and economic structure of a society. One may be a prole, entrepreneur or

renter, and this happens because he is constantly aware of the nature of his “placement” or place in the social structure, and knows the pressures and the possibilities of winning that derive from this position¹.

2. THE YOUNG GENERATION IN THE SPACE OF THE LITERARY AND HISTORICAL COMMUNICATION OF THE 27S

In Romania, the Young Generation arises as a result of the indefinite expectations triggered by the violent events that emphasize the anti-Semite students' movements at the beginning of the 20s, movements which have often threatened to get out of control and against which a series of political measures have been taken, the reaction being a rational-critical one on behalf of a part of the intellectual world.

The Young Generation ends up being a cultural identity by means of the 12 article series entitled “Spiritual Itinerary”, published by Mircea Eliad in the “*Cuvântul*” Journal between September 6 and November 16, 1927, and also by means of “The manifest of the White Lily” published in “*Gândirea*”, under the signature of Petre Marcu-Balș, Sorin Pavel and Ion Nestor, between August and September 1928.

Mircea Eliade, seen by his fellows as the leader of this exceptional group, offers in the manifest-serial “Spiritual itinerary” a synthesis of the specific characteristics of this group, establishing its guidelines and revealing the causes that led to the creation of such a structure:

“For the ones who understand, we are the most blessed and plighted generation, from the

ones that appeared so far. We have to take into account only the high society.

We are those who have experience, in our childhood, diverse and tragic things and we have also experienced life from the faces of our parents. Some have suffered more, others less. But, we have all wondered. This is something that has never been done before. The religious crisis was higher for us than for the previous generations [...] The confusion which was made before us, and which is made today even by professors, was not made by us. This is because we have experienced a more complete life. We have gone through experiences that led us to reason, to art and to mysticism. We are the first ones who make a difference between these plans and reality, and we understand that each one has its own life and rules. Life, hitting us early and painful, has brought us closer to realities that are unknown to others.

This is why, for us, the inner life is so cruel, so diverse, and so tormenting. In us, the *Spirit* vanquishes."²

Eliade's reference plan seems purely spiritual and does not make any association with the students' movements that ended in August 1927 with the establishment of the *Legion of the Archangel Mihail*. Yet Eliade, who was an expert in contemporary Italian culture, is familiar with the fascist theories of the neo-Hegelian idealist philosopher Giovanni Gentile (the one who has written the theoretical part of the *Fascist Manifest* published in 1932 in *Enciclopedia Italiana*, signed by *Musolini*), as one notices from the reviews and travel reportage which he makes a year later in Italy. According to the "Spiritual Itinerary", the Young Generation defines itself as a spiritual movement which passionately pursues, by means of experiences, to update its Spirit, which has an independent position in relationship to the material level of existence. *The Spirit has to overcome the economic* is one of the primary elements of the legionary movement, as well as the common route with the Italian fascism, and this proves right from the beginning the ideological proximity with the Legion.

The Spirit has a religious nature, is related to Christianity, and therefore to orthodoxy; the Legion declared itself a Christian, exclusively orthodox movement. ("Our nationalism is based

on a principle of the purest, deepest and universal spirituality, meaning our Christian orthodoxy"³, and the Orthodox Church offered the Legion, besides the spiritual support given by the legionary priests, institutional support in terms of infrastructure. For Eliade, culture, this summary of the individual experiences, represents the way in which the spirit becomes independent of the other crystalizing forms of the material human, in general, and it reduces its role to religion, which is a primitive form of the spirit.

"The manifest of the White Lily"⁴, published in "*Gândirea*" in 1928, has in common with Eliade's "Spiritual Itinerary" the anti-positivism and the anti-enlightenment, emphasizing every exceptional element of the new generation ("the most beautiful, the proudest and the newest") and the lack of faith in the unspiritual parents' generation. The difference is made by the greater emphasis placed on autochthony and on the organic vision of the state, but especially on the tone and attitude which are aggressive and expressed in a much more spouted and demanding style.

The emergence of "The Itinerary" and of "The Manifest" led to a series of reaction on behalf of the press, and sometimes they were met ironically and minimizing: Serban Cioculescu states that "Mr. Mircea Eliade brilliantly expressed the poem of the youth, cerebral passionate and suffering from the fever of the Holy Spirit [...] He tries to revive the old orthodoxy using all the European and Asian stimulants and narcotics"⁵; Mihai Polihroniade challenges anyone "to find just one precise and coherent phrase in the entire manifest, apart from the trivial insults to the previous generations"⁶; Mihai Ralea sees in the manifest "literature and only literature," and it places it closer to an anthology of diaries of "teenagers and pension ladies in the critical phase, and also to the students' manifests which end up with broken windows, fights and desecrations of the holy things"⁷.

Mircea Eliade's manifest articles appear at the same time that a group of people get out of A. C. Cuza's movement and join Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, known as *The Captain*, a leader of the students in Iasi, and they form the Legion of the Saint Archangel Mihail. The rise of the Young

Generation takes place at the same time as the rise of the Legionary Movement, which enters politics in 1930, favored by an international context in which the failure of the Weimar Republic⁸, the achievements of the Italian and Soviet Union fascism, as well as the Great Depression of the 1930s, which led to a huge rise in the number of unemployed people in Romania, question the effectiveness of democracy.

In this respect, there are three crucial moments that we have to take into consideration. The first one is the survey conducted by the newspaper *Vremea* on the Young Generation of the 1930s, at the end of 1932. Mircea Eliade, Petru Comarnescu, Mircea Durma, Pompiliu Constantinescu and Nae Ionescu analyze the problem of the intellectual unemployment as a result of that moment, signaling the fact that the most important problem of the young intellectual generation is a problem of existence, because the youngsters cannot find a job, which makes the intellectuals start off looking pathetic.

The second moment defines the generation from a political point of view. At a conference in 1934, Mircea Vulcănescu names the role of the young generation, both on a spiritual and cultural plan, reckoning that the problem of the Young Generation is not an economic one:

"Internally, the problem of the young generation is that of establishing a soul union between the politically united Romanians. [...] The second inner goal of this generation is that of objectivizing this soul union in cultural creations, and of finding the most suited shapes of the Romanian feeling from architecture to theology, and to improve the lifestyle of this nation to the level of universality."⁹

Vulcănescu's conference partner, the politician and economist Mihai Manoilescu claims exactly the opposite: "I dare to believe that we are up against a material crisis. [...] The spiritual crisis is more like a derived crisis, like a form of instability and spiritual restlessness, which especially come from the anxiety and lack of stability of the society itself."¹⁰ During this conference, the intellectual wing of the Young Generation was disputing extreme right wing politics, and this became a manifest phenomenon.

The third moment took place in 1936 when Zaharia Stancu indirectly imputes the failure of

the cultural project, prior announced by Mircea Eliade:

"I am part of a generation of revolutionaries. This generation started off in 1926. Ten years have been enough to turn it into dust. Why should we be proud, as some colleagues do, of the fact that the dust is made of gold? Let's be honest. The dust of my generation is plain dust, exactly like any other dust."¹¹

This statement triggers Eliade's reaction, who answers in *Vremea*¹² with a series of names that cover the areas of mathematics (Grigore Miosil), physics (Sabba Ștefănescu), zoology (Radu Codreanu) and literature (Anton Holban, Ion Călugăru, Sergiu Dan, Mihail Sebastian, Dan Botta, Virgil Gheorghiu, Ion Călugăru "and others just as good as them").

The exchange of ideas continues in the two journals, each time being adapted to the twists and turns of the discussions, up to the point in which income lists of the majority of the members of that generation are being drawn up, and this proves that the Young Generation is not only interested in the spiritual context, but also in the financial one. This fact is important because, under these conditions, the young intellectuals begin to realize the political consequences of their theoretical starting point, largely similar to that of the Italian fascism. Under these circumstances, a large number of members of the Young Generation join the legionary movement because they consider that here they can implement their dogmatic fulfillment plan. In the same period, the debates regarding the Young Generation are recurring with the same discursive aggression as in 1927 and 1928, and this fact reinforces the metamorphosis moment, or better yet, the moment of assuming its identity which this generation goes through.

In an article from *Buna Vestire* in 1937, Mircea Eliade presents the story of the Young Generation and that of the Legionary Movement.

"The year 1927 marked the beginning of the generation clash. Not the clash between the old and the young [...] but the war between two worlds: on the one hand the old world, that believed in the primacy of economics and politics, and, on the other hand, a world which believed in the primacy of the spirit." The historical meaning of this youth movement is not at all

difficult to understand. Based in Christianity – and Christianity means “the overturning of all values” – it tries to create a new man. The modern man is still a part of the old economy: that of selfishness, of instincts and of the most abject biology. Every time a new man emerged into history, he became complete by obeying the primacy of the spiritual values. The clash between light and dark, between good or evil, will only end at the end of time. But every new victory of the spirit, of the light, couldn’t have been achieved without a complete relinquishment of the individual preservation instincts.”¹³

This 1937 text presents once again the most important elements from the “Spiritual Itinerary” speech, launched by Eliade ten years before. The dates do not change radically but there is a difference in terms of the volatilization of the own experience, which had a primary role at the moment when the manifest articles appeared.

Eliade’s generation doesn’t still have the distinct character that it possessed during the *legionary climax* period of 1937, when the Legionary Movement gained a percentage which brought it very close to the governing position due to some electoral alliance movements (which also included de Jewish party) with the liberals and the peasants who were in power. This generation suffers from the very fast pace imposed by the unfavorable political and historical mechanism, but also due to its own revolutionary ideas, far too poetic and maximal. The surviving members of the Young Generation spread into cultural missions abroad, as it is the case of Mircea Eliade, Eugen Ionescu and Emil Cioran, occupy positions in the Government such as Mircea Vulcănescu, work illegally such as Belu Zilber or they simply withdraw from the scene as Jews, as it is the case with Mihail Sebastian, who, by means of the numerous articles published on the topic of the Young Generation as a global phenomenon, demonstrates if not his disapproval, in any case, his detachment and the lack of adhesion to its beliefs.

The mystical ardor, the desire to live an adventure, the outlook that denies the value of rationalism were some of the traits that Mihail Sebastian did not have at all, a rather lucid, rational and well-balanced spirit, who had its own moments of frenzy whom he severely

censored: “If I were to tell them that I have my own hallucinations, they wouldn’t believe me. The difference between us is that they stimulate their own fevers, while I supervise mine.”¹⁴

Petru Comarnescu conducts a survey on *The New Spirituality* in the first number of the journal *Tiparnița literară*, launched on November 30, 1928. Among the respondents we find Nicolae Iorga, Octavian Goga, Lucian Blaga, Nichifor Crainic, Radu Dragnea, Sandu Tudor, Ionel Jianu, Eugen Lovinescu, Șerban Cioculescu, Mircea Vulcănescu and Mihail Sebastian. Sebastian denies the mysticism of his generation and favors the rationalist *Kalende* belonging to Cioculescu and Streinu:

“I am following the yet unclear destiny of the new spirituality – out of which the mysticism only presents a single side – passionate and attentive.” As far as I’m concerned, I see without living the improper congenital of this last soul position. My temper destined to present thing under an angle of frenzy and simultaneous passivity, is strange and distant to it. It is hard for me to establish myself. Yet, between Spirit, Word and Calends – considering them as two positions and two approaches (obviously beyond literature) – I incline towards the latter places.”¹⁵

In 1930, in a letter sent to Camil Petrescu from Paris, Mihail Sebastian emphasized his lack of interest for everything that went beyond the writer’s individualist literature. For him literature was enough: “I don’t want to be a “social fighter,” but only a thinker and maybe a writer.”¹⁶

Two years later, although he was getting close, not only from an intellectual point of view to the beliefs of his generation, but also from a human point of view, when he announces the appearance of the group *Forum* (founded by Ionel Jianu), a stage that antecedes the name Young Generation, Mihail Sebastian reaches his peak of fame and he isn’t able to hide his irony towards the aggressive-collective offensive of 1927: “The Young Generation establishes itself as a spiritual rugby team.”¹⁷

The group *Criterion*, set up in 1932, aims at thoroughly analyzing the outlooks of the time without any preconceptions. The group used the expression manner which the public from the interwar era liked the most, public lectures, held all over the country by a sociocultural network

of leagues, association and students' unions, comprised of intellectuals from every political party. The vast majority of the members of the new group worked inside *The Association of Christian Students*, within the *Romanian Annals Set*, but especially within the intellectual group *Forum*. From this latter one a group of people came out and they became the core of the new *Criterion*. The moment when this high initiative set reunited, familiar known as "the seven," was at a night in April 1932, in choreographer's Floria Capsali garden. This moment has been immortalized by Petru Comarnescu in his diary: Mircea Vulcănescu, Paul and Margareta Sterian, Dan Botta, Mac Constantinescu, Floria Capsali, Mircea Eliade and, of course, Petru Comarnescu. In a press release in May 1932, among the initiators we also find Haig Acterian, Ion Călugăru, Mihail Sebastian, Marcel Iancu, as well as the future enemies, who contribute to the destruction of the group, Zaharia Stancu and Sandu Tudor.

When the group *Criterion* appeared, in May 1932, Sebastian reanalysis the themes of the Young Generation:

"All the youth, intellectual, artists or writers' gatherings in the last few years were completely harmless and ideologically convenient. The discussion about the young generation, which I hope will not be resumed, because it was too naive and dry, was limited to only a few phrases without any substance, which became a sort of conspiring passwords. Mystic and rationalist were two reciprocal insults, which were directed from one camp to the other."¹⁸

Sebastian took part in spectacle conferences from the cycle dedicated to the Romanian contemporary culture, where he speaks about the *modern novel*, a topic dear to him, and previously very much analyzed. He also took part in the symposiums from the *Idols* series, with topics about Proust, Gide and Paul Valery. During one of these conferences the group experiences for the first time the victory feeling of the "creterionist spirit," whose primordial goal was to capture the public's attention and to make it deal with the ideas, and eventually, to change the way in which they perceive the world, thanks to Mihail Sebastian, who, because of the presence of the anti-Semitic students in the hall,

said that he is not going to talk about the artist Charlot, but that he will speak "from one Jew to another." Mircea Eliade includes in *Memorii* Sebastian's speech which presents the loneliness of Chaplin's characters, when it comes to the ghetto complex and which was highly appraised by the public.

Unfortunately, not all the meetings held at the Foundation were characterized by intelligence and reason; there were some moments in which every initially established principle was broken and they easily found explanations for the brutal interventions. The group *Criterion* was attacked both by the radical left or right wing press, and also by the democrat newspapers, and therefore it wasn't difficult for the members of the group to become undesirable for the authorities.

Following the railwaymen's strike in February 1933, which was thought as a prelude to the Bolshevik revolution, the siege was proclaimed in the country. All the political gatherings, including those from the Foundation, were forbidden. Nevertheless, after the Interior Minister was reassured that there will only be intellectuals attending the meetings, and not fascists or communists, some gatherings were allowed at the headquarters of the Commercial Academy. The "Tendencies" series, which took place between February 8 and May 4, 1933, included debates on various topics: *Spiritual orientations of the young generation* (presided by Simion Mehedinți, where Mircea Eliade, Petru Comarnescu, Emil Cioran, Paul Sterian and Mircea Vulcănescu present), *Political orientations of the young generation*, *Peace and war*, *Between individualism and guided economy*, *Literature-confession and subjective literature* (where Șerban Cioculescu, Mircea Eliade, Mihail Sebastian, Petru Manoliu, Arșavir Acterian and Eugen Ionescu present)

Starting from the fall of 1933, the lectures return to The Foundation, where, between September 30 and December 17, the cycle "Great Moments of Music" takes place. In the same period Petru Comarnescu organizes, starting with the 19th of October, another cycle "1933 Tendencies", comprised of eight symposiums whose topics were frequently presented under an interrogative form. The first conference, with the topic "Solutions to the economic crisis" was

followed by "Autarchy", "The meaning of the contemporary literature," "Dictatorship?," "Neoclassicism" moderated by Tudor Vianu, whereas the different neoclassical events were analyzed by Mircea Vulcănescu (*Jean Codeau and the futility of the virtuositities*), Dan Botta (*Vasile Pârvan*), Paul Sterian (*Picasso*), Horia Teodoru (*Le Corbusier*) and Petru Manoliu (*Valery*). The debate "War?" was presided by Grigore Gafencu and it spoke about "Germany and the European balance," "France and the peace of Europe," "Japan, China and the Pacific." Another conference topic was "Civilisation? Europe's neo-imperialism," presented by Victor Vojen, Petru Viforeanu, Mihail Polihroniade and Constantin Enescu. On December 7, 1933 the debate "Race" took place, in which Paul Costin Deleanu gives a reason for racism and is vigorously contradicted by Petru Comarnescu.

This was the last debate proposed by the *Criterion* group. In the country the political atmosphere had become tense: The Iron Guard becomes illegal due to the governor's I. G. Duca decision from December 9, 1933. It is the moment in which everybody understood the fact that it will be impossible that, in the same place and time, for the dogmatism to face the critical spirit, and for the idealism to face right or left materialism. The liberal Prime Minister I. G. Duca was assassinated by the legionaries on December 29, 1933, and this event occurs at the same time with the fall of the group. Mihail Polihroniade and Al. Cristian Tell are arrested (a few years later, in 1934, when another Prime Minister, Armand Călinescu is murdered, the two are again arrested and executed), and the country is again under assault. The public activity of the *Criterion* group comes to an end. Despite all this, in February 1934, The Dalles Hall hosts "The 1933 Plastic Arts Salon", where we find Michaela Eleutheriade, Margareta Sterian, Lucia Bălăcescu, H. Catargi, Mac Constantinescu, Marcel Iancu, M. H. Maxy and P. Iorgulescu-Yor. We come across almost the same participants, a year later, at another exhibition. This time the exhibition displayed the name "The 1934 Group" instead of *Criterion*.

A part of the former members of the *Criterion* group will present speeches under the patronage of the Romanian Social Institute, Romanian

Intellectual Union, or the journal "Convorbiri literare", where Petru Comarnescu, I. I. Cantacuzino, Mircea Eliade, Richard Hillard, Constantin Noica and H. H. Stahl joined the editorial board for a few months, before they handed in their resignations. In February 1934 the journal organized a series of conferences entitled "Clashes", seen as public talks between "the old men" (Al. Tzigara-Samurcaș, Paul Zarifopol, Artur Gorovei) and "the youngsters" (H. H. Stahl, I. I. Cantacuzino, Mircea Vulcănescu).

A last attempt to revitalize *Criterion* was made when a journal using the same name was published in October 1934, but because of a press campaign secretly guided by the authorities the publication is shortly destroyed.

Debates on the topic of "The Young Generation" strongly reappear during the years in which *Criterion* had a strong activity, and these years coincide with the climax of the crisis which took place in Romania. Despite the strong intellectual and human bonds with his peers, when they present the virtues of their generation in an exaggerated manner, Mihail Sebastian doesn't accept any concession and strongly protests against compromising deeds.

When Mihai Polihroniade (who although took the side of the legionaries, acknowledges the importance of the role played by the Jews in the definitive cultural integration in the world pace: "Jewish writers have improved our modernist tendencies and offered Romanian literature a variety and mobility that it didn't have before"¹⁹) summarizes the generation and identifies its role of integrating itself, from a cultural point of view, in the global pace, Mihail Sebastian replies:

"I set aside Mr. Mihai Polihroniade's article which integrates us all in "the world pace" (without previously asking for our approval). I am hoping for the author's remorse and I prefer not to insist on this pathetic chapter, which is compromising for us all. If there had been an official office of "the young generation", I would have immediately handed in my resignation from the youth, and not from the generation."²⁰

Sebastian seen only one difference between the generation of 1927 and that of 1933: "One might say that while in 1927 discussions were directed towards spirituality, today, in 1933, they are directed towards social politics. But, the

same forces, the same intellectual inconsistencies and the same dilatant exercises are at stake. And, eventually, this is something very tiring²¹. The writer remains cautious and is happy to notice that "closing time is not yet here, nor is it the time to award any medals"²².

3. CONCLUSIONS

Although the period between the two world wars has been strongly influenced by the complexity of the problems of the era, it established a spiritual climate of high contrasts, of great effervescence and of renewal. In this context literature tries to become a continuous presence in the spiritual life, exploring a complex universe and presenting people's lives and the problems they are facing from an entirely new perspective.

His remarkable destiny and his enthusiast creative concerns turned Mihail Sebastian into a lucid and analytic spirit, opened to the literary experiments and changes of his time, a theoretician of the novel, but also writer of some works that transpose the interior adventures, an extraordinary playwright, but also a brilliant essayist, one of the most expressive and important of his generation.

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