

The Imaginary of the Space in Mihail Sebastian's work

Summary

The thesis *Imaginarul spațiului în opera lui Mihail Sebastian* (The Imaginary of the Space in Mihail Sebastian's work) aims to be an invitation in the "space" of the work of Mihail Sebastian, an attempt towards a deep knowledge of the writer's personality and of his literary creation. Not in the least, it is an attempt to dismantle the intimate processes of a complex creation, to re-create a vibrant literary universe, to discover or rediscover an author that represents, perhaps, one of the most beautiful voices of the Romanian literary stage in the tumultuous interwar period, but with an actual impact upon the 21st century reader.

The idea behind the accomplishment of our paper is to outline a possible mental map for the main beneficiary of the work, the reader, either from the interwar period or contemporary. The paper examines the spaces in Mihail Sebastian's creation, placing them in the cultural framework of the age, highlighting the presence in these works of fiction of themes from the area of moral and political reflection and even of narrative modalities specific to texts of different genres such as the *diary*. These correspondences bring new data to support the demonstration of the interest displayed by Mihail Sebastian for the problems of his age.

The paper is structured into five chapters: Chapter I – *Preliminarii (Preliminaries)*, Chapter II - *Percepția spațială în ficțiune (Spatial perception in fiction)*, Chapter III - *Imaginarul spațiilor posibile în proza lui Mihail Sebastian (The imaginary of possible spaces in the narrative of Mihail Sebastian)*, Chapter VI - *Imaginarul spațiului ca decor în dramaturgia lui Mihail Sebastian (The imaginary of the space as scenary in the plays of Mihail Sebastian)*, Chapter V - *Spațiul intim în Jurnalul lui Mihail Sebastian (The intimate space in the Diary of Mihail Sebastian)*. These are completed by the Conclusions of the research and the Bibliography.

In the first chapter of the paper, we conducted a mobile and chronological portrait of Mihail Sebastian as a man, insisting upon the significant moments and stages that allow shaping his biography. We noticed that there are subsidiary connections between the different tracks of his creation and the peculiarities of the socio-political and cultural context of the time he was born and educated. We followed the stages of his formation as a writer, in his family environment, a conservative Jewish environment, that would leave its mark upon his evolution,

as well as in the formal educational environment of the educational system in Romania and abroad (France – Paris), where the pupil, then the student Mihail Sebastian assimilates in a creative way established models: Marcel Proust, André Gide, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf for his fiction and Jean Giraudoux, Luigi Pirandello, Henrik Ibsen for his drama.

Then we have followed the existential evolution of Sebastian after his completion of university studies abroad, at his return to Romania, insisting upon the circumstantial aspects that had echoes in his life as a writer. The moment when he affirmed himself was a moment of great cultural amplitude and Mihail Sebastian proved to be a lucid and analytical temperament, receptive to the literary experiments and innovations of his age, a temperament with a particular confession acuity, a theoretician of the novel but also author of writings that transcribe the adventures of interiority, a perfect playwright and a brilliant essayist, one of the most expressive and substantial of his generation. For the major echo he had as a writer, we payed attention to the relation of Mihail Sebastian with the authorities of that time, seriously affected by his condition as a Jew, but also to the link with the literary space of the '30s, years when the writer expressed himself constantly and prodigiously.

In the second chapter of the work we meant to create a theoretical perspective on the concept of *space imaginary* and to identify the different circumstances of this modality of literary expression in the work of Mihail Sebastian. We tried to define the imaginary using the critical interpretations of Gaston Bachelard, Gilbert Durand, Paul Ricœur and Henry Corbin and we showed that it manifested itself as creative imagination, as euphemistic avatar of the world, as setting of the human being. The imaginary of Mihail Sebastian is deep, arising from the desire to restore the link between the values of the present and everything that brings us closer to nature and to the rudimentary.

We then proceeded to deepen the concept of space as an object of literary representation, with its interiority and externality and tried to define the overall limits of these typologies, based on recent researches of Gilbert Durand, Gérard Genette, Jean-Yves Tadié and Sharon Spencer, that focus on “signified”, “represented” spaciousness, revealing that the spatial effects in his work greatly contribute to its meaning formation.

The space of the literary work, in waiting for the characters to animate it, place and action at the same time, is in a relation of reciprocity with the characters and the audience, conditioning itself permanently and defines itself not only as a place for the narrative, but also as a place of

the protagonists who inhabit it one by one, and of the reader, spectator who, once sat in front of the stage, completes the theatrical triangle. The latter reconstructs the space, imagining what lies beyond what a single frame reveals. Always incomplete, the space does never appear as “given”, cannot be grasped at a single glance, as it happens with the territories on a map. The imaginary of the literary space is constructed of pieces, of “images” registered by the eyes of the characters and the reader alike.

Interiority is related to the protection, to the arrangement and to the boundaries of the space, while exteriority regards the totality of uncontrolled things. The conception of interiority, based on the idea of the centre, appears in the symbolism of the mandala. “Dwelling” gives interiority to the space through the contribution of the human being to it. Analysing the exteriority of the being, we can deduce that everything that is not within the being is exterior. So no matter how the space is conceived, it belongs to exteriority, forms the exterior territory. The arguments lead to the assertion of the extra-territoriality of the space, as even interior spaces have this property.

In Mihail Sebastian, the interior closed spaces are protected: there his characters can withdraw from the oppressive reality of every day life. The reality of each character of Sebastian is a closed space, dominated by heat, an antechamber of something to come no one knows how or when, where characters consume energies and dream. In the work of Sebastian we are dealing with spaces closed in the physical sense, but open to dreaming, like niches hidden in the daily life, impossible to be traced by outsiders, but within which the characters ignore intentionally the fact that they belong to an objective reality. Sebastian's interior space consists of several types of spaces that evolve in overlapping realities or, better said, it is the synthesis of this juxtaposition of realities, an interior and simultaneous space.

For Sebastian, the interior space – be it room, house or city - is always full of concrete realities that at some point isolate. Therefore, whenever they envisage even the smallest possibility of leaving it, his characters take immediate advantage, and the best escape is toward nature. Once overpassed the limited area of the city, the exterior space of Mihail Sebastian opens to the horizon that releases the eye of any constraints and leads the reader into the very heart of the *landscape*. The exterior space of nature appears both as a place of freedom and as one of contemplation, of introspection and of an attempt to redefine and strengthen the sense of identity, a space easy to be overtaken by the characters and turned in their own private and intimate space.

Every detail regarding the exterior space and its configuration is bound to the perspective, to the horizon that limits the view, characteristics often useful in deciphering images, sometimes false, actually hiding to the eye a deep meaning of the text. The elements added with the intention to deepen the landscape of Mihail Sebastian's work communicate, in reality, a certain type of information, and to every detail related to the exterior space there corresponds a clue that contributes to decrypt deep meanings of his work.

Another important point of this theoretical part is the vision upon *the space of the interval*, where it is seen as an interface between interior and exterior. The space of the interval represents the interface interior-exterior, the envelope of the space seen from several perspectives: from the interior, from the exterior and even from the very position of this interface towards the interior and the exterior. It represents the very existence of the limit, because from the interior it is seen as a primarily human boundary (strictly regarding the feeling of protection that any interior space induces to the individual), and from the exterior it is perceived as a barrier that controls the passage to the interior, be it private or otherwise. Thus, it finds its essence, rules and limits in this feeling of a double hypostasis (both to the interior and to the exterior) which itself is the limit. "The vines" from *Oraşul cu salcâmi*, "the Weber guesthouse" in *Jocul de-a vacanţa*, "the cottage of Gunter Grodecki" from *Accidental* "windows", "pictures", "the port", "the attic", "transportation", "music" are some examples of spaces of the interval in Mihail Sebastian's work.

We have also paid a particular attention to the *insular space*, as the island frequently occurs as a motif in Sebastian's work and it has a significant development. Being synonymous with freedom, as the hero of the novel *De două mii de ani...* thinks, the island is a privileged place for those characters who seek a temporary isolation, a retreat of the self and of the essential elements of the existence, a territory of desired loneliness and reverie.

Mihail Sebastian is distinguished by the fact that throughout his work, he presents his characters directly related to what surrounds them. The influence of space on the character is a central idea in Sebastian, because in the writer's work there is an indelible connection between people and places and his characters are strongly linked to their environment.

On these theoretical bases, in the applied part formed of chapters third, fourth and fifth, the paper identified the imaginary of possible spaces in the work of Mihail Sebastian, with attention to their features, intending to provide new reading perspectives.

In the third chapter, we concentrated on the imaginary of possible spaces in the narrative of Mihail Sebastian and analysed, one by one, the novels: *Fragmente dintr-un carnet găsit*, *Femei*, *De două mii de ani*, *Oraşul cu salcâmi* şi *Accidentul*.

Fragmente dintr-un carnet găsit, written at the end of 1930 and the beginning (January – February) of 1931, in Paris, was (partially) published as a series in the magazine *Cuvântul* on February 7, 12 and 18 1931, together with a *Notă a traducătorului* that was not reproduced in the first printed volume of Mihai Sebastian, *Carte cu semne*, 1932.

Fragmente... is an accumulation of observations and impressions of a young man, interesting as a document for an uncertain psychology of his generation. Like other followers of the theory of authentic living, Sebastian understands knowledge as creation of an inner experience of the artist himself and carries on a ruthless analysis of own ego, as he takes out of the depths of his soul the innermost disappointments, the deepest sorrows and the most incredible hopes.

The booklet is a real memoir diary of ideas and morals in which the author imagines a character placed in reflexive situations; he restricts the epic at a minimum, brings a substance lyricism and problematizes the states of consciousness. Sebastian does not excel in describing the landscape and still fails to outline any human figures worthy of his portrait-creator vocation that can be discovered in his subsequent prose volumes. *Fragmente dintr-un carnet găsit* is rather an analytical exercise carried out in order to achieve the perfect peaks of his future creation.

Fragmentele... represent a space of testimony, like a diary of the generation that Sebastian belongs to, an interesting old document, which reflects the mentality and psychology of a group of interwar writers, a group that has in common with the narrator topics such as experience, failure, (soul or love) crises, intelligence, morality, loneliness, God, culture, introspection, death, miracle and ineffable, themes that we find, for example, in the *Romanul lui Mirel*, the debut volume of Anton Holban, or in the youth novels of Mircea Eliade.

The space of the adventure experience, structure of the interior imaginary space, was analysed in the novel *Femei* that he writes in the same period of *Fragmente dintr-un carnet găsit*, but publishes a year later, in 1933.

The love stories of Valeriu Stefan are nothing but stages of knowledge, of experience. There is nothing in the main character's tale to indicate despair or pathos, and the four stories

end naturally, as if their ending means nothing but an inevitable step in the rhythm of life flowing without the possibility to change its course.

The life experiences of the characters were highlighted, these products of life that help man to weighing things and choose only the path to follow. Observation, provision, preparation, reflection, circumspection, assessing the situation, knowledge, maturity, simulation, concealing, all to be encountered in the characters of the four novels, have confirmed the practicality of the events, outlining the space of the experience through adventure.

The analysis of the novel *De două mii de ani...* concentrated on the *space of the labyrinth of the human consciousness*, drawing the spatially tortuous path of hesitations of one's own conscience captured by the pressure of external factors over which it would like to be able raise, wanting to remain independent. The space of the *alternative universe* constructs realms of freedom and fantasy created not to run away from reality, but to confront it better prepared through emotional and spiritual energy that the heroes receive through their contact, inevitably temporary, with the *island*. The island is a privileged territory for those seeking a temporary isolation, a retrieval of the self and of the essential elements of life. For the hero of the novel *De două mii de ani...*, the island is the territory of reverie and desired loneliness, because it is synonymous with freedom.

In the last part of this chapter, we analysed the novels *Oraşul cu salcâmi* and *Accidentul*.

In *Oraşul cu salcâmi*, while he first describes the provincial town atmosphere, with its authorities, traditions and small social events, Sebastian does not carry out a social study and does not investigate in depth the provincial mentalities. The subtle atmosphere of the teenager soul, the mixture of sensuality and chastity, of tragedy and sense of mystery, of play and adventure, of arbitrary and legend are very well captured by the author because he works in shades and gives importance to details that draw up the general atmosphere of the soul of the characters.

In *Accidentul*, where the theme is the awakening and rediscovering of the beauty of living and loving at the same time, Sebastian builds a construction with a complex architecture, a dense psychological analysis with interior perspectives that adequately cross the exterior ones, while their blending leads to the artistic authenticity of characters and situations.

In both novels, the places the protagonists cross are not only a physical space, but also a symbolic space of relations, a space that is in relation to those who use it, cross it, dominate it, a

space that becomes recipient of the perceptions and emotions of the characters, who, even if they belong to a particular social group, have their own spatial references.

In the fourth chapter of this paper, we analysed the imaginary of the spaces as décor in the plays of Mihail Sebastian and we focused on his theatre creations: *Jocul de-a vacanța*, *Insula*, *Steaua fără nume* and *Ultima oră*.

The confession slightly hidden behind the mask, the affirmation of the self, the alternative imaginary and compensatory existence of the writer through his creation are some of the features of the established relation between the creator and the imaginary of his literary creation that we took into account in decomposing his theatre creations *Jocul de-a vacanța* and *Insula*. The focus fell on the contrast between common reality and unrestricted freedom to which the individual can aspire. The boarders of the Weber guesthouse are attracted to the young companion Stephen Valeriu “the holiday game”, “the forgetfulness game”, “the happiness game” that they keep on, enrich and live through it the illusion of a life spent outside of rigid, difficult to respect conventions. The space of the guesthouse becomes a space of the island, closed, where intruders are not allowed, where a game is played, a game of illusions abandoned out of lucidity, fear and resignation.

At the opposite end, the refuge in an imaginary island from the play *Insula*, “with plenty of light, plenty of blue, plenty of sky”, no longer represents a solution but this time it is equivalent to an act of suicide. The only way to overcome the existential impasse is given by Nadia, the young painter who, through her force of will not surrender to vicissitudes, gives to the two companions of “confinement” (Manuel and Bob) confidence and hope. With this play, the author demonstrates once again that evasion is a sure way to escape a limited life.

If in *Jocul de-a vacanța* and *Insula*, Mihail Sebastian gathers his heroes in a particular place for a particular time, period in which they reveal traits that characterize them and the conflict is consumed, in *Steaua fără nume* the playwright emphasizes the ongoing life, hence the particular importance he gives the representation of the social environment.

The play *Steaua fără nume* provides a picture of the everyday life, of the petty, prosaic and dull life in a provincial town, combining discreet tragedy with slightly ironic humour and skilfully alternating everyday reality with illusion, two dimensions in an irreconcilable conflict.

The play *Ultima oră* contains within it two distinct plays which the author wrote separately and joined afterwards. The first evokes the space from the journalism environment, and the second, that of Professor Alexandru Andronic, a passionate of Alexander the Great's age.

The plot of the play is located amongst scandal journalists, always in pursuit of sensationalism to capture at all costs the reader's attention, but addicted to slavery to the economically powerful people of the city who, in order to protect their less legal businesses, are willing to close with them "all kinds of deals". Mihail Sebastian expands the limited space of the mountain guesthouse of *Jocul de-a vacanța* and that of the small provincial town of *Steaua fără nume*, succeeding in *Ultima oră* to cover a diversity of social and human backgrounds, showing for the first time, the agitation of city life.

The fifth chapter of the thesis focused on Mihail Sebastian's *Journal*, written between 1935 and 1944. The two parts that compose it, *Identitate și destin* and *Principalele teme ale Jurnalului*, analysed the double identity of the writer.

Through the alert daily notes, under the pressure of external events, the *Journal* pages reveal the figure of a spirit who, in a dialogue with himself, gradually outlines himself and reveals himself nude, without reticence, with his entire arsenal of illusions, deceptions and limits. The *Journal* is a vast site of notes, news, information out of which the scenario of a possible love, historical or political novel can be extracted, because the writer offers here, in a syncopated rhythm, a fresco of the most significant events and aspects of the time, primarily reflecting his personal drama, at large including the Jews community - transnational or, where appropriate, Romanian.

The paper *Imaginarul spațiului în opera lui Mihail Sebastian* has proposed an approach to the creation of the author from an overview perspective, having as a starting point the concept of *space*, considered in the meaning of modality to structure the imaginary universe of the work, and followed the shift of stress to the relation between *space* and *imaginary* through the sketching of mind maps able to provide a reading key to Sebastian's creation. All five chapters of the work, despite the inevitable lacks due to the depth of the subject, were instrumental in making a step forward towards the discovery, reception and fully deserved valorisation of the work and personality of the writer Mihail Sebastian.