

# A Case of Mystified Perception: Mihail Sebastian

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*“You, my unfortunate friend and reader, you curse. He shoots. But both of you feel the same anger.”*

*Mihail Sebastian*

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**U**NTIL RECENTLY, the image of Mihail Sebastian (1907–1945) circulating in Romanian culture has been a considerably distorted one. The delicate and sentimental style of his plays, as well as the juvenile and graceful atmosphere of his prose, were extrapolated to the author himself. The posthumous anthologies of various articles—literary criticism, theatre chronicles, political commentaries, personal pieces—also generated the image of a precocious, gifted, cultivated, objective critic, with a broad intellectual horizon and with an unblemished reputation. After 1990, when Pandora’s box came open and we learned of the extremist interwar political orientation of Mircea Eliade and of E. M. Cioran, Sebastian, a member of their generation, emerged as a model of political balance, of clairvoyance, and as an innocent victim, especially after a distorted reading of the book *Cum am devenit huligan* (How I became a hooligan, 1935) and of older and more recent anthologies. It seemed to me—and maybe I was not the only one to wrongfully presume him innocent—that a Romanian writer

of Jewish origin, a victim of the professor, philosopher, and publicist Nae Ionescu (1890–1940), the author of the anti-Semitic preface to Sebastian's own book *De două mii de ani...* (For two thousand years..., 1934), would have been safe from any extremist and anti-democratic temptation. After the publication of Sebastian's *Journal* (Journal, 1996), which tells nothing (or rather *almost* nothing) about his political past, the writer began to be seen as the fundamentally innocent victim, on a national scale and on the basis of actual quotations. His former friends and acquaintances who turned against him seemed all the more cruel and despicable.

In actual fact, the current public perception of Sebastian is a strongly mystified one. We are dealing with old and successive levels of mystification, for which the writer himself is in no way responsible. The responsibility in this case lies first and foremost on the shoulders of history—that is, the lengthy communist experiment and the difficult mental recovery that followed. Secondly, the mystification was favored by the absence of a complete edition of Mihail Sebastian's writings—because it is easier for people to read a book than to access a newspaper collection in a library. Thirdly, responsible are all of us who wrote about Sebastian, in one way or another, without going to the archives to see what the young journalist actually published in the space of seven years (from August 1927 to January 1934) in the Bucharest newspaper *Cuvântul* (The Word) and in the other publications to which he contributed. We took what was available at face value, we all believed what Sebastian said in his anthologies and in the *Journal*. The subtle clues likely to challenge the standard representation—for instance, Eliade's statement in the afterword to Nae Ionescu's *Roza vân-turilor* (1937) whereby Sebastian was an antidemocrat; or some strange pages in *Cum am devenit huligan* and in *De două mii de ani...*—went unnoticed.

Sebastian's orientation was of public notoriety in the early thirties. G. Călinescu subtly alluded to his political sympathies, talking about the “mentality of the new legion to which Mr. Sebastian belongs.” The scandal created in 1934 around the novel *De două mii de ani...*, albeit fueled mainly by the political turn taken by Nae Ionescu and by the country itself, was also made possible by an element from the intellectual-moral biography of Sebastian: the political pieces written by him for *Cuvântul* and his presence in the editorial staff until the paper ceased to appear. In various ways and representing various political orientations, several commentators of the novel showed their amazement with the right-wing Romanian—and not Jewish—extremism of the author. I. Ludo and others from the Jewish magazine *Adam* sarcastically wrote about the “circumcised Archangel Michael,” “daily political adviser” to Nae Ionescu at a “racist newspaper.” Dr. Th. Löwenstein, from the Jewish magazine *Renășterea noastră* (Our revival), was himself puzzled by the bizarre presence of Sebastian “at an

anti-Semitic newspaper,” “enlisted” in the “legions of the Iron Guard.” After reading the novel *De două mii de ani...*, he directly accused Sebastian of having “a clearly anti-Semitic position.” Tudor Teodorescu-Braniște mentioned his “juvenile and tentatively fascist ramblings” published in *Cuvântul*, but he did not hold them against Sebastian, as Nae Ionescu offered a far more promising target for his polemical attacks. Similarly, the publication *Viața românească* (Romanian Life) condemned the political lessons he taught by way of *Cuvântul*.

The Romanian political developments of the late thirties forced the politically non-aligned Sebastian to remain among the democrats. It was only during the war, when he admired the British model, that Sebastian voiced a truly democratic view. At any rate, after 1934, the politically revised and improved version of Sebastian stayed away from politics and from the far right press. The persecutions he suffered as a Jew in the late thirties and during the war, followed by his brief cooperation with a communist team in the spring of 1944, made him look like a true democrat in the confusing period that came right after the end of World War II. This constructed image was reinforced by the absurd and untimely death of the writer.

During the period of real socialism, the mystification was preserved and augmented, and the early right-wing proclivities of Sebastian were overlooked. This proved to be a rather fortunate development for his fiction, which was completely republished. Thus, in the case of Sebastian, communist censorship and history blended nicely with our sluggish ignorance, creating the huge mystification of an always democratic Sebastian, an innocent victim of the “despicable departed, Nae Ionescu.” The mystification was completed after 1990, with the complicity of those who knew the truth but chose either to remain silent, or to write pious and opportunistic falsehoods. In a way, the prudence of those who knew the truth but refrained from bringing up the issue is understandable. Apart from the difficulty of contradicting a standard image, created with the help of successive layers of whitewash and supported by the “Sebastian effect,”<sup>1</sup> namely, the compelling power of his *Journal* (people forget that this diary only covers the second period in the life and work of Sebastian), the Romanian culture that emerged after 1989 tended to punish all those who challenged, even on the basis of documents, any of the desirable and idealized images that the collective Romanian cultural imagination had used in order to flatter itself. Romanian culture finds it difficult to accept the truth, even when it is reached in an inductive fashion and supported by solid evidence. Mihail Sebastian’s case was to be no exception to the rule, even if the truth is likely to make Sebastian more complex, more dramatic, and more interesting.

SEBASTIAN WORKED for *Cuvântul* from November 1927 until January 1934, when the publication was banned. He contributed all sorts of pieces, from book reviews to political articles. From the very beginning, Nae Ionescu gave him free rein: “write anything you want.”<sup>2</sup> In the summer of 1928, Nae Ionescu became the owner of the newspaper,<sup>3</sup> and Sebastian was constantly under his protection and under his direct authority.

Without sharing all the ideas and the “ambiguous values”<sup>4</sup> circulated by his generation, the generation of 1927, Sebastian did nevertheless remain one of its typical representatives. Established almost as a fighting unit or, as meaningfully suggested by G. Călinescu, as a “legion,” from the very outset the generation of 1927 was characterized by a “parricidal” attitude towards the forerunners, by Orthodoxy (combined with mysticism, or rather with a desire to reach a mystical experience), autochtonism, anti-modernism, by a rejection of all things French and initially of all politics (this gradually turned into an anti-liberal and anti-democratic attitude, and then into commitment to the far right doctrine by many members of the generations; also, some moved from one extreme of the political spectrum to the other), by a refusal to accept the ideas of the Junimea (The Youth) cultural association, by anti-rationalism (often displayed as anti-Cartesianism), vitalism (a desire to experience adventure, to truly live), and by an appreciation for culture and “spirituality.” Just like the previous generation, that of Lucian Blaga and D. D. Roșca, or like the “class of Neculai Iorga” to which Nae Ionescu belonged, from the very beginning and in a rather more noisy fashion the generation of 1927 announced its intention to elevate Romanian culture to universality. Sebastian’s position within the generation of 1927 became atypical only after 1934. Until then, despite his peculiarities—his interest in French culture and lack of interest in “mysticism,” his complementary yearning for “lucidity,” etc.—he remained one of the most conspicuous and bellicose representative of the generation spawned, like an incubator, by *Cuvântul*. The large number of occasional political commentaries written by Sebastian indicates that until the end of 1933, and maybe even a bit after that, until the beginning of 1935, he was—like many other members of his generation—opposed to modernism and openly adverse to democracy (fiercely and constantly attacking the Liberal Party, and also following the policy of his newspaper, very much against the National Peasant Party). Similarly, he shared the “revolutionary” mindset so common at the time; he was ingeniously anti-Nazi, but showed sympathy for Mussolini’s fascism and for the Spanish revolutionists (of the left, like Francesc Macià, or of the right, like Franco); he was coldly anti-European and, consequently, a staunch and organicistic advocate of Romanian autarchy.

In Europe and in Romania, the interwar period brought to the forefront the so-called “collectivities” or “totalities,” to the detriment of individuals and individuality. Both the far right and the far left centered their doctrines on “totalities,” to use the term devised by Constantin Rădulescu-Motru. Initiated in the Soviet Union and in the Europe of the early 1920s, the idea of collectivity also reached Romania, and the members of Sebastian’s group were gradually seduced by collectivist ideas (either of the right, or of the left). Symptomatic for his age and sensitive to its spirit, the pieces published in *Cuvântul* by Nae Ionescu promoted a kind of nationalist collectivism, associated with the idea of an authoritative leader. In the collectivity–leader equation, as a journalist Sebastian was more interested in the spectacular rise of contemporary authoritarian figures, of exceptional individuals, in other words, of absolute leaders. This is how he came to sing the praise of, for instance, Mussolini, or of other European “revolutionists.” On the issue of collectivities, his approach was (more often than not!) the moderate and localized one of Romanian organicism and autochtonism, which he advocated until 1933. It was only in 1934, after the great scandal that created a fault line across his intellectual and emotional biography, that Sebastian became allergic to collectivism, to the massification and the leveling it entailed.

If one only looks at the articles published in *Cuvântul* by Sebastian (and disregards those written by Nae Ionescu), one is amazed by their thematic diversity, by the talent and the vast amount of information possessed by their young author. He could write anything, from short lyrical pieces, celebrating the arrival of spring on the Danube or the blossoming pear trees of Louis XVI at Versailles, to devastating literary or political pamphlets. During this period he was a complete journalist, writing at a very high level about any subject. However, if we read Sebastian’s pieces in parallel to those of his fellow columnist, Nae Ionescu, we instantly see the thematic and stylistic influences exerted over the young journalist by the director of *Cuvântul*. Sebastian imitated Ionescu both during public conferences, as indicated by Petru Comarnescu, and in writing. Ever the eager student, he seemed keen on showing Nae Ionescu that he had learned the lesson well and that he could creatively reproduce it, combining Ionescu’s ideology with an ingenious argumentation, presented in a quick-paced and enticing style. Read in parallel to his mentor, during the period spent at *Cuvântul* and even afterwards, as far as certain ideas were concerned, Sebastian appears to be suffused with the concepts, the ideas, the style, and the idiosyncrasies of Nae Ionescu. The true magnitude of this influence has remained concealed so far, because most of the articles written by both of them can only be found in old press collections. But the phenomenon did exist and it was a comprehensive and even devastating one, affecting everything, from the

language and the style employed by the young apprentice to the ideas he advocated. Nae Ionescu's influence shaped the political ideas and beliefs of Mihail Sebastian.

In 1929, when he became a political commentator, Sebastian was thrilled by the promotion and publicly prided himself with his ability to turn a trivial event into a political subject. The fact that he intermittently claimed, rightfully or not, that he lacked political passion did not prevent him from *also* writing political pieces, against the designated targets of his newspaper, or from gradually turning from a cultural commentator into a political one. He loved journalism and repeatedly praised the profession, even in *Cum am devenit buligan*. Of course, every now and then he complained about the fact that political journalism was forcing him to deal with the "filthiest" function of human stupidity.<sup>5</sup>

If chance and chance alone took him to *Cuvântul*, where Nae Ionescu received him with open arms, what was it that kept Sebastian there? According to his own statement, what kept him was Nae Ionescu himself, after their fateful first encounter: it was "the hour when one's fate is sealed or a new path opens."<sup>6</sup> Sebastian admitted that his presence at *Cuvântul* was "perhaps a mistake, but not an accident."<sup>7</sup> No accident, then, but the precise opposite, a deliberate choice and a destiny. A fate sealed with the name of Nae Ionescu.

*Cuvântul* was no ordinary newspaper, but a major independent daily. Until 1930 it supported the opposition and orchestrated resounding media campaigns, for instance for the National Peasant Party, and after 1929 it militated for the return of King Carol II. Its campaigns of 1928–1930 made the uncompromising *Cuvântul* the target of censorship, confiscations, and bans. In June 1930 however, after the return of Carol II, *Cuvântul* became the king's newspaper, the "organ of monarchic mysticism,"<sup>8</sup> to quote Grigore Gafencu. After having skillfully supported the cause of the king, despite the risk of reprisals, Nae Ionescu became the political adviser of the "Rex." The period between June 1930 and the autumn of 1933 was a splendid time for the royal philosopher, for his newspaper, and for the editorial staff, Sebastian included. During this happy time, to be criticized in the "official organ of the new rhythm,"<sup>9</sup> handsomely funded from the privy purse,<sup>10</sup> was a nightmare even for a leading figure such as Nicolae Titulescu,<sup>11</sup> for the simple reason that the king systematically read the newspaper in question. Besides, as a member of the private circle, the political adviser Nae Ionescu had access to the villa belonging to Elena Lupescu, where he had private meetings with the king.<sup>12</sup>

This state of affairs, highly convenient to Sebastian, came to an end in the autumn of 1933, right after Nae Ionescu's return from a trip to Germany. Amid a political crisis whose signs had become visible since September, and as King Carol II seemed intent on giving the power to the liberals led by I. G. Duca,

Nae Ionescu was expelled from the inner circle. It was in the same year 1933 that he met the leader of the Legion, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. Also, this was the time when the director of *Cuvântul* began to firmly endorse Nazi anti-Semitism, arguing that Hitler's policies towards the Jews were not the Romanians' concern, as Romanians were neither Jewish, not the citizens of a Western democracy.<sup>13</sup> As the king was preparing to make the liberal I. G. Duca his prime minister, in his editorials the royal philosopher advocated the precise opposite and talked about a national revolution and about a non-parliamentary peasant state, about the "reality of the national collectivity," telling his readers that the liberal society was "not only historically, but also politically on the brink of death."<sup>14</sup>

Nae Ionescu's retaliation lasted for nearly two months and ended following the assassination of I. G. Duca. *Cuvântul* was banned and Nae Ionescu himself was arrested (2 January 1934). These are the last 45 days in the life of *Cuvântul* mentioned by Sebastian in *Cum am devenit buligan*, days for which he felt redeemed because, on November 23, "to the amazement of the anti-Semites," he published the piece on "Ion Trivale."<sup>15</sup> The text on Trivale does indeed exist, and is beyond reproach. But there are also other, rather different pieces written by Sebastian.

On 14 November 1933, the king appointed I. G. Duca (who had once opposed him, during the Restoration of 1930) to form the government and organize parliamentary elections. Immediately, Nae Ionescu went on the offensive in the editorial "... Și un cuvânt de pace" (... And a word of peace), in which Duca was accused of intending to repress only "a certain kind of extremism," the "anti-Semitic one." Suddenly, this seemed very "serious" to the former guest of Elena Lupescu: "This is indeed a serious matter." The next step was the rapid justification of anti-Semitism: "If some Romanians have the right to be philo-Semitic, then it is obvious that other Romanians equally have the right to be anti-Semitic."<sup>16</sup> Then, suddenly bothered by the Jewish interference in the life of Romania, he demanded that Jews be removed from the editorial staff of newspapers (an older desire of Octavian Goga) and from all political office, because they disturbed the peace of the country: "this word of peace will not be obtained. Not only because the Jews occupying high positions in the democratic press equate being a Jew with leading a Romanian newspaper . . . We do not wish to offend anyone, but in order to keep the peace, and especially in order to ensure normality in political life, a radical measure is needed: the removal of all Jews from political leadership positions."<sup>17</sup>

This was not the only anti-Semitic statement made by Nae Ionescu,<sup>18</sup> but rather the first explicit reference to the Jewish question in Romania. How did Sebastian react to it? Did he remain quiet, "like a stuffed pike," as I. Ludo

claimed, when Nae Ionescu “advocated the isolation of an entire Jewish collectivity”? In *Cum am devenit huligan* he speaks about a conversation in which his mentor explained his position, followed by the publication—in order to publicly explain his attitude and “to the amazement of the anti-Semites”—of his piece on “Ion Trivale.”<sup>19</sup> However, in *Cuvântul* we also find another response provided by Sebastian: the article dated 10 December 1933 and entitled “Minoritățile în alegeri” (Minorities in the elections), related to Nae Ionescu’s proposal whereby the Jews should no longer participate in political life (which meant the creation of two categories of Romanian citizens, one enjoying full political rights and another deprived of them, basically a step backwards to the period preceding the Constitution of 1923). In this article, Sebastian starts from the fact that the liberals had concluded an electoral alliance with the Saxons, while the party led by Grigore Iunian had established a cartel with the Ukrainians. In his opinion, the situation was “serious” and deserved a serious discussion, not in a “sentimental vein” but “in a fully objective fashion.” In his view, the vote of a Romanian weighed more than the vote of a member of an ethnic minority. The two votes also served different purposes, as the voters of “Romanian parties” were concerned with “the general political problems of the country,” while the electorate of “minority organizations” only cared about “the specific issues pertaining to the minorities, problems concerning their schools, their denomination, their culture.” Sebastian argued that while “minority interests can be legitimate, just, and acceptable,” they “are always particular in nature.” His conclusion, written in capital letters and highly conspicuous on the page, was that “THERE IS A FUNCTIONAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE ACTUAL POLITICAL VOTE AND MINORITY VOTE.” Consequently, argued Sebastian the electoral alliances concluded by minority organizations led to a “complete distortion of the parliamentary and implicitly of the political situation.”<sup>20</sup>

We learn thus that minority groups had too many, rather than too few rights and that, because of the many rights they enjoyed, they were responsible for distorting Romanian political life! And this from the voice of Mihail Sebastian. In his article, he only mentioned three minorities—“Hungarians, Saxons, Ukrainians, etc.”—and avoided any references to the Jewish minority, reduced to the rather general “etc.” Still, it is obvious that he was not interested in more rights for that minority, or in fact for any such group. On the contrary, this good disciple of Nae Ionescu advocated a limitation of minority rights—for instance, the right to form an alliance with other parties. Or, why not, even the right to vote. Aside from the fact that he did not prove any of the premises of his demonstration (there is no evidence to indicate that minority groups only pursued “particular” goals), it is obvious that, in the wake of his director, Sebastian also divided the citizens of Romania in two groups: Romanians having general in-

terests and concerns, and minority groups with particular interests. The latter are some sort of disabled persons whose excessive rights (more specifically, the right to form electoral alliances) paradoxically distorted the results of the elections. The open accusation formulated by Nae Ionescu, who claimed that the Jews were damaging Romanian political life, is taken one step further by Sebastian and generalized to all minorities. Also, the solution proposed by Nae Ionescu—the departure of Jews from political life—is also hinted at by Sebastian in this twisted version of the theory, generalized to all minorities, but it is not explicitly stated. Sebastian refrained from clearly demanding that the minorities responsible for distorting the election results should be deprived of the right to vote.

With election day ever closer, things heated up and Duca's government took drastic and sometime abusive action against the far right Legion. Newspapers of various orientations constantly criticized the actions of the government, seen as going against the rule of law. *Cuvântul* followed suit, but it was less interested in the rule of law than in defending the Legion. Overnight, the former royal newspaper had become the "official organ of the Iron Guard," which it "openly"<sup>21</sup> defended. The assassination—by the police!—of an Iron Guard member, student Virgil Teodorescu (an episode mentioned by Eliade in *The Forbidden Forest*) stimulated Nae Ionescu to write, in his editorial of 25 November, about the "revolutionary dissolution" of Romanian public life, which was presently living in the "age of assassinations." While the democratic press repeatedly called for the end of armed violence in political life, Nae Ionescu calmly explained that the new historical period was one of "armed struggle, in which human lives are immaterial," that Romanians were anything but peaceful by nature, as our history was filled with "political assassinations," perpetrated, however, "by the boyars." He continued by stating that the legionnaires represented a new kind of person, for whom "life means nothing," who "is not intimidated by death" but instead "*renounces individual existence with the precise aim of enhancing the existence of the collectivity.*" Furthermore, they were ready not only to die, "but also to kill."<sup>22</sup> Still, they were not supposed to be seen as common criminals, but rather as "new men," or indeed as "sacrificial victims."<sup>23</sup> According to Nae Ionescu, the calm and the rule of law advocated by other papers were not a solution. The solution was the collectivist revolution envisaged by the legionnaires, excessively delayed in Romania by the "cowardly passivity of the disintegrating bourgeoisie."<sup>24</sup> Support for the Legion went hand in hand with anti-Semitism. Nae Ionescu openly spoke against the "'assimilated' Jews" and explicitly demanded that: "1. Jews declare that they are Jewish, 2. Jews mind their own business," meaning that they should stay away from Romanian politics.<sup>25</sup>

*Cuvântul*, eagerly reporting news of the Legion, acquired a new contributor on November 29 in the person of Legion ideologist Vasile Marin,<sup>26</sup> and did not lose any member of the editorial staff as a consequence of this.

While democratic newspapers such as *Adevărul* (The Truth) and *Dimineața* (The Morning) pleaded for calm and for the end of armed violence in politics, and, at the opposing pole, Nae Ionescu talked about the fateful dawn of the age of assassinations, on 15 December 1933 Sebastian published one of his fiery pieces, aimed at a character of immediate relevance: “Omul cu revolverul” (The man with the gun). He describes a man who always carries a gun and fires it: “He travels around the country firing his gun. For him, firing a gun is like breathing. It is a biological function. The gun is part of his anatomy, and if careless biology omitted to make one grow on him like a third hand, he solved the problem by himself . . . ‘The man with the gun’ fires bullets around the clock, in all Romanian counties, riddling the country’s map. Not long ago in Bucharest, yesterday in Brăila, today in Ploiești, tomorrow in Buzău. If it’s cold, he fires his gun. If it’s warm, he fires his gun. You ask him the time, he shoots. You ask him nothing, he is still shooting.”

The young political journalist, who had witnessed for some time the presence of the gun in the election campaign,<sup>27</sup> was amused by this errant gunman, seemingly descended “from the American comedies seen in movie theaters,” especially because his bullets did not kill. At worst, they “damage the backside of someone’s pants.” Described in energetic and sympathetic terms, Sebastian’s “man with the gun” is an emblematic character: “After all, if this individual can roam the country and fire his gun anytime and anywhere he wants, this is because to a certain extent he embodies a kind of public sensibility.” More precisely, the “anger” of a disillusioned population. What ordinary people vent in a curse the man with the gun expresses in a gunshot: “You, my unfortunate friend and reader, you curse. He shoots. But both of you feel the same anger.” Furthermore, after “having fired the gun, with equal passion, under three governments,” under the Duca government he is forced to adapt: “If things continue at the same intensity, then under Duca’s government our man will have to trade his handgun for a machinegun, and become henceforth known as ‘the man with the machinegun,’”<sup>28</sup> came the cheerful prophecy of Sebastian. This text—consonant with the general tone of the newspaper, humorous and yet premonitory, if we think of the violent death of Prime Minister Duca—implicitly alludes not only to the legionnaires ready to take up arms but also to a real incident occurred in Bucharest: an incident between police officers and Gheorghe I. Brătianu, during which the head of the National Liberal Party (G. I. Brătianu) fired a shot in the air.

On 9 December 1933, the Council of Ministers banned the Iron Guard (the ban was timed so that the Guard would have no time to participate in the elections under a different name). At the same time, the police began making arrests (more than 1,700 legionnaires were arrested<sup>29</sup>; it seems that the actual number was larger, as Corneliu Zelea Codreanu claimed that more than 10,000 legionnaires had been arrested,<sup>30</sup> but this figure is disputed by historians) and the press began to protest. In defense of the law, the democratic press protested against this measure. For instance, in *Facla* (The Torch), Ion Vinea wrote that “We therefore protest, in the name of the law, against the dissolution of the destructive guards led by Codreanu, because we consider that . . . legality must be defended.”<sup>31</sup>

Nae Ionescu’s response was a gradual one. He began by questioning the legality of the measure<sup>32</sup>; then he accused the prime minister, claiming that the dissolution of the Iron Guard (which “has indeed resorted to armed violence. *But never without provocation*”) had a broader significance, being aimed at “our national movement” in general. This was seen as proof of the fact that Prime Minister Duca was working against his own interests and against the interests of the Liberal Party, on behalf of “an occult anti-national group” and especially “at the order of someone in the shadow,” who sought to intimidate the national movements in a display of power.<sup>33</sup> The target of the allusion, transparent even today, was Elena Lupescu. Then, three days before the elections, Nae Ionescu proposed, for the sake of “peace,” the release of the arrested legionnaires, the reintroduction of the Iron Guard on the election lists, and the postponement of the elections by a month, so that the legionnaires could organize an election campaign, just like the other parties.<sup>34</sup>

What did Sebastian do, when the “family” and the “home” that was *Cuvântul* threw all of its weight in support of the banned Iron Guard? On 21 December, the man later accused by the Jewish press of having “fought until the last minute for the triumph of racist ideology”<sup>35</sup> publicly announced his intention to abstain from the vote. According to Sebastian, neither he nor his friends would go and vote: “I conducted a small political survey among my friends and co-workers, writers, professors, doctors, men of letters, all members of the harried ‘young generation,’ on whose behalf so many ideological platoon leaders brazenly state absolute truths. The conclusion was far too general to be deprived of a precise meaning. None of them, none, I tell you, has registered to vote. None of them votes.” He continued by indicating that their planned absence from the vote did not result from a lack of interest in politics, or from their indifference to the “historic crisis” experienced by the country. On the contrary, they were “passionately interested in the issues of their time, in the political meaning of the moment they were experiencing, in the indicators of the his-

torical crisis.” Still, “their refusal to become politically involved” was “quite natural,” because “there are parties old and new, tame or noisy movements are ‘launched,’ brand new or time-honored formulas circulate in political life, and yet none of them manages to reflect the thinking of this elite, none of them can answer its questions, none of them can meet their serious expectations.” In other words, with the Legion no longer present on the election lists, the “elite” around Sebastian was no longer represented by any of the political organizations still on the lists. “Those who do not vote,” wrote Sebastian, are “in the service” of those “few great and serious things”<sup>36</sup> concerning Romania which cannot be found on the agenda of any of the political parties still in the running. Associated with the internal political events and with the editorials of Nae Ionescu, Sebastian’s article clearly indicates his support of the political line recently adopted by *Cuvântul* and the solidarity he felt for the beleaguered Legion.

A few days later, not long before Christmas and with the elections finally taking place, as Nae Ionescu was explaining “De ce alegerile acestea nu însemnează nimic” (Why these elections mean nothing)<sup>37</sup>—because they had not been free and because the government had taken the Iron Guard out of the game—Sebastian echoed his ideas, telling his readers that “Cu sânge sau nu, tot una e” (Blood or no blood, it’s all the same). The title itself is a manifesto. The article claimed that elections had not been free and were worthless. What is serious here is not the fact that Sebastian’s ideas repeat and continue those of Nae Ionescu. Far more serious is the fact that for the young commentator “it’s all the same” if the elections were marred in blood or not, if voters were subjected to violence or not, if they were killed or not. (Today’s innocent readers may want to know that interwar elections, especially those organized by the liberals, involved a lot of spilled blood, with many dead and wounded.) His indifference to the blood spilled (we know he had been safe, as he had not gone to vote) is stated in the very title. “Is the manner in which the elections were held in any way important for the political situation in the country?,” came his rhetorical question. And he continued: “Could the extreme savagery or, conversely, the peaceful nature of the elections alter in any way the function of the parliament produced by these elections, angelic or devilish?”<sup>38</sup>

His answer is no, because in Romania “parliaments . . . are . . . servile bodies, at the government’s beck and call,” so it mattered not whether elections had been bloody or not. His fallacious reasoning (which combines two issues but provides a single answer) can receive the simple reply that even if the parliament is subservient to the government, it does matter whether the elections were free or deprived of violence. We can assume that, had electoral thugs beaten *him* up, Sebastian would have been much more sensitive to blood, less cynical,

and less of a sophist. The cynicism displayed by Sebastian in this article matches the one showed by Cioran in pieces like “Hitler în conștiința germană” (Hitler in the German consciousness) and “Revolta sătuirilor” (Revolt of the gluttons) of 1934, where he justified Hitler’s decision to assassinate his opponents and competitors during the Night of the Long Knives.<sup>39</sup> In that December of 1933, the only blood that mattered for the editorial staff of *Cuvântul*, Sebastian included, was the legionnaire-green one. The exact same issue saw Zelea Codreanu’s debut as a contributor to *Cuvântul*, practically Sebastian’s co-worker. Thus, the indifference to voter blood displayed by Sebastian on the front page was spectacularly compensated for by the legitimate concern expressed on page three by Zelea Codreanu, in connection to the blood spilled by his fellow legionnaires, “children” beaten up in their prison cells “at the order of the Judeo-Mason bankers.”<sup>40</sup>

In the eight days left until *Cuvântul* was banned, Sebastian fully did his job as an editor. For instance, on December 30, he wrote a piece on the death of Colonel Macià,<sup>41</sup> once again praising him (and, in passing, also Franco) and proving his admiration for the authoritative and adventurous type of revolutionist. In the last issue of *Cuvântul*, dated 1 January 1934, Sebastian published two texts. Fortunately, both dealt with cultural subjects: “Unde literatura răspunde în politică” (Where literature responds in politics), devoted to Curtius, who had published in Paris his study on Balzac, and a review to the book *Pluie d'étoiles* by Matila C. Ghyka.<sup>42</sup> The legionnaire-green waters in which, as indicated by I. Ludo,<sup>43</sup> he swam merrily like a “trout,” became red with the blood of the legionnaires abused by the authorities, and also with the blood of a victim of the Legion: I. G. Duca, the chairman of the Council of Ministers (29 December 1933).

**G**IVEN HIS entourage, Sebastian naturally and smoothly turned into an extremist of the right. If we read the articles published in *Cuvântul* and correlate them with the texts of his mentor, and if we relate the writings of both to the political chronology of Romania, we realize beyond any doubt that Sebastian, deeply influenced by the personality and the ideology of Nae Ionescu, became antidemocratic and “revolutionary,” embracing the far right. He was not a legionnaire, only a right-wing extremist. As even extremism can have various degrees of intensity, Sebastian was a moderate extremist of the right—the label may sound utterly bizarre, but it does reflect the content of its articles—and not a “raving” one. Quite often, his ideas are a notch below those of Nae Ionescu and those voiced in the years to come by other members of his generation, such as Eliade, Cioran, Noica, a. o.

Sebastian was a man “ahead of his time,” embracing extremism earlier than some of his colleagues. His extremism began in 1929, culminating in 1933. It is a rather unique intellectual experience to read his “revolutionary texts,” some of them truly violent, and realize that the pieces published by Eliade in the same issues of *Cuvântul* dealt strictly with cultural subjects: on the *Upanishads*, on the Renaissance, on hemlock, and, in the summer of 1933, on intellectual unemployment, screaming “I’m hungry” on the first page of *Cuvântul*.<sup>44</sup> Cioran and Eliade developed a taste for political extremism later than Sebastian (Cioran towards the end of 1933—when Sebastian’s revolutionary violence had reached its peak—, in a progression that culminated in 1936; Eliade embraced the cause of the Legion at the end of 1935, when Sebastian had already seen the error of his ways...) Sebastian remained at *Cuvântul* and continued to write in keeping with the doctrine of the newspaper even after the publication became the official organ of the Legion. Thus, the young political commentator became colleagues with the Legion’s leaders, Vasile Marin and Zelea Codreanu. As Norman Manea pointed out after reading Sebastian’s *Journal*, the incompatibilities whose absence he condemned in others were not really his strong point.<sup>45</sup> No amount of anti-Semitism, ethnicism, and support for the Legion—all manifest with Nae Ionescu after his falling out with the king—could persuade Sebastian to leave the editorial staff. I. Ludo (whose actual portrait is rather different from what Sebastian tells us in *Cum am devenit huligan*), outraged by a letter Sebastian sent to him in 1934 in defense of his mentor, legitimately asked why the “young Aryan Jew” had not left *Cuvântul* “after the first ethnicist growl.” We may wonder why he had not left the newspaper even after the first signs of brutal anti-Semitism, which appeared in September 1933. Although he never wrote anything that was explicitly anti-Semitic, in the pages of *Cuvântul* he chose not to defend the rights of the Jewish minority in Romania. On the contrary, by speaking against the rights of all minorities, he implicitly undermined (in that strange article, “Minoritățile în alegeri”) the rights of his own community. Similarly, although he never wrote anything explicit in support of the Legion, it is perfectly clear that texts such as the aforementioned “Omul cu revolverul” and “Cei care nu votează!” strengthened the cause of the beleaguered Legion and of the far right in general. Maybe his approach was less violent and direct than the one chosen by his friend and fellow journalist, G. Racoveanu. Still, Sebastian made no secret of his opinions.

The absence of documents—letters, journal entries, etc.—prevents us from knowing his state of mind at the end of 1933, when Nae Ionescu became openly anti-Semitic. The information found in *Cum am devenit huligan*, distorted by the polemical context in which it was written, is rather vague when it comes to

the last months of 1933. Besides, statements like “The possibility of seeing *Cuvântul* in the service of the Iron Guard has always seemed to me utterly preposterous”<sup>46</sup> are pure rhetoric. It may be that, although he wrote the way he wrote, he was not entirely comfortable with what he was doing. We also do not know how he felt when I. G. Duca, his eternal “muse,” was assassinated. But we do know that, after everything that Nae Ionescu had written about Jews and legionnaires and after the Jewish reactions of 1933 to the anti-Semitic texts of his mentor, Sebastian chose to remain at *Cuvântul* and continued to write in keeping with the official line one of the newspaper—publicly demanding an award for his journalistic heroism and “martyrdom.” He had an unshaken belief in Nae Ionescu, whose ideas he shared both privately and publicly and with whom he was eminently compatible. Like Snow White, delicately nibbling at the tidbits collected from the plates of the seven dwarfs, Sebastian partook of all the ultra-reactionary (to him, ultra-revolutionary) ideas of his professor. When it came to Nae Ionescu’s ideology, the only things likely to trouble Sebastian were its manifest anti-Semitism and the open support for the Legion (an anti-Semitic organization). Still, Sebastian managed to perfectly deal with this challenge, following up on Nae Ionescu’s ideas in skillfully written articles like “Minoritățile în alegeri,” “Omul cu revolverul,” “Cei care nu votează!” The elevated status granted to Sebastian by *Cuvântul*—political commentator, first page columnist, writing for the eyes of the king—must also be factored in when we consider the emotional attachment showed by Sebastian to his director.

**S**EBASTIAN WAS NOT a permanently nice and gentle person, nor was he always a democrat, or an innocent victim, as he has been seen and portrayed until recently. Nae Ionescu influenced him to such an extent that all of his attention and gentleness were directed towards his immediate circle of friends and allies. His opponents saw his other face, the offensive and unjust one. Politically speaking, between 1929 and 1934 he was an antidemocrat of the right and of the far right, and after 1934 he stayed away from all politics. In the late 1930s and during the war, to our eternal shame, Sebastian was the victim of the official Romanian state anti-Semitism. He was not an innocent victim, but rather the victim of his former accomplices. This does not absolve us Romanians of our anti-Semitism, but it does put the statements found in Sebastian’s *Journal* into a different perspective, as their subjective nature may require some circumspection on the part of the reader. Once we correct the data on Mihail Sebastian and actually begin with his debut, in 1927, and not with the year 1934, the moral profile of Sebastian goes through a process of self-adjustment, becoming more dramatic but ceasing to be an exemplary model.

I believe he can no longer be presented as a model of political lucidity; on the contrary, given his lack of lucidity and his propensity for self-delusion, as well as his long complicity with his future persecutors, he is an example of conjec-tural political readjustment. He is also a good example of the fundamental in-dividual right to change one's opinions. Also, he is an example of masochistic loyalty to the first and only people he thought of as his friends. More than anything, he is a good indicator of the tremendous appeal exerted over the Romanian interwar intelligentsia by the idea of a right-wing revolution, and of the immense seductive power of Nae Ionescu.

The concrete case of Sebastian—a Romanian writer of Jewish extraction lost in the labyrinth of the Romanian far right—reveals the endless deceptions that history leaves in our path. He was the first member of the generation of 1927 to be deceived by the revolutionary ideology of that time, by the charm of Nae Ionescu, and by the example of the European far right, in its tame, Italian ver-sion. Beginning with 1933 he was followed by the other members of his gen-eration, Racoveanu, Cioran, Eliade, Noica and the others, even if their paths soon diverged. His evolution highlights the significant gravitational force ex-erted by extremism in interwar Europe and in Romania, being also an indica-tion of the persuasive force of the model represented by Nae Ionescu. Sebastian's condition—a Romanian-Jew lost in the abyss of the Romanian right, at a time of unfortunate anti-Semitism—is similar to that of Chaim Breisacher, a char-acter with a knack for “the most recent changes in orientation” whom Thomas Mann, understanding his odd mix of reactionary and avant-garde ideas, defined with the phrase “a child of his time.” Well, Sebastian himself was “a child of his time,” molded and twisted by the seven years spent in the “house of *Cuvân-tul*,” by the seven years of “undeserved luck” and of apprenticeship with his “master,” Nae Ionescu.

□

## Notes

1. The phrase belongs to Leon Volovici. See the debate “Efectul Sebastian.” Întâlnire dedicată *Jurnalului* lui Mihail Sebastian, 17 febr. 1997,” in *Întâlniri la Ierusalim*, eds. Costel Safirman and Leon Volovici (Bucharest: Ed. Fundației Culturale Române, 2001), 232.
2. Mihail Sebastian, *Cum am devenit huligan: Texte, fapte, oameni* (Bucharest: Cultura Națională, 1935), 75.
3. Nae Ionescu to Elena-Margareta Ionescu, Bucharest, 5 August 1928, in Nae Ionescu and Elena-Margareta Ionescu, *Correspondența de dragoste (1911–1935)*, ed. Dora Mezdrea, vol. 2 (Bucharest: Anastasia, 1997), 335.

4. Mihail Sebastian, "Constantin Noica: Mathesis sau bucuriile simple," *Rampa* (Bucharest) 18, 5311 (27 September 1935).
5. Mihail Sebastian, "'Să ne premieze și pe noi!'" *Cuvântul* 10, 3107 (18 December 1933).
6. Sebastian, *Cum am devenit huligan*, 79–80.
7. *Ibid.*, 74.
8. Grigore Gafencu, *Însemnări politice, 1929–1939*, ed. Stelian Neagoe (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1991), 16.
9. *Ibid.*, 47.
10. Mihail Manoilescu, *Memorii*, ed. Valeriu Dinu, vol. 2 (Bucharest: Ed. Enciclopedică, 1993), 324.
11. Armand Călinescu, *Însemnări politice, 1916–1939*, ed. A. G. Savu (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990), note of 7 June 1933, p. 169.
12. *Ibid.*, 27 April 1933, p. 162.
13. Nae Ionescu, "Prietenia italo-germană a fost denunțată," *Cuvântul* 9, 3016 (17 September 1933); *id.*, "Ce avem noi cu revoluția germană?" *Cuvântul* 9, 3021 (23 September 1933).
14. Nae Ionescu, "D. Gr. Iunian și parlamentarismul," *Cuvântul* 9, 3027 (28 September 1933); *id.*, "Ce nu știm încă," *Cuvântul* 9, 3044 (15 October 1933); *id.*, "Despre 'necesitatea obiectivă' a unui guvern Duca," *Cuvântul* 10, 3072 (13 November 1933).
15. Sebastian, *Cum am devenit huligan*, 107.
16. Nae Ionescu, "... Și un cuvânt de pace," *Cuvântul* 10, 3076 (17 November 1933).
17. *Ibid.*
18. The first to condemn Nae Ionescu was publicist I. Ludo, in *Adam* (Bucharest), in June of 1933. In November 1933, the magazine *Adam* was joined by *Cuvântul liber* (Free Word).
19. Sebastian, *Cum am devenit huligan*, 107; *id.*, "Ion Trivale," *Cuvântul* 10, 3082 (23 November 1933).
20. Mihail Sebastian, "Minoritățile în alegeri," *Cuvântul* 10, 3099 (10 December 1933).
21. Armand Călinescu, 199.
22. Nae Ionescu, "Când ne vom desmeteci?" *Cuvântul* 10, 3084 (25 November 1933).
23. Nae Ionescu, "'Linștea domnește la Warșovia!'" *Cuvântul* 10, 3092 (3 December 1933); see also *id.*, "Ce e de făcut—și ce nu se va face," *Cuvântul* 10, 3106 (17 December 1933).
24. Ionescu, "Când ne vom desmeteci?" (25 November 1933).
25. Nae Ionescu, "'Zdrobitoarea majoritate' a evreilor naționali," *Cuvântul* 10, 3099 (10 December 1933); see also *id.*, "'Între 'agresivitate' antisemită și 'pasivitate' filosemită,'" *Cuvântul* 10, 3085 (26 November 1933); *id.*, "'Transcendentalism' și politică," *Cuvântul* 10, 3088 (29 November 1933).
26. Vasile Marin, "Abdicările statului democrat," *Cuvântul* 10, 3088 (29 November 1933).
27. Mihail Sebastian, "'Democrat' și 'conservator,'" *Cuvântul*, 10, 3086 (27 November 1933). The identity of the person alluded to by Sebastian remains uncertain; it could have been Grigore Forțu, who had been involved in a public incident: he had fired

- five bullets at a policeman; see the report “D. Forțu, autorul unui incident foarte ciudat,” *Cuvântul* 9, 3039 (10 October 1933).
28. Mihail Sebastian, “Omul cu revolverul,” *Cuvântul* 10, 3104 (15 December 1933).
  29. Armin Heinen, *Legiunea “Arhanghelul Mihail”—mișcare socială și organizație politică: O contribuție la problema fascismului internațional*, trans. (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1999), 241.
  30. Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, “Un cuvânt în chestiunea dizolvării Gărzii de Fier,” *Cuvântul* 10, 3113 (24 December 1933): 3.
  31. Ion Vinea, “Afară din lege,” *Facla* (Bucharest) 12, 865 (11 December 1933).
  32. Nae Ionescu, “Contribuții la teoria actului de guvernământ,” *Cuvântul* 10, 3102 (13 December 1933).
  33. Nae Ionescu, “Roluri blestemate,” *Cuvântul* 10, 3103 (14 December 1933).
  34. Nae Ionescu, “Ce e de făcut—și ce nu se va face” (17 December 1933).
  35. I. Ludo, “Un ovrei cumsecade în ghiarele moralei iudaice,” *Adam* 5, 68 (1 March 1934): 10. See the similar accusations against the narrator in *De două mii de ani...*, identified by critics with Sebastian himself: that he felt “at home rubbing elbows with uncompromising nationalists”: Mihail Solomon, “A cui e vina?” *Adam* 6, 75 (15 November 1934): 12.
  36. Mihail Sebastian, “Cei care nu votează!” *Cuvântul* 10, 3110 (21 December 1933).
  37. Nae Ionescu, “De ce alegerile acestea nu însemnează nimic,” *Cuvântul* 10, 3112 (23 December 1933).
  38. Mihail Sebastian, “Cu sânge sau nu, tot una e,” *Cuvântul* 10, 3113 (24 December 1933).
  39. See Marta Petreu, *Un trecut deocheat sau “Schimbarea la față a României”*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Bucharest: Ed. Institutului Cultural Român, 2004), 14–16.
  40. Zelea Codreanu (24 December 1933).
  41. Mihail Sebastian, “Macia,” *Cuvântul* 10, 3117 (30 December 1933).
  42. Mihail Sebastian, “Unde literatura răspunde în politică”; id., “Matila C. Ghyka: Pluie d’ététoiles,” both in *Cuvântul* 11, 3119 (1 January 1934): 1 and 3–4.
  43. Ludo (1 March 1934).
  44. Eliade, “Mi-e foame!” *Cuvântul* 9, 2978 (10 August 1933).
  45. Norman Manea, “Incompatibilitățile,” 22 (Bucharest) 8, 23 (9–15 June 1998); see Jordan Chimet, *Dosar Mihail Sebastian* (Bucharest: Universal Dalsi, 2001), 22–23, 26–27.
  46. Sebastian, *Cum am devenit buligan*, 106.

## Abstract

### A Case of Mystified Perception: Mihail Sebastian

For a long time, the image of Mihail Sebastian in Romanian culture has been the distorted one of a gentle democrat, an innocent victim of the intolerant right-wing doctrines manifest in Romania until the end of the Second World War. The present analysis of some articles published by Sebastian

in *Cuvântul* shows that he was anything but a democrat, eager to complain about excessive minority rights and subtly endorsing the idea of violence in politics. Despite the fact that his texts were never explicitly anti-Semitic or openly supportive of the far-right Legion of the Archangel Michael, his continuing presence in the editorial staff of *Cuvântul* and his endorsement of the official line of the newspaper, after the latter's radical turn to the right, require that the image of Sebastian be put in the proper perspective and context.

**Keywords**

Mihail Sebastian, anti-Semitism, interwar Romania, Nae Ionescu, far right, Legion of Archangel Michael