

THE GAME OF SHADOWS. MIHAIL SEBASTIAN'S THEATER



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Abstract: *This article aims to investigate the playful dimension of Mihail Sebastian's theater, focusing on how play and games constitute not only dramatic devices (techniques), but also mechanisms for constructing and deconstructing identity and questioning reality. The analysis considers the four plays in his dramatic repertoire (The Nameless Star, The Holiday Game, The Last Hour, and The Island) and starts from the premise that, for Sebastian, play and games represent a fundamental aesthetic category through which the author artistically explores the tension between reality and unreality, constraint and freedom, the desire to escape and the need to confront reality. Essential structures of his theater, "ludus" and "paidia", as understood by Roger Caillois, fulfill a dual function: on the one hand, they open a temporary sequence of liberation, fantasy, and experimentation, in which the mask plays a primordial role in constructing the mirage, and, on the other hand, they expose and ironize the negative aspects. "locus" becomes a key concept through which the playwright inscribes himself in a modern tradition of playfulness, where it, synonymous with illusion, understood simultaneously as a space of freedom, a travesty of being, a critical/ satirical mechanism, and a solution for survival, is not the opposite of existential gravity, but rather the very means by which it is expressed and problematized.*

Key-words: game/ play, illusion, escape, Chronos, identity/ otherness

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Escapism and Illusionism

Before becoming a playwright, as Mircea Tomuș observed (Tomuș, 1969, pp. 286-299), Sebastian had lived in the world of theater, written theater reviews, and debated issues related to repertoire, interpretation, and directorial vision in dedicated articles. A work of artistic maturity, bearing his unmistakable stylistic imprint, the four plays, "thinner, intellectualized farces with serious social and moral implications" (Crohmălniceanu, 2003, p. 385), are undeniably relevant today and absolutely captivating in their sensitivity and elegiac tone. They captivate

today's audience, which is very different from that of their first performances, perhaps precisely because of their slightly outdated "poetry" and "humanity" (Pop, 2007, p. 11). The audience, although not experiencing dramatic upheavals, can dream¹ alongside the heroes, stepping into their story², while one eye laughs and the other cries. His atmospheric theater, "dreamlike, poetic"³ (Grăsoiu, 1986, p. 180) possesses a lyricism which, far from being a simple compositional artifice, is the result of the writer's own unique way of looking at and understanding life (Râpeanu, 1966, p. 176). By no means "stuck in the realm of the frivolity of boulevard theater" (Mihăilescu, 2007, p. 10), it clearly stands out in the dramatic landscape shaped by Lucian Blaga (mythical) and Camil Petrescu (knowledge and its problems).

Happiness, with its many facets, becomes the overarching theme of Sebastian's dramaturgy. His heroes, *alter egos* of the author⁴, hypersensitive, maladjusted, and nonconformist, crushed between limits and limitations, obsessively desire it, stubbornly seek it, in an endeavor that requires escaping from a flat, confining, hostile, and alien, and "the acceptance of an illusory world, of imagination" (Crohmălniceanu, 2003, p. 385), condemned to be temporary: the seriousness of the game reveals the profoundly human nature of playfulness, but also its impossibility to last forever. Practicing escapism is equivalent to illusion, translated as dreaming, isolation (pushed to the limits of insularity), sublimation, denial in fantasy, the presence of the mirrored double and, above all, the mask⁵.

¹ As Ion Vlad intuited, noting: "Moving away from direct quotation, the reader recomposes the text himself. It will belong entirely to us, we will hear it. We will hear our own replies, and the text ceases to exist in its old form." (Vlad, 1972, p. 257) As long as theater itself is nothing more than "spectacle, that is, mirage, that is, artifice", and "the mask expresses and satisfies this need to step beyond" (Mihail Sebastian, in an article in *Rampa*, September 22, 1935, p. 1, quoted by Narcis Zărnescu, 1988, p. 15), the spectator can detach himself and, depersonalized, partially identify with or become one with the heroes.

² For Sebastian, theater is "a fiction you believe in", "a game you participate in" (Sebastian, 1935, p. 1, apud Zărnescu, 1988, p. 14).

³ We must not forget that the writer, in his capacity as essayist, critic, and theater chronicler, advocated for lyricism in theater, which was nothing more than a laboratory in which the sensibility of an era finds, formulates, and legislates its self-awareness: "Thought, poetry, meditation do not form [...] a mere unfortunate ballast of theater, but on the contrary, theater can only be saved as an art through poetry and thought." (Sebastian, 2015, p. 139)

⁴ The author often spoke in the pages of his *Journal* about his stubborn search for an "ideal of happiness", equivalent to an "ideal of life" that was at least tolerable, if it could not be lived fully in all aspects of reality. Consequently, his avatar characters become spokespersons for the writer's permanent desire to give materiality to that tormenting What might have been, which marked his life (Sebastian, 1996, p. 402)

⁵ The mask is a corollary of "the tragedy of a sensitivity that cannot be realized" (Sebastian, 1928, pp. 1-2), which "responds to our instinct for escape. An instinct like hunger, like thirst,

Some characters practice this game¹ “seriously” (in Huizinga’s sense, 2003: 43, “[...] the game has rules that are willingly accepted, it is freedom that satisfies ideals of expression and social ideals, it creates order, it is order.”) in a lucid, conscious way, because they exercise their imagination and are trained in illusion, while others act mechanically or instinctively or are completely unconscious. In their daring attempt to carve out a bearable pseudo-existence, where restrictions, inauthenticity, and illogicality can be combated through a metaphorical release, they must adapt the rules of the game to their own horizon of expectation and alter the facts of reality, playing with the axis of time and space, modifying their predetermined trajectory, far from their conventional linearity, dilating or contracting them until the limits are completely diluted, and with identity, by practicing a kind of agnosia. Only in this way can the mirage, with all its inherent provisionality, acquire the proof and validity of a pure experience.

Trained in the art of escapism, fervently practicing (self)deception, the characters in his melodramas, although they possess the inner strength to build a system of levers through which they can temporarily desert their own half-lives and apparently master the rules of the game of happiness, of real life, they will not emerge victorious from the battle against conformism and convention, continuing to merely exist rather than live, tasting failure with wounded sensitivity and loneliness. Although, “sensitive emotional reeds” (Grăsoiu, 1986, p. 199) have glimpsed the shadow of another kind of game played by the fairies and have experienced, as in a shadow theater, for a short period, the illusion of a projected life, they will ultimately capitulate in the face of opacity, triviality, loss of identity, and annihilation.

The Mirage and Its Illusions

In Mihail Sebastian’s theater, acting and playfulness are not just simple dramatic devices (techniques), but also mechanisms for questioning and (de)constructing identity and benignly altering reality. Gifted with extraordinary sensitivity, the heroes of the four plays construct a tolerable pseudo-existence for themselves. Captive to routine, like sufferers condemned to immobility, they seek to live in an immediate unreality

like love, a sumptuous instinct, of course, luxurious and expensive, but no less natural.” (Sebastian, 1935, p. 1)

¹ Which, according to Caillois’ definition, possesses all the constituent elements: it is free (unburdened by obligations), separate (delimited in time and space), uncertain (its course cannot be determined, as it allows for innovation/ improvisation), unprofitable (free), controlled (governed by rules), and fictitious (imagination or fantasy). (Caillois, 2001, pp. 9-10)

(similar to that described by Blecher), while the mask, the simulacrum, becomes the only desirable and bearable reality. By abdicating lucidity, play, the gamification of one's own life, can become a palliative.

The characters' ideals of happiness, seemingly different, are nevertheless similar in their essential features. Each of them achieves it in their own personal, highly individualized way: Ștefan Valeriu, from *Jocul de-a vacanța* (The Holiday Game, the title itself announcing the playful dimension), finds it in an isolated guesthouse in the forest, lost in the mountains, in an escape that completely breaks him away from his ordinary life; Mona, the unknown woman from *Steaua fără nume* (Star Without a Name), in a simple house in a dusty province, on the arm of a man who cannot afford the luxury of offering her a branch of white lilac in February ("I'm happy, my dear. Do you hear me? Happy. There is so much sun, so much light. And these flowers, look... they are the most beautiful flowers in the world. It's as if they all raise their heads at once and say, 'Good morning!'); Alexandru Andronic and Magda Minu, from *Ultima oră* (The Last Hour), on a journey in the footsteps of Alexander the Great; Nadia, from *Insula* (The Island), in an isolated place "...with lots of light, lots of blue, lots of sky... plants and flowers, and colors, and a wide horizon...". For the delicate Professor Miroiu, happiness lies in another galaxy ("There are evenings when the whole sky rustles with life... when, if you listen carefully, you can hear the forests and oceans murmuring on the last star — fantastic forests and fantastic oceans — evenings when the whole sky is full of signs and calls, as if from one planet to another, from one star to another, beings who have never seen each other are searching for each other, sensing each other, calling each other."), while Corina sees it as a constructed illusion of a desirable identity: "Maybe you're the Prince of Wales. Maybe I'm a great dancer. [...] Stay that way. What do you want me to find out about you? That you're a little engineer, or a little lawyer, or a little architect. [...] That all year long you've been saving money naively, which embarrasses you, so you can afford a month's vacation... [...] Let me be the stranger who breaks away from you, to return to a life of mystery..." Bogoiu finally lives his dream of being a sea wolf, while the trio on *the Island*, participating in a modern Robinson Crusoe adventure, delude themselves with the hallucinogenic effects of aspirin abuse.

Always waiting for something important to spice up their mundane lives, fill the void, or change the course of their destiny, heroes forget to live in the present. For them, ataraxia can be achieved if they obtain a precarious balance, peace, and calm, even if these are gained at the cost of renunciation or painful capitulation. Under the assault of the trivial and the opacity of a world in which they cannot or do not want to find their place, the heroes

fight their battles with the same weapons. If “in the formula of happiness, dreams and symbols play a special role” (Georgescu, 1964, p. 92), forgetfulness and feigned ignorance seem to be the key. Disguise, *qui-pro-quo*, a kind of endophasia combined with self-induced prosopagnosia (thought of in a metaphorical sense), and the shaping of the axis of time are the favorite tools of the participants in the game of life, which, far from being frivolous, represents a form of autonomous existence with its own rules.

Ștefan Valeriu, possessing both a propensity for play and experience, becomes the initiator of a collective experiment: within the isolated mountain villa, he establishes the rules of an “absolute vacation”, in which any reference to everyday life is prohibited, including professions, social roles, obligations, and even real names. By giving up their identifying details and completely abandoning themselves, the ordinary world is suspended, and the characters, despite their initial reluctance, enter an alternative reality governed by the logic of the game. This temporary reality is, however, a mental construct that inevitably takes on a utopian character. Although it promises liberation from external constraints, at the same time it tests the characters’ resistance to freedom. Each of the participants responds differently to this challenge: some experience it as a chance for reinvention, while others fear the consequences of the suspension of identity. The conflict in the play arises precisely from the fragility of the playful convention, which cannot withstand the pressure of aggressive reality.

In *Steaua fără nume* (The Nameless Star), the playful dimension acquires new subtleties. Diametrically opposed beings, Professor Miroiu and Mona, involuntarily overcome by an inexplicable desire to seek each other out, embark on a lamentably failed attempt to escape their own captivity into another universe. The relationship between the two protagonists is built through a game of imagination and conversation, relying on the seductive power of words and autosuggestion. The discussions about astronomy and infinity, in which the celestial enthusiast pleads passionately for a completely uneducated audience, are not just simple intellectual exchanges, but forms of existential disguise, in which each hides their frustrations and desires under the mask of a game of ideas. The unknown woman, coming from a sophisticated and decadent universe, and the young man, modest, caught between the limits of a monotonous provincial life, create, for only a few hours, a common space, governed by fantasy and the chimera of a domestic life for two.

In *Ultima oră* (The Last Hour), the game takes on a different tone: one of irony and satire, mocking the false freedom of the press and commercialism¹.

In this play, Sebastian uses the playful device not necessarily to allow the heroes to escape, but to expose, ridicule, and criticize. Here, the playwright explores the world of journalism and university life, revealing the mechanisms of corruption, manipulation, and imposture. "ȘTEFĂNESCU: (contemptuously) Printed! (with a certain skeptical, jaded bitterness) A newspaper lives for a day. Less than that. A morning, an hour. A newspaper dies five minutes after it has been read." (Sebastian, 1965, pp. 328-329). Between the lines, the writer's own experience as a journalist and his familiarity with this volatile environment become apparent. The bitter retort hides, behind the ridicule, the disappointment of one betrayed by the pen. The characters engage in a constant game of appearances: journalists hide their obscure interests behind cultural pretensions, innocent teachers who are out of touch with reality get caught up in machinations, and the print media becomes the scene of a power game, where the rules are dictated by arrogant, unscrupulous moguls with money and influence. The innocence of the game of vacation, of happiness, or the poetic fragility of *Steaua fără nume* (The Nameless Star) are far removed from this grotesque masquerade. Irony and satire are here forms of the "serious game", revealing to the audience how fragile the boundary between truth and simulacrum is. For the first time in Sebastian's theater, "the visible conflict transcends the hidden areas of the ineffable soul, rising to the realm of the factual." (Tomuș, 1969, p. 298). This time, dreamers are no longer defeated by reality and no longer have to resign themselves to its onslaught.

Recruited from very different social backgrounds, the heroes of *The Island*², caught in an extreme situation, find themselves forced to form a bizarre, completely unexpected alliance in order to ensure their escape. We witness a sensitive, lyrical retelling of Robinson's story, this time with three characters: a banker who possesses only useless checks, an injured soccer player, and a virtually unknown painter. Here, as in his other plays, Sebastian chooses to abandon the social fresco and focuses on psychology,

¹ The playwright was aware of the risks he would be exposing himself to by publishing this latest dramatic production: "They fear that the entire press will be outraged. There may be some truth in that. In that case, the play will have to be signed by a completely invulnerable name. A debutant, an unknown, someone who can mitigate any attacks through personal effacement." (Sebastian, 1996, p. 441)

² References to *The Island* refer to the unfinished version of the play, as conceived by Sebastian, and not to the version completed, more or less successfully, by Mircea Ștefănescu (not Mircea Șeptilici, as erroneously noted in some of the exegesis).

which he probes carefully, using the precarious means of dramatic discourse, more restrictive than epic discourse. Seemingly lighthearted, on a second reading, the text generously opens up to the game of masks, to the idea of the contrast between appearance and essence in a world of illusions. *Migrantis aves*, driven by the single, impossible-to-ignore instinct to return home, disoriented, lacking landmarks, thrown by vicissitudes into inhospitable lands, the three characters in the play, now shadows of their former celebrity, elegance, talent, wealth, or beauty, place themselves under the imperative need to escape, mentally, from the sordid attic where they are locked in humiliation, far away, somewhere on the sea, in another isolation, in search of a paradise never known and yet lost.

The Shadows of Chronos

At the end of his study, Jacques Ehrman concluded that play cannot take place in a reality with standard data, since it participates, with all the elements that form it, in playful activity. Therefore, it can never be neutral, objectified, subjectivized, or neutralized¹. Consequently, the theorist postulates that, in the text, play and reality are inseparable, synonymous. In Sebastian's theater, the assiduous practice of play (defined by the playwright as an act of freedom), the construction of a scaffolding of illusions, is based, alongside the wearing of masks, with all the implications that this gesture entails, on the alteration of the coordinates of reality, especially the axis of time². This change contributes to the creation of a world with loose boundaries, in an atmosphere of uncertainty, a moral/emotional/ existential space in which the characters search for their identity, meaning, and, ultimately, happiness. "Mihail Sebastian's plays are — a fact that has not been noted until now — almost *mythical* scenarios of the tragic clash between time and man." (Zărnescu, 1988, p. 15)

Memory and remembrance are among the forces acting on the temporal axis. In *The Island*, the present is all the more difficult to bear because the heroes cannot help but compare themselves to their glorious past. While Mona proves incapable of breaking ties with her former self, in

¹ "Play is not played against a background of a fixed, stable, reality which would serve as its standard. All reality is caught up in the play of the concepts which designate it. Reality is thus not capable of being objectified, nor subjectified. However, it is never neutral. Nor can it be neutralized." (Ehrman, 1968, p. 56)

² "His characters have entered the pantheon of our national drama for their ability to add a paradoxical and contradictory soul structure to reality, for their extraordinary ability to play with language and transform theater into the art of supreme illusion [...]." (Băicuș, https://www.academia.edu/44419132/Iulian_Baicus_Mihail_Sebastian_sau_lacomia_de_tragic, last accessed on 25.05.2024).

the arms of a man for whom love and happiness are nothing but empty words, Ștefan Valeriu, faced with his lost former self, from whom he had unwittingly become estranged¹, has painful flashbacks:

“ȘTEFAN: [...] I have occasionally sent flowers to a friend or girlfriend, but I have never delivered them myself. I would have died of shame. Look, just once, in Bucharest, last spring, it was March, I was coming back from work... I was in a hurry... around noon... It was sunny... and there were big baskets with yellow and blue flowers... gypsy women inviting you to buy... I was suddenly struck, I don't know where from, by the desire to wear a flower in that midday sun. How I suffered afterwards! From Corso to Capșa, it seemed to me that everyone was looking at me, pointing at me. I was carrying a few yellow flowers in my hand and they seemed to prick me. I was ridiculous, I was comical. Near the Military Club, in the crowd, I closed my eyes and... threw them away.” (Sebastian, 1965, pp. 77-78)

Time does not flow linearly, becoming elastic, and memories that creep in bring regret, nostalgia, and prevent entry and/ or remaining in illusion. When the past is relived and becomes present, not only does temporal perception change, but access to the mirage that guarantees the right to happiness is blocked. Amnesia, the abandonment of all the burdens of the year, are at the heart of the elaborate game proposed by Ștefan Valeriu², who accuses others of not knowing how to forget, bringing automatisms, obsessions, regrets, and former loves in their suitcases. Some understand his game, others do not (depending on whether or not they are capable of dreaming), but all accept it: out of conviction (Corina), out of constraint (Bogoiu), or simply out of indifference (the Major). The mechanism is only accessible to people who are spiritually prepared to receive it: Jeff deludes himself that he can forget his failure in mathematics; Corina wants to appear as a woman shrouded in mystery, sailing imaginatively towards the sunny shores of Italy, thinking of the unknown performer of Mozart's serenade; Bogoiu, a ministry official, who is addressed rudely by everyone throughout the year, asking him about the fate of their files, sails fantastically across the seas and oceans, at the helm of his own ship, but also of his own life. On the other hand, in Andronic's case, the past is a source of vitality. A “blasé guy” who “has no ambitions”, driven by the sole impulse to “spend all day with his nose in books”, oblivious to the universal flow of time, in his attempt to escape vertically through

¹ “I met him once before, a long time ago. About twenty years ago. He hasn't changed much. [...] Since then, I've seen him a few times. 'In life', as they say. Less and less often... Further and further away... When I came here... I had lost him completely...” (Sebastian, 1965, p. 116)

² A particular type of *ludus* (controlled play), which, according to Caillois, differs markedly from *paidia*, i.e. spontaneous play.

history, taking refuge in his room, lost in individual time, slaloming through the ideas scattered on the papers on the table that Ana, the maid, never cleans, for fear of upsetting him. Because he failed in his attempt to identify with the great ancient conqueror, remaining an effigy, without three-dimensional relief, he decided, in the absence of another therapeutic solution, to focus exclusively on finding the truth: "ANDRONIC: It disturbed me. I was twenty years old. He was twenty-one, twenty-two when I met him. [...] I wanted to know who this man was. I wanted to write a portrait of him." (Sebastian, 1965, p. 300)

The future is often fraught with uncertainty. The characters are in a constant state of waiting for something that will fulfill them. For Madame Vintilă and Corina, this is a phone call that will confirm or save their romantic relationships; for Jeff, it is a resit exam; for Miroiu, it is a book that will decipher the mysteries of the universe; for Udrea, it is an English horn on which the completion of the symphony depends; while for the high school girls isolated in a dusty provincial town, another Sadoveanu-like place where nothing ever happens, the train is a promise of a possible but unlikely life. Dramatizing, flirting with the idea of suicide, Mona throws herself onto the tracks, waiting, but, as Ispas, the stationmaster, announces, the rules themselves, "It's no use standing on the tracks. There's no train coming to run you over until 11:35". Andronic, the pedantic professor, ridiculed by his students, also aims to publish a scientific article in a reputable journal, while imagining himself applauded on stage by an ecstatic audience:

"To feel hundreds of eyes fixed on you, thousands of eyes, waiting, calling, asking. To feel how your every word opens hearts, ignites imaginations, stirs passions... Your writing to pass from hand to hand, from person to person, your name to spread through the crowds, to mean something..." (Sebastian, 1965, p. 312)

The heroes of *The Island*, in their pseudo-detention in the squalid attic, dream of stadiums filled with people cheering at Bobby's match ("a match that depends entirely on me"), art galleries where Nadia's paintings are admired, and, meanwhile, under the oppression of an unbearable today, they demand a tomorrow where the sun does not rise without them, mentally projecting an island of Euthanasius. For all of them, waiting is that *locus amoebus*, the womb. Latency, potentiality translate into the chance for an existence that has not had a predetermined path. In contrast, certainty produces suffering. The future already known, immobile in its fixity, is not desirable. Just as Corina knows that Ștefan is "a little engineer, or a little lawyer, or a little architect", who will go "to the factory, or to the construction site, or to court", who has spent the whole year "naively saving

up for a month's vacation", and that she herself, who sews her own dresses, after dreaming for hours in front of a department store window, returns to a "modest, ordinary house", so too is Miroiu convinced that Mona's departure, despite all her promises to return, is final: "Because no star ever returns from its path". In turn, confronted with her image projected into a possible future, guaranteed by remaining in provincial stagnation, the heroine, abruptly cured of her erotic delirium, emerging from self-hypnosis, cannot accept becoming Miss Cucu, a shadow of the sensual, refined woman, the desire of all men. Her self-induced myopia must be canceled. An elegant accessory, she cannot find happiness with the professor, nor with Grig, but at least in the world of the latter, although a hostage to her own assumed status, she is perfectly adapted to her gilded cage. The protagonists of Sebastian's last play, although in crisis, with their very survival threatened, do not have the freedom to give up on life. When they abandon the struggle with fate, death (induced by drug abuse) seems to be the only way out, camouflaged by the mirage of an island of treasures:

"Given the blockade that had immobilized the three young people, nothing and no one could help them survive except their own will and desire to live. Taking refuge on the imaginary island [...] was by no means a solution [...], but amounted, this time, to an act of suicide." (Grăsoiu, 1986, p. 198)

Removing external pressure by abolishing temporal limits seems to be a necessary and sufficient condition for canceling out the effects of the past and avoiding predestination. Psychological, subjective time is opposed to objective time, as the desires, fears, expectations, or dreams of the characters shape their perception of Chronos. The clock and the calendar must be ignored, if not canceled. In *The Holiday Game*, the short holiday, stolen with long-term sacrifices, becomes a separate temporal zone, in which normal social rhythms are suspended, moments of contemplation or stagnation are created, guaranteed by plantar laziness as an ordering principle.

"If everyday, inauthentic existence, undermined by worry and anxiety, is under the sign of Chronos, of devouring time, symbol of *paternal authority*, play, *vacation*, reverie overturn the values of the daytime and establish the nocturnal regime of Anti-Chronos, of authentic existence." (Zărnescu, 1988, p. 15).

During a vacation, which is limited in time by definition, the passage of time seems slower, and moments expand, becoming denser, more

meaningful, seeming to extend beyond real life¹, melting into perpetuity. Through the intervention of a mysterious figure, a woman from outside his world, the temporal and spatial dynamics change in Miroiu's world, an orchestrator of escapism in time, which he practices, for example, when he takes refuge in reading the long-awaited astronomy book; his escape from the monotonous, limiting present takes place in just one night, which, however, expands to encompass an entire life experience, lived to the fullest. Unfortunately, the loud ticking of the clock (or the horn of a luxury car!) marks the violent invasion of the real world. The painful failure of the dreamers will ultimately be due to the temporary nature of the mirage. On the contrary, in *The Island*, the heroes, who are cloistered, humiliated, reduced to poverty and loss of identity, want to compress the aggressive present, to reduce it to nothingness, building an impossible bridge between a yesterday in which everyone was a respectable, powerful person and a tomorrow in which all this could be revived. And in *The Last Hour*, under the pressure of the urgency of publishing the periodical (which, by definition, has a life limited to the present, as Ștefănescu points out), the ultimatum time is limited and shrinks. Important choices must be made in a matter of seconds, and destinies are (re)written under time pressure.

The exaggerated expansion of time can be interpreted as its suspension, to the point of timelessness. Imagining an idyllic phalanstery, a utopian farm governed by continuous harmony, Bogoiu, desperate to perpetuate the provisional, with all his illusions, even comes up with the bizarre idea of keeping Corina prisoner and pushing the boundaries of time beyond simple dilution, erasing them completely and projecting them into an idealized prehistory, towards an impossible matriarchy, in which time is abolished:

“And the seasons pass, and the years come, and we are always here, all four of us, on our little farm, like a ship sailing through the world, without stopping” (Sebastian, 1965, pp. 139-140).

The potential love story between Magda and Andronic, as well as their future experience as explorers of ancient ruins, is prolonged by the planned journey in the footsteps of Alexander the Great, beyond the present, into a kind of protohistory.

¹ Ion Vartic pointed out: “In this program of re-naturalization of the human, intelligence is replaced by sensitivity, an instinctive-vegetal one. [...] Thus, ‘playing vacation’ means playing at forgetting, living without memories or aspirations, [...] without knowing ‘the exact time’ or ‘what today is, what tomorrow will be, and what yesterday was’; it means living like a plant, a single day, «a long, long, long one» that gives you the feeling of eternity.” (Vartic, 1982, p. 259)

The unification of temporal moments is possible when the characters realize the constant element, the repeatability, which leads them to understand, painfully, that there is no chance of escape.

“ȘTEFAN: I never laughed at you. Don't you see how many things connect us? Corina, trigonometry, Dupuis' logarithm, failing grades... Everything is the same today as it was twenty years ago. Everything is the same. It's as if we were two classmates” (Sebastian, 1965, p. 135).

By altering the perception of time, either through dilution or expansion, as circumstances dictate, the three men, facets of the same masculinity, captured at different stages of life (young, adult, mature), meet in psychological, not just chronological, landmarks and end up becoming mirrors for each other, linked by their love for Corina. Mona, on the other hand, realizes the real possibility of becoming a bitter Miss Cucu, a walking school rulebook, whose vitality and beauty will have been drained by a conventional, obtuse, and limited provincial life in a town that, “even if it sleeps... and sees us even in our sleep”, ready to label, after a summary judgment, and to standardize, through flattening.

Paradoxically, the slices of life manufactured through these processes are more intense, more desirable, and more real than a life burdened by redundancy and restrictions. Narcis Zărnescu also observes in his article that “true identity is hypothetical, imaginary, possible, *false*” (Zărnescu, 1988, p. 15). In the game with Saturn-Chronos, the drama of dreamers arises from the impossibility of telling the moment to stay. The re-semanticization of the temporal axis fails every time in their obstinate and emotional attempt to translate the emptiness of a repetitive life into the passionate pulsations of a fully lived experience. With their masks fallen, the heroes, after an illusory escape, will abruptly return to the cages of their own petty existences. Under the assault of the present, the temporary anabasis will turn into a painful catabasis, made permanent by (survival) in a simulacrum, while the illusion will have given them the only real life.

Je(ux) est un autre. The Game of Masks

In Sebastian's imagined game, assuming a new identity (which is never a simple given, a stable “label”, but rather a process, a negotiation between how the character sees himself and how he is perceived and categorized by the rest of the world) comes as a corollary. Identity tension often arises between the desire for inclusion/ belonging and the feeling of otherness/ internal exile and marginalization. As Burke and Stets (2000, pp. 224-225) postulate, identity, which is constructed in the process of self-categorization or identification, places at its center the perception of the self

as occupying a position and a role circumscribed by it, with all the meanings and expectations generated by this role. Organically linked to the group they belong to, the characters are placed in situations that challenge their understanding of their own meaning. In situations of identity crisis, the characters can oscillate between what they feel they are, what they want to be, and what they are asked to be, between their prominent identity and their activated identity (Burke & Stets, 2000, p. 230). Practicing the game of illusion, be it *ludus* or *paidia*, the heroes of the four plays must abandon their social selves and create a *persona* that corresponds to their inner geography. Taking on the mask becomes a saving solution or a mechanism of defense or survival. Through it,

“identity is denied in favor of otherness, unity in favor of diversity. The mask simplifies and amplifies. It reduces and multiplies. It generates enchantment and conciseness.” (Zărnescu, 1988, p. 15)

The stranger, the man without a clear identity, is often present in Sebastian’s theater. The malicious character who insinuates himself into the domestic lives of the Weber villa’s residents, cutting off their ties to the outside world, does not initially have a known identity. Moreover, throughout the play, we realize that he is inhabited, in harmony, by the former Jeff, silenced by dreary repetition, and the future Bogoiu, aged by monotony. The unknown will only be given Mona’s name (Dumitriu, May 15, 1975, p. 4) at the end, when the assumption of identity marks the provisional and destroys the mirage. Anonymity (in her moving plea, Corina fights to preserve it, as a guarantee of remaining in the mirage: “Listen, Ștefan. Don’t ask anymore. I feel that if you ask again, I will answer. You might regret it... I know how to ask too. But I don’t want to. Who are you? Who am I? I don’t know.”) and a particular kind of prosopagnosia (“Sometimes you have to close your eyes if you want to live”, the author declares through Nadia’s voice) thus become a catalyst for the chemistry of illusion. To attain happiness, it is necessary to forget oneself and accept the masks of others. On the other hand, in *The Island*, the loss of identity causes suffering. Although at the beginning of the conflict, weary, disillusioned, and suffering from misanthropy, Manuel seeks isolation by renouncing his identity (“I stopped in your country for three days, precisely because no one knows me. I wanted a vacation. It’s so tiring when everyone knows you. [...] I wanted to be alone, to leave alone, I’m sorry I met you. But what do you want me to do? I have no choice.”) (Sebastian, 1965, p. 260), when, together with Nadia and Bobby, seen as alleged criminals, he is put in a hopeless situation, faced with the danger of imprisonment, his frustration is accompanied by a real fear of serving someone else’s sentence.

The outsider character, a copy of the playwright himself, becomes a leitmotif of the plays, in which the recurring theme is maladjustment. Ștefan Valeriu (through rudeness and boorishness), Mona (through sophistication), Alexandru Andronic (shy, airy, an innocent lost in the world of shady business) and the three companions in suffering from *The Island* (none of whom fit into the slum landscape) are at odds with the world. Their maladjustment forces them to adopt *alter egos* that make it easier for them to adapt. Under the mask of rudeness, the hero of *The Holiday Game* can hide his sensitivity, which Corina intuitively guesses. For the price of a vacation, he can remember, through Jeff, the freshness of his youthful enthusiasm and be an elegant, nonchalant, and courteous gentleman. Showing an appetite for the game of masks, which he had been playing for years, Bogoiu assumes his new identity as a ship captain, which he vocally asserts in the face of the assault of the two unwelcome vacationers. Marin Miroiu (“a good boy”, but who, in the view of the obtuse provincials, wastes his time reading) seems perfectly adapted to the town where express trains never stop. For one night, however, as his humble room is transformed into Aladdin’s palace (Grăsoiu, 1986, p. 190), the shy dreamer can become a seductive man with whom a refined woman like Mona can fall in love. At dawn, the beautiful stranger, identified to some extent with the nameless star, abandoning herself completely, understands that love means compromise (and she is no stranger to such a life) and that she must conform to social pressure and transform herself from a “luxury animal” into a housewife integrated into this world that mutilates through regimentation. Forced to work as a loader in the port in order to ensure his survival and that of his two comrades, the former millionaire from *The Island* chooses to hide this thankless role, assumed in his new imposed identity from his fellow sufferers and continues to wear his mask with dignity.

Although he is one of the few characters who has a coherent and consistent identity discourse, Andronic also seems to succumb to the temptation of the mask. Nicknamed Alexander the Small by his students, the university professor, who spent his youth researching the history of the great conqueror, is an idealist reduced to a miserable existence in a society dominated by influential, unscrupulous individuals. Undesirable, isolated in a messy apartment, finding no satisfaction in his life as a professor, experiencing an acute sense of uselessness, he is seduced by the mirage of academic success, by the temptation of false glory, of the ephemeral, which almost nullifies the ideal, purity, the eternal. Drawn into Borcea’s web, who puts the newspaper at his disposal, for a moment he allows himself to be

conquered by the superficial, mercantile world, “which encourages science only in panic” (Piru, 1958, p. 450).

Between these narrow limits, with social norms, stereotypes, labels, which impose masks and roles and exert pressure on the individual to conform, identity becomes fluid or fractured, as these conflict with the real *persona*, with the inner self, with free will, with the crisis of authenticity, and the organic need to achieve the ideal of happiness. Sebastian’s dramaturgy becomes a space for confession, in which his characters allow us to probe the mechanisms of the subtle interplay between identity and otherness. Although, occasionally, the heroes can shed certain facets of their personality like an ill-fitting garment, most of the time, the real self becomes a Nessus’s shirt, impregnated in their being. Their suffering, a spectacle of frustrated lucidity, stems from the ever-unfulfilled desire to be more/ someone else than they are.

The Message in the Bottle

A key concept in Mihail Sebastian’s theater, play, seen not only as a compensatory refuge but also as a form of responsibility, forcing characters to confront themselves and the world, becomes a corollary of happiness, articulating the tension between the desire to escape and the need to face reality. Through this strategy, the playwright earns his place in a modern tradition of playfulness, where *iocus* (i.e. fantasy, mirage), understood as a privileged space of freedom, disguise, critical device, and survival solution, does not stand in antithesis to existential gravity, but represents the very mode through which it is expressed and problematized. The essential paradox is that play, situated on the fine line between *ludus* and *paidia*, reveals hidden tensions, contrasts between the individual and the world in which they try, fighting with the weapons of illusion, to live, and confronts freedom with its limits. The heroes of his comedies live in the world, but they are only physically part of it, for their aspirations point in a completely different direction. Conditional on the obligation to function in an obtuse society, the characters, after an existential syncopation based on autosuggestion, are forced to come back down to earth in order to survive. These individuals retreat only temporarily from the social turmoil, to their utopian islands, small isolated citadels. Outside these protective walls are the people who lay down the law, mechanisms driven by external forces, powerful voices calling them back to reality, and the heroes are defeated. Abstracted, for the duration of a dream, from the bewildering whirlwind of everyday life, they are the evaders who succeed, through imagination, by pushing the limits of (self)delusion, in making a pact with the provisional.

Avatars of the playwright, lucidly experiencing the drama of inadequacy, they understand that they will be disappointed.

“The last reserves of energy, patience, and modesty are expended (“how well we hide what we have to hide, how sadly we hide it”) in order to leave the stage, if not victorious, at least with dignity. Ștefan Valeriu silently watches Corina walk away, knowing he will never see her again, and Miroiu, with a supreme effort, leans over the atlas, retreating into his work. The heroes’ revenge is this detachment with which they accept defeat, this discretion, this refuge of submission, this concern for maintaining their composure. There are cries that must be stifled, memories that must be locked away, despair that must be concealed. A tragic revolt on their knees! Nevertheless, his heroes have a zest and a beauty. At first glance calm, dull, gray, their existence is stormy. In their world, they are conquerors.” (Elvin, 1955, p. 69)

Abandoning the clause of time line (chronology), juggling with the facets of otherness, the characters in *The Holiday Game* ensure themselves, for a short period of time, access to domestic happiness. Corina’s untimely departure is the signal for the end of self-hypnosis. *Ludus* must, in accordance with the rules of the provisional, end with the abandonment of masks. The meeting of the characters in *The Nameless Star* is a game of blind man’s buff between incompatible worlds: Mona seeks liberation from bourgeois conventions, while Miroiu escapes the routine of provincial life and gives himself the chance to give physical form to the star he senses in the sky. In the end, however, reality reasserts itself: their love cannot be consumed, and the game stops. The masks worn at night no longer fit in the light of day, they are uncomfortable, bordering on the ridiculous. In both plays, playfulness, which accentuates the tragedy of the human condition, serves to mark temporariness and reveal the potential of an impossible freedom. From this perspective, the creations illustrate the dialectic between play and disenchantment: it is precisely the ephemeral moment, lived with the intensity of incandescence, this temporal loop that interrupts the flow, that makes the return to everyday life more painful. *Paidia* has in Andronic a participant who not only does not know the rules, but is also unaware that he occupies this position in Magda’s skillful orchestration. The ultimate message of the play is a powerful statement in favor of the minuscule but nevertheless existing possibility, despite all obstacles, of triumphing in the battle against simulacrum, against inauthenticity, using precisely the levers constructed by the Procrustean world to stifle dreams. Quite apart from this, however, the heroes of *The Island* are forced to embrace their otherness (once sought after as a desideratum) imposed by a world at war, which isolates them. As the current masks are difficult to

wear, there is a need to sublimate ugliness into self-induced hypnosis, through which, traveling to the enigmatic island, a benevolent chimera, they can hope to become who they were before.

“Sick with lucidity”, like the author who created them, the characters are constantly searching for themselves and the means that can ensure their freedom. The saving solution through which they can fill the existential void seems to be the omnipotent and multifaceted escape: pushing the boundaries of reality, appealing to the potentialities of the imagination, which would allow them to break away from everyday life, as the writer himself hoped. Happiness, tasted for a moment, though within reach, slips through their fingers. Ultimately defeated in their reckless attempt to free themselves from the captivity of their own existence, the heroes conquer through the innocence and sensitivity with which they fight their battles, one of the elements that ensures and perpetuates the longevity of the works, preserving, unaltered by time, their extraordinary power of seduction. Mihail Sebastian’s plea, exhausted by struggle, recorded in *How I Became a Hooligan*, is a warm invitation to reflection:

“Every book is, in a way, an attempt to force the unknown. In whose hands it will fall, what agreements it will establish, what disagreements it will provoke — you don’t know. There is an endless series of unknowns that will decide its fate. There are resistances, opacities, accidents, and only beyond them do you hope to find certain questions that your book answers. Will it reach these questions? Will it answer them? Maybe yes, maybe no. It’s a matter of chance. Your message... may reach its destination, but it may also fall by the wayside. There are many chances to lose it. But those who don’t know how to lose with a clear conscience have no reason to write books” (Sebastian, 1990, p. 6).

Distinct voices of the writer¹, his characters perform, on different tonal ranges, the same sober melody that accompanied the literary and existential journey of the one who knew how to lose with dignity, preserving the message in the bottle of the shipwrecked man, a promise of a distant but achievable possibility of salvation.

¹ “There are two intellectuals in Mihail Sebastian: one troubled by the radical nature of certain existential and aesthetic solutions, assimilating new forms of thinking and participating in the intellectual drama of the era, and another (a kind of Ștefan, Miroiu, Andronic) who is a dreamer and incurable sentimentalist, still believing in an ideal order of life, but daring only to isolate himself from the rest of the world, avoiding open confrontation. The only things they have in common are their proud sadness and their belief in human values. One is a new, modern man, who lives his intellectual condition intensely and cerebrally, the other is the successor of the misfit from interwar literature; one looks at the world as a true intellectual, the other is a nostalgic, shy and lonely soul, who lives on an emotional level.” (Dumitriu, 1975, p. 7)

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