

## MIHAIL SEBASTIAN'S SHAKESPEARE<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

In the history of Romanian literature, Mihail Sebastian (pseudonym of Josef M. Hechter) fares as a playwright, novelist, journalist and essayist who lived through most of the historical convulsions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – mainly institutionalised anti-Semitism – before he was killed in a traffic accident at the age of 38. His literary star however proved to shine posthumously, as more than fifty years after his death, following their publication in Romania, both his *Journal 1935-1944* and his novel *For Two Thousand Years* were translated and published in French and English, stirring up a wave of international controversy as a result of their being read as historical and political documents.

Sebastian's worst years were the early 1940s when, practically destitute as a result of the antisemitic laws, he taught Romanian literature and Shakespeare's sonnets at a Jewish college in Bucharest, while avidly reading, studying and translating Shakespeare's works. Based on the only available information on the topic – Sebastian's *Journal* and translator Petre Solomon's recently published memoir (2016), this paper considers the relationship between Sebastian and Shakespeare. All through this most trying period of Sebastian's life, Shakespeare provided the backdrop to the unfolding events and moral support, as his readings of the Bard prove.

**Keywords:** *identity, Shakespeare, sonnets, translation*

“*Je' est un autre*”.  
Arthur Rimbaud

At the beginning of the 21st century the claim that so much has been written about Shakespeare that it seems nothing has been left unsaid appears to be correct. “What more can I say about Shakespeare than has already been said?” Anthony Burgess, that master Shakespearean, was wondering back in 1974

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<sup>1</sup> All English translations from Sebastian's *Journal* and other works, as well as from Petre Solomon's memoir are mine.

(Burgess 73). It has also long become clear that there is more than one Shakespeare, one of whom, for instance, is Kiernan Ryan's proto-communist Shakespeare, another Marx's Shakespeare (Volceanov iii), and yet another Jan Kott's. The unfixity of history means that we no longer read Shakespeare like his contemporaries, not even like his 19<sup>th</sup> century readers. In the process, Shakespeare has been called many names, including "drunken savage" (Voltaire in his *English Letters* of 1737) and "literature's greatest psychologist", by Romanian literary critic Tudor Vianu (Shakespeare ca poet al Renașterii /Shakespeare as a Renaissance poet, 65), who writes that anyone can find in Shakespeare "a confidant" (Eminescu și Shakespeare/Eminescu and Shakespeare, 567). Currently, interpretations of Shakespeare are a matter of power (Heinemann 232), but beyond shifting paradigms it must be Shakespeare's perceived humaneness that makes it possible for scholars and readers alike to appropriate him, despite the fact that Shakespeare the man remains elusive. This paper argues that in the politically oppressive early 1940s in Romania, Shakespeare was just such an intimate friend, or "confidant", to the writer Mihail Sebastian, who in the last few years of his life found both solace and moral support in studying, translating and teaching Shakespeare.

Tudor Vianu further writes that "[Shakespeare's] spiritual stance was determined by that singular moment when the emerging Anglicanism displaced Catholicism before the rise of Puritanism. "This time of relative spiritual freedom allowed the expansion of Shakespeare's powers of perception and depth of moral intuition" (Shakespeare ca poet al Renașterii, 68), in other words Shakespeare lived at the best time in the best place, as G. M. Trevelyan argues (Trevelyan 154). Sebastian, on the other hand, lived the last decade of his short life in completely adverse circumstances and in a tragically wrong place. Mihail Sebastian was the literary pseudonym of Josef M. Hechter, born on October 8, 1907, the second of three brothers, in Brăila, on the Danube, where he spent his childhood and adolescence, becoming a voracious reader. He was to return to his native town – always his home- every so often, describing himself as "a Jew, a Romanian and a man from the Danube" (*De două mii de ani*/"For Two Thousand Years", 224-5)<sup>1</sup>, one with a pathological love for Romania and everything Romanian, according to one of his friends (Manole 17).

In June of 1926 the head of the commission for his school-leaving examination, who commended his Romanian literature paper, was Nae Ionescu, a native of Brăila himself, who was to become a key character in Sebastian's life – "our director of conscience" (*Cum am devenit hooligan*/"How I Became a Hooligan", 27), as his mentor and employer on the periodical *Cuvântul* [The Word] and its cultural circle (1927-1933). "I pity those young people who did not, at the right age, have the chance to meet such a man in whom to believe,

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of this self-description see Finkenthal in Volovici 2009

one apt to captivate them to the point of altering their lives”, Sebastian would write later, in 1935 (*Cum am devenit huligan*: 270). Nae Ionescu, the widely influential philosopher, logician, journalist, academic and mystic, was the *de facto* mentor of the whole of Sebastian’s brilliant generation of *literati* –now described as *Generația 27*. It included Mircea Eliade, who described their generation as the most interesting precursor of French existentialism (Eliade 232-233). However, Nae Ionescu remains a highly controversial character, not least because of the hypnotic magic that he seems to have exercised upon all those who came into contact with him as well as his subsequent involvement with the infamous Iron Guard. According to philosopher Emil Cioran, Ionescu embodied all of the Balkanic contradictions (interview by G. Liiceanu, in Stănescu:96). 1926 was also the year of Sebastian’s literary and journalistic debuts, his enrolment with the Faculty of Law in Bucharest and the beginning of a lifelong cultural journalistic activity. He was to collaborate with a large number of magazines and newspapers on a wide variety of both cultural and political subjects. In 1929, his was the first positive reaction to Joyce’s *Ulysses* in Romania (Manolescu 870).

In 1932 Sebastian published his first book of fiction, followed in 1934 by the novel that was to stir a wave of bitter controversy, *De două mii de ani*/“For Two Thousand Years”. A singular novel in Romanian literature, it relies on reflection and self-analysis, featuring a largely autobiographical main character who attempts to reconcile, individually and culturally, his Jewish and Romanian identities, an attempt brutally rejected in Nae Ionescu’s antisemitic preface, and subsequently by both Jewish and Romanian intellectuals at large. “There is a metaphysical obligation of the Jew to be detested. This is his function in the world. Why? I don’t know. It’s his curse and his destiny”, wrote Ionescu in his preface (*De două mii de ani*, 213), which argued antisemitism from a theological and mystical perspective. The ensuing controversy, to which Sebastian responded with the polemical *Cum am devenit huligan* was, in fact, only an omen of the times, a highly volatile age of vehement ideological confrontations. In the late 1930s he authored two more novels and made his name as a playwright with *Jocul de-a vacanța* /“Holiday Games” (staged 1938), *Steaua fără nume* /“The Star without a Name”, *Ultima oră* /“Breaking News” and the unfinished *Insula* /“The Island”. His literary works were not easily accepted, for instance the influential literary critic and academic George Călinescu’s first edition of *The History of Romanian Literature* (1941) included a brief entry on Sebastian containing disparaging comments such as “he appears to have no artistic talent whatsoever as a prose writer”, while *For two Thousand Years* “shows the exaggerated sensitivity of Jews, their enjoyment of their victim status and their congenital inability to fight at all risks” (*The History*, 1963). “A man of a complex and refined spirit”, Sebastian was understandably deeply hurt by such evaluations (Cristea-Enache 357).

The early 1940s were by far Sebastian's most difficult years, in a historical period which witnessed the demotion of democracy, racial discrimination and institutionalized antisemitism, deportations and alleged pogroms, the access to power of the Iron Guard, military dictatorship, war and finally Soviet occupation (Micu 155), the times Eliade anticipated in his memoirs as "the terror of History" (Eliade 320). In September of 1940 Sebastian was dismissed from his job because of his Jewishness, banned from working as a journalist and saw his pleading attorney's license revoked. The terrible distress of the five last years of his life is clearly reflected in his deeply moving *Journal. 1935-1944*, which amounts to a chronicle of its author's disillusionment before the final disaster.

In February of 1935, at the age of 28, when he started his journal, Sebastian was still experiencing the crisis set off by the scandal around his 1934 novel *For Two Thousand Years* with Ionescu's "shocking preface" (Volovici 5), and by the suspension of the periodical *Cuvântul* ["The Word"], which he called his "last home", and he could clearly see the end of all his prolific cultural activities. "Navigating a sea full of dangerous cliffs", a "ship's log" could help him avoid a shipwreck; alternately it could preserve for posterity the testimony of a failure which signifies much more than an individual defeat. This also accounts for his intention to make notes of everything, despite the frequent moments of exhaustion and despair", opines Leon Volovici in the preface to the *Journal* (6). In the preface Volovici identifies several layers in Sebastian's *Journal*: first, a private one, "of his inner thoughts and feelings, love life and family. On this level, however, two things are apt to attract the reader's attention: the many carefully transcribed dreams, some of which are simply ominous, but first and foremost an overwhelming number of notes on every page concerning the classical concerts that he avidly listened to, at the Athenaeum but most often on the radio. On another level this is also a journal of creation, documenting his literary and translation endeavours, and on yet another an intellectual and political one, which includes numerous entries that amount to a chronicle of the Second War, as well as the reactions and attitudes of his politically radicalized friends and former associates, as he found himself ostracized: "it's not for the first time that I've found myself in the middle, caught between the ideological machine guns of the extreme right and left" (qtd in Volovici's *Preface*, 9). His one friend to the end was the playwright Eugene Ionesco.

Following Sebastian's sudden death in May 1945 after he was run down by an army truck as he was crossing a busy street in Bucharest on his way to teach his first inaugural lecture at the university, his *Journal* was preserved by Sebastian's younger brother Benu before he managed to smuggle it out of the country in 1961 when he emigrated to Israel. Naturally, Sebastian could not have foreseen the twisted fate of his dramatic *Journal*, which he did not want

published in the first place, or that of his controversial novel. The *Journal* was first published in Romania in 1996 (by Humanitas Publishing House), followed by a French edition in 1998 (Stock) and the first American edition at Ivan R. Dee in 2000, at Heinemann in 2001, the first British edition at Pimlico in 2003, before another U.S. edition at Rowman & Littlefield in 2012. In 2011 his novel *The Accident* was published in English translation in Canada.

Quite unexpectedly, Mihail Sebastian's name has become international, not as a result of his plays and fiction, as he would probably have liked, but of his personal *Journal*, and the amount of reaction it has stirred is absolutely remarkable, including comments from the likes of Philip Roth, Arthur Miller and Andrei Codrescu – it is enough to check the comments at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). The literary and documentary qualities of the *Journal* are not the main reasons for this popularity. *For Two Thousand Years* too has had a most unexpected fate. A young Romanian woman who studied literature in the U.S. and now works for Penguin was asked by her coworkers to provide the title of a Romanian book that deserved to be published in the Penguin Modern Classics collection, while at about the same time she found out that the Irish writer Philip Ó Ceallaigh, now a Romanian resident, had already translated the book into English (Ó Ceallaigh 17; [www.scena9.ro](http://www.scena9.ro)). Eighty years after its publication in Romania, *For Two Thousand Years* has reached its British readership, meeting with an enthusiastic reception. One of its readers sees Sebastian as akin to Dostoyevsky and Kafka (Vasiliu 2016). Sadly, however, the *Journal* and the novel have attracted international attention as historical and political documents on the persecution of Jews rather than for their literary qualities. “Mihail Sebastian is now regarded as one of the foremost chroniclers of the rise of nazism in civilised Europe”, writes Paul Bailey in his *Guardian* review (2016). Both *Journal* and novel, however, are first and foremost stepping-stones in their author's identity quest: “the government may well pronounce me a ship, a polar bear or a camera, this will not alter my being a Jew, a Romanian and a man from the Danube. ‘Too many things at once’, whispers my antisemitic voice (for I too have an antisemitic voice with which I converse in my meditation hours). Too many indeed. But all of them real” (*De două mii de ani*, 224-5).

The *Journal*, on the other hand, is also the only source of available information concerning Sebastian's late interest in the English language and literature and the works of Shakespeare in particular. Sebastian had studied French and German in school and had been literarily influenced by the French culture then prevalent with the Romanian elites, which had been rather hastily acculturated in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. He had a passion for French, fuelled by the Literary Circle “Voltaire” in his hometown (Șerban 128) and was an avid reader and interpreter of Proust, Balzac and Gide, while his *Journal* entries are often interspersed with comments in French. It is worth noting at this point that English was a latecomer in the field of foreign language studies in Romania,

having emerged in the early 1800s in a largely “francophone” country (Lidia Vianu web document). At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several English self-study textbooks printed in French were in use, which had been brought by the French and Belgian engineers employed by the British and American oil companies operating in Romania. Dragoș Protopopescu, one of the first native university professors of English, who gained his doctorate in England, had also taught himself English (Bălu xi).

Sebastian’s appreciation of English culture and its rational, factually-based values was of late date (Cornea 19-20), while the *Journal* shows quite clearly that his interest in English and Shakespeare’s works accompanied the last and most dramatic period of his life, against a backdrop of skepticism and despair, e.g. “I have a feeling of uselessness that is driving me to despair” (*Jurnal*, 236). It is not clear what prompted his decision to learn English in the first place, but in the *Journal* the first mention dates from February 9, 1939: “I’ve been learning English for about three weeks” (195), i.e. since January. The following mention comes on May 16: “I cannot say I’m making any headway with my English. I’m no longer studying with Mangeriu: as a matter of fact, there’s nothing more he can teach us” (204), while the “us” is an indication that he was studying in a group. Somehow surprising is the fact that he was already able to read novels in English – Arnold Bennett and Joseph Conrad, “both without a dictionary [...]. I let myself carried by the rhythm of the sentence, whose general meaning I always get” (2016: 204) In a 1993 essay, Romanian-born American author and academic Andrei Codrescu suggests that translation can also be “self-therapy” (Codrescu 101), and this is what it seems to have been to Sebastian as well.

On July 22, 1939 he was translating a biography of Lincoln, “without difficulties and I’ve almost stopped wondering at what could be something of a record: after 6 months, a translator from English” (*Jurnal*, 215). In early February of 1941 he resumed his English lessons after almost two years: “I’m studying with an American and it’s quite interesting. [...] What’s strange is that I read English much more easily than German. My German vocabulary is certainly much richer than my English one [...]. I’m utterly unable to express myself in English; I can nevertheless read Shaw almost without any difficulty” (300). Shakespeare is first mentioned in the *Journal* on May 8, 1941: “I read all sorts of things almost exclusively in English: Ruskin, Shelley, even Shakespeare. I’ve tried *The Tempest* and it’s been somewhat easier than I’d have expected” (330). On August 10, 1941: “The pleasure – my only one – of reading English and noting the headway I’ve made”, as well as a quote in English from Dante Gabriel Rossetti: “Look in my face: my name is Might-have-been”, which Sebastian takes to summarize his entire life (370). In early September of the same year he was reading and translating Shakespeare’s sonnets: “it goes without saying, at this stage [the translations] are nothing more than rough

drafts” (377). A few samples of these drafts have been miraculously preserved by his former student, translator Petre Solomon, who included them in his recently published memoir (Solomon 194-198).

Since Jews had been banned from attending public schools, in 1941 the Jewish Community in Bucharest set up several private secondary schools, besides a university-level college, which benefited by the expertise of top academics who had also been banned from teaching – first-rate mathematicians, linguists, historians and philosophers (Sommer; Solomon 171-176). One of these was Sebastian himself, who commented in his *Journal* that he was not made for the job (*Jurnal*, 389). At the same time he was dreaming of escaping to London, New York or California: “Oh, the dreaming! The dreaming!” – he quoted Shaw (390-1), while continuing to read Shakespeare’s plays (396). On November 7, 1941 he wrote: “I’m having difficulties reading *Hamlet* in English. The vocabulary and syntax make the text incomparably more difficult than anything I’ve read before” (412).

In February 1942 he taught his first lecture at the College “Onescu” for Jewish students, at a time when he was also struggling with the text of his own play *Steaua fără nume* “The Star without a Name”, besides the forced labour he had to do clearing the snow off the streets. Other than his *Journal*, there is practically no information on Sebastian’s life and work at that time, besides another memoir, also published this year, of the translator Petre Solomon, who was Sebastian’s student at the college, and a couple of pages of reminiscences of the literary critic and academic Paul Cornea (Cornea 14-20), who attended Sebastian’s secondary school Romanian literature classes. Petre Solomon had preserved his college notebooks, so that his memoir is the only source of information on the contents of Sebastian’s Shakespeare and Romanian literature lectures.

Several months later, in November 1942, at a time when Hitler vowed to exterminate Jews (*Jurnal*, 476) and the battle of Stalingrad was raging, Sebastian started his Shakespeare course (485), while continuing his readings of *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *The Comedy of Errors* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and making plans to translate Shakespeare’s sonnets as well as write a book on him (464-8). Not only because he was depressive (Cornea 29) and Shakespeare himself a skeptic (Vianu *Shakespeare ca poet* “Shakespeare as a Poet, 65; Matheson 78), could he relate personally to Shakespeare’s tragic characters. On August 1, 1942, in his *Journal* he quotes *Richard II* in jail: “For now hath time made me his numbering clock”, but “our own prison is even more oppressive” (*Jurnal*, 464-5). He had also learnt, on reading criticism (mostly in French), that Shakespeare was acquainted with Montaigne and appreciated his essays (463). On July 11 he wrote: “The more I read of Shakespeare, the more my enchantment grows. I take pleasure in contemplating writing a book on Shakespeare” (461). In fact,

throughout 1942, Shakespeare was his constant preoccupation, and he read Shakespeare exclusively.

The following year, destitute, he took on the translation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, but in early October returned to Shakespeare – *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It*: “delightful reading: there’s nothing more ethereal, more graceful or enchanting [...]. There’s something dance-like about Shakespeare’s comedies. Floating movements detached from reality – like ballet” (*Jurnal*, 529). Sebastian the aesthete could not have failed to notice Shakespeare’s ability to blend down-to-earth realism with a fairy-like atmosphere, and tragedy with comedy. On October 19 he was reading *Coriolanus*: “Now I understand why it stirred up so much fury in Paris in 1934” (531) and, on finishing *Titus Andronicus*, commented on “the most absurd number of atrocities in Shakespeare” before continuing with *Antony and Cleopatra*: “as a play, it is loose, dissipated, and lacking in dramatic consistency” – his first piece of negative criticism of Shakespeare. On November 10 he finished *King Lear* and *Macbeth* and started his Shakespeare course at the college for the new academic year. (534). In the last year of his life -1944, Sebastian was translating *The Taming of the Shrew* and in December he received a telegram with an offer from an Italian publishing house for his novel *The Accident*: “Is there any chance for my writings to ever make it out of this filthy dump?” (*Jurnal*, 575). Naturally, he could not have anticipated that *The Accident* would have to wait for another 67 years before it was translated, not into Italian, but into English.

The fact that Sebastian chose to teach a course on Shakespeare rather than on Balzac or any other French author he was familiar with speaks for itself. It is not known what led him to choose the Sonnets, a notoriously difficult subject, in the first place. It seems that it was their being concerned with the relationship of individual experience, and “especially the personal ties of love and friendship, as the most intimate and intense manifestations of that experience” (Traversi 188), at a time when Sebastian himself was experiencing terrible distress, questioning his own experiences and identity, so that he must have found in Shakespeare his own mental anguish. The sonnets’ bitterness (Traversi 189) in particular must have resonated with Sebastian. He had probably also realized that the sonnets are “the most profoundly enigmatic works in the canon” (Dobson 438), as they continue to excite speculation, not least as a result of their intriguing views of love.

The first thing to note about his introduction to Shakespeare’s sonnets, as it is preserved in Petre Solomon’s memoir (Solomon 190-198) is the clear, well-structured presentation, which “made explicit even the most complicated topics” (Cornea 16). After remarking that the Sonnets’ dedication had given rise to an immense amount of literary criticism, he noted that their second editor had probably been embarrassed by the first 126 and had converted some of the

masculine possessive pronouns to feminine ones – a radical change which made for a fully moral love story. From the start, Sebastian focused on four relevant issues: the sonnets' debated authorship, as related to Shakespeare's identity itself; their actual order; their date of authorship and, finally and most importantly, the mysterious character identified as "W.H." (Solomon 191-2).

His interpretation is both original and personal; for instance, he notes that as a result of the fact that their main character is a sort of androgynous being, neither man nor woman, or both, the first 126 sonnets make for a rather strange romantic confusion, or one of the most ambiguous passions in literary history: "I'm surprised that Freud did not approach the topic" and "neither has English criticism: English morality does not allow such doubts" (Solomon 193). Could he have read somewhere, for instance, that "George Chalmers, writing in 1796, refused to accept that 'Shakespeare, a husband, a father, a moral man, addressed a hundred and twenty, nay, a hundred and twenty-six *Amorous Sonnets* to a *male* object!'"? (qtd in Dobson 440). Freud was indeed a lover of Shakespeare, who he thought was the Earl of Oxford and believed that the Sonnets were autobiographical (Holland 72).

Taking his examples from Sonnet XX, Sebastian first singled out what he considered a troubling issue of Shakespearean psychology:

The topic of the personality of the male friend in the sonnets can be related to the larger topic of travesty [...]. There is so much beauty, so much grace in Shakespeare's travestied characters, that they are more than a theatrical convention. The poet enjoys lying on the border between masculinity and femininity, as though beyond the species of men and women there was another species, in a lighter, more unfathomable and indeterminate world. (Solomon 193-194)

Was Sebastian speaking only about Shakespeare's characters, or was he also speaking about his own insecurities and his dreams of escaping to a safer place, so often mentioned in his Journal? He would have had to live to see the beginning of this millennium in order to read about the sonnets' "explicit homoeroticism", which "suggests that Shakespeare's sexuality was consciously bisexual in its desires" (Holland qtd in Dutton 122). To this day, Shakespeare's sexuality and its reflection in his sonnets remains a moot point among critics.

On turning to the last 28 sonnets, Sebastian remarked that the Dark Lady did not in fact represent Shakespeare's ideal of beauty: "Shakespeare's great passions, his most marvellous images that stand for love, are fair women"; also, with the exception of Cleopatra, Shakespeare's works contain numerous "disagreeable" words about dark women (Solomon 194). He illustrated his interpretations with Sonnet CXXX, "one of the most beautiful, the most interesting but also one of the saddest" (Solomon 195), and Sonnet CXLI (141): "Far from being a blessing, love in Shakespeare of the sonnets is a curse, or

insanity. Very lucidly, the poet knows what is what. He is not mistaken or deceived, and has no illusions – all illusions are shattered, but beyond all the sad irony [...] love endures, overcoming his own lucidity” (Solomon 195-6). Again, Sebastian might have been talking about himself.

He further argues that sonnets XLI (41) and XLII (42) correspond to sonnets CXXXIII (133), CXXXIV (134) and CXLIV (144): “if we consider the sonnets in a sentimental light, as Shakespeare’s sole confidential act, the only place where we can find Shakespeare the man, then these five sonnets represent the tensest moments of his romance” (2016: 196). He also finds in line 5 of sonnet CXLVII (147) - “My reason, the physician to my love” a flat and prosaic simile and an example of Shakespearean bad taste. In fact, it is an example of the Shakespearean “mind over matter” theme (Strier 82), or the lucidity that Sebastian himself had identified as characterizing the poet. It is strange, however, that he should have singled out this particular line rather than noting the powerful sarcastic couplet which deftly relates “*fair*”, “*bright*”, “*black*”, “*hell*” and “*night*”, or indeed the dark night of the soul this sonnet describes. Petre Solomon’s 1942 notes also contain several lines of sonnet CXLVII in Romanian translation, one of just three or four brief samples preserved. “With Shakespeare, not only in the sonnets –noted Sebastian, love is almost always a tragic or comic error, almost always a substitution of persons. In every love there is a travesty or *malentendu*” (196-7). The same thing held true for Sebastian’s own love life, as his Journal amply testifies.

There is more negative criticism in Sebastian’s interpretation, as he notes that the sonnets are unequal and contain very many trite, inexpressive passages, a claim he exemplified with sonnets CXXXV, CXXXVI and CXLIII, which present a pun-loving Shakespeare. The sexual puns in these sonnets, however, appeared to Sebastian, himself a sensualist, “unbearable, utterly jarring in poetry” (Solomon 197). In fact, he considers the last of these three bad, with “as a careful housewife runs to catch/ One of her feather’d creatures broke away” an example of the “awkward euphuistic style” (Solomon 198). In one interpretation, “the feather’d creature” is the poet’s friend (Southampton), while “the babe” is the poet himself (Stopes qtd in Deleanu 90). Sebastian could not have been acquainted with Elizabethan slang, so that he only identified the three grammar-book meanings of “*will*”, missing the bawdy ones: “sexual desire; lust”, as well as “now the male, now the female, sexual organ” (Partridge 284) and thus misunderstanding the sonnets. Needless to say, the translation of these sonnets is all but impossible, as Deleanu’s version of sonnet 135, where all “*will*”s are rendered as Rom. “*Dor*”, shows (Deleanu 51). Eric Partridge notes that

“[I]n Shakespeare, the *nexus* between the sexual act and literary creation is closer, more potent, more subtly psychosomatic than in any other writer,

whether of verse or of prose. In the *Sonnets*, this fact emerges more clearly, and much more persistently, than in the plays: and no one has so fearlessly and brilliantly treated this predominant Shakespearean quality as Anthony Burgess has done in his very remarkable novel, *Nothing Like the Sun. A Story of Shakespeare's Love-Life*, 1964". (Partridge 285-6)

Sebastian's interpretation of Shakespeare's sonnets is a highly personal one, as the verbs "I think/ wonder/ believe" in Petre Solomon's recorded notes suggest. Solomon concluded: "on introducing us to a less mythical Shakespeare, the opposite of the romantic idol exalted by so many English poets and critics, Sebastian followed in the footsteps of modern researchers such as John Dover Wilson" (Solomon 199). Sebastian is unlikely to have read Dover Wilson, though, as the literary histories that he consulted were in French, while his attempt to access the resources of the Bucharest University library was unsuccessful (*Journal*, 535). It seems quite surprising, nevertheless, that he was not at all preoccupied with the sonnets' expressive force, and their high degree of intensity in a relatively short space. As Traversi remarks, "taken together, these two factors – verbal immediacy and the moulding of stress to the movement of living emotion – account in very great measure for the unique impression produced by Shakespeare's mature poetry" (Traversi 187).

Informative though it is, Sebastian's interpretation of Shakespeare's sonnets is clearly focused on problems of character identity. Against the background of the ravages of war that fill page after page of his *Journal*, with his own life in danger and deserted by all his former friends: "Life is somewhere beside me, outside of me" (*Jurnal*, 452), he was at the same time questioning his own identity. In fact, his may have been an obsession with identity, as proved by his entire literary output, novels and plays, besides what some critics deem to be his most important work, the *Journal*. In all of these Sebastian was writing himself. Social psychologists and reading theorists have shown that, more often than not, innermost emotions and moral impulses outrank reason in real-life situations that involve decision-making (Moscovici 565; Cornea 502-507).

It can be argued that Sebastian chose to teach Shakespeare's sonnets mainly because as a narrative, they too are preoccupied with identity – "the identity of the word with its concept, the identity of beauty with truth, the identity of the heir with its begetters, not to mention the identities of the personae in these poems" (Kalas 264). The conventions of the Renaissance sonnet demand that it be concerned with the poetic self, and this was Sebastian's exclusive focus; he did not deal with sonnet structure, literary influences, or indeed stylistics. Kalas further argues that the sonnets also explore "the condition of being subordinate, even to the point of nonbeing" (Kalas 270). Indeed the order of subjects and objects often appears confused, as in sonnet CXXVI, which marks the intersection of the male and female love objects, and a

survey of pronoun use in the sonnets confirms this. Given the historical context, the condition of being subordinate was that of Sebastian as well.

Ultimately, the key factor here has to be politics. While the current complex processes of negotiation within networks of cultural interaction have led to Shakespeare's works being used as vehicles for political and ideological debates, and while the concept of 'identity' itself is now a much-debated controversial issue, Sebastian's concern with his own identity, autonomous and self-critical in the modern sense, can be made sense of in the historical context of widespread antisemitism and insecurity generated by the world war: "a Jew, a Romanian and a man from the Danube", to whom Shakespeare provided solace in trying times.

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