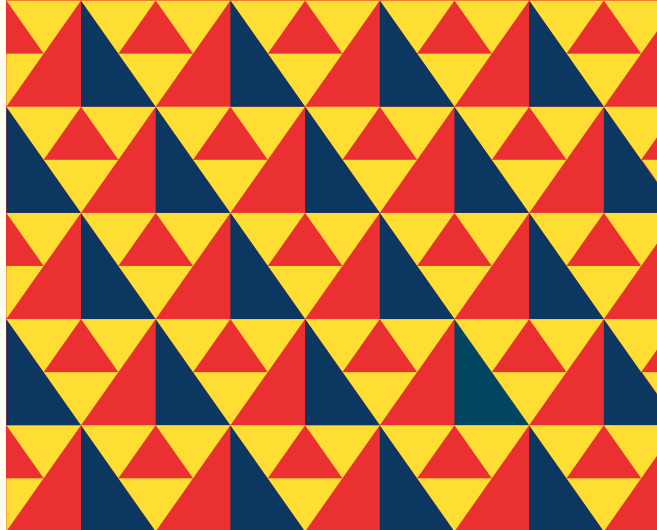


WOMEN

Mihail
Sebastian

With an introduction by
John Banville

'Sebastian's prose is
like something Chekhov
might have written'
Arthur Miller



Women

Also by Mihail Sebastian

For Two Thousand Years
Journal 1935–1944: The Fascist Years
The Accident

Women

Translated from the Romanian by Philip Ó Ceallaigh

MIHAIL SEBASTIAN

With an introduction by John Banville



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Introduction

Freud's querulous question haunts us yet: 'What does a woman want?' Of course, it would probably make more sense to ask, 'What is it a man wants of a woman?' The 'Viennese quack', as Nabokov used to call him, would answer that even Don Juan is ever in lovelorn search of the lost mother. And this is true, so far as it goes; but as is always the case with Freud, the formula goes too far and not far enough. Anyway, women are not really the point—Woman is.

And it is Woman in many of her most fascinating aspects that Mihail Sebastian conjures in this superb volume of four linked stories. The central character is Stefan Valeriu, a Romanian medical student living abroad. We meet him first on a summer morning in the grounds of the Alpine guest-house where he is spending a lazy summer recuperating after the rigours of a year of work, study and exams. The opening pages are exquisitely done, as Stefan wakes into a sort of hazy, Mallarméan *Matin d'un faune*—'. . . time will pass—five minutes, an hour, an eternity—and a flickering blue light with vague silver streaks will appear through his closed eyelids. Then it will be eight . . .' [p. 3]

Stefan is, as one of his female fellow guests remarks in wistful admiration, *un nouveau jeune homme*, and as such is primed for love. This he finds to varying degrees in the company of the Proustianly named trio of Renée, Marthe and Odette. His triple adventure gives off a distinct whiff of the

autobiographical, and Sebastian's account of it has a mesmeric immediacy. Here is Renée, the highly strung wife of the complaisant, or merely short-sighted, Marcel, a French landowner from Tunisia, bursting into Stefan's room in the middle of a sunny afternoon,

falling into his arms and removing her dress with panicked movements and kissing him haphazardly, murmuring from time to time, "if Marcel comes," in a passionate voice, as though it were an exclamation of love rather than of fear, and losing herself in his arms with small, ragged cries . . . [p. 33]

This first, longish story, done with the lightest of light touches, would have been, in the hands of a lesser author, little more than a mildly titillating anecdote about a young roué getting lucky with some bored ladies at a summer resort. As it is, it has a timeless, melancholy *savoir* that marks it as a true work of art.

Émilie, the second story, is an account of a gawky and unappealing girl who finds herself an unlikely husband in the milieu of Romanian émigrés in Paris. She is happy for a while, and dies in childbirth. The little tale is narrated with a pitiless detachment that is reminiscent of one of Flaubert's *contes*. The match between *Émilie* and her comically named spouse Irimia C. Irimia is absurd to the point of farce. All the same the narrator, our friend Stefan, permits here and there a shaft of ennobling light to fall upon the action, as for instance at the climax of the wedding day, when *Émilie*, 'on her groom's rigid arm, had a modest queenly glow and her usual ugliness shone solemnly, like an aura of chastity.' [p. 82]

Maria is the only one of the four stories narrated by a woman. It takes the form of a long letter, presumably addressed to Stefan, in which the no longer young Maria of the title broods on a difficult and star-crossed affair—‘I became Andrei’s lover with the complicity of an automobile, an August evening, and a smile.’ [p. 97] In love Maria may be, but she has a cool eye for male wilfulness and vanity, and a sharp tongue with which to express her observations on the eternal male:

Privately, I felt I was the stronger of the two of us, and I often thought that most of his victories over me, at least at the beginning, were really little concessions I’d made so he wouldn’t have to go off in a sulk. [p. 100]

Compared to what has gone before, *Arabela* is a positively raucous picaresque, in which Stefan forms a musical duo with a young woman, the non-performing member of an acrobatic act. The pair become the toast of the European cabaret circuit, and end up starring in the pictures. There is even an incident of what appears to be what nowadays is called ‘dogging’! The closing lines of the story are prophetically chilling, when, on the evening after Arabela’s departure from his life, Stefan buys the newspapers ‘to see what had happened that morning at the League of Nations. There had been heated debates.’ [p. 186]

Mihail Sebastian was a Romanian Jew, real name Iosif Mendel Hechter. He was a lawyer, a playwright, a novelist and a journalist. He suffered under the poisonously anti-Semitic wartime Romanian regime, but somehow survived, until 1945, when, by a bitterly ironic twist of fate worthy of his own fictions, he was knocked down in the street by a US

army truck, and killed. His masterpiece is *Journal 1935–1944: The Fascist Years*, an extraordinarily vivid record of life under occupation, which is at once horrifying and insouciantly entertaining. He is one of Romania's greatest writers, and a great European artist. For those who do not know his work, *Women* is the the perfect place to start.

John Banville

Renée, Marthe, Odette

One

It's not yet eight. Stefan Valeriu can tell by the sunlight, which has crept only as far as the edge of his chaise longue. He can sense it climbing the wooden legs, feel it caressing his fingers, his hand, his naked arm, as warm as a shawl . . . More time will pass – five minutes, an hour, an eternity – and a flickering blue light with vague silver streaks will appear through his closed eyelids. Then it will be eight and perhaps time to start thinking about getting up. Just like yesterday, and the day before that. But he'll remain lying there, smiling at the thought of this sundial he constructed on the first day, using a chaise longue and a patch of terrace. He passes his hand over his sun-scorched hair, rough as hemp fiber, and accounts it no great loss in the end that he's forgotten his bottle of Hahn oil – his sole extravagance, but a precious one – in his room on the rue Lhomond in Paris. He enjoys passing his fingers through tangled hair that received no more than a cursory brushing that morning, and its roughness tells him how blond it has become.

It must be very late. Just now, he heard the sound of voices from the pathway. Somebody, a woman, shouted from down at the lake. Perhaps the Englishwoman from yesterday, the one he'd watched swimming powerfully. He had been surprised by the way she struggled with the water; she seemed to know only the breaststroke.

Stefan swings his leg over the edge of his lounge and feels

about the grass with his naked foot for a patch of dampness. He knows that somewhere not too far to the left, toward the hedge, is a place that holds the dew until as late as lunchtime. There it is. His body, baking lazily in the heat, and the feeling of that cold vegetation.

On Monday evening, going downstairs to the guesthouse dining room – he had just arrived at the station after a long journey and had hurriedly changed his shirt – the talkative Serbian woman at the table at the back announced, for all to hear:

—*Tiens, un nouveau jeune homme!* . . .

Stefan had been doubly grateful. For the *nouveau* and for the *jeune homme*. He had felt old a week earlier, on his way out of his final medical exam, and weary. Tired after the sleepless nights, the mornings at the hospital, long afternoons in the library, and the two-hour exam in a dim hall before a deaf professor who was dressed for winter and whose collar appeared to be dirty . . . And then the name of this Alpine lake, stumbled upon on a map in a bookshop, the train ticket bought at the first travel agency he'd come across, the trip through big stores to buy a white sweater, gray flannel trousers, and a summer shirt. And then a journey that was like an escape.

Un nouveau jeune homme.

Stefan doesn't know anybody. He's been greeted in passing a few times but has not let himself be drawn out. His accent makes him coy; he is not eager to give himself away as foreign on the first day. He passes between the tables after lunch, aloof, with the trace of a frown. Perhaps he seems gruff. But it's just laziness.

Above, behind the terrace, the forest begins. There's a small clearing there with dense, long, yielding grass. He crushes it beneath the weight of his sleepy body all afternoon and the next day finds that it has sprung back completely, as though it had never been touched. He throws himself down, arms spread, legs stretched out, his head buried in the vegetation. He succumbs to what is forcing him down, though he wishes he could fight it.

A squirrel has leaped from one hazel to another. How do you say squirrel in French? There's an immense silence . . . No. That's not true. That's an expression from books. There's an immense racket going on, an immense animal hubbub, crickets chirping, frantic grasshoppers, and the clink of the carapaces of beetles as they collide in midair and plummet earthward like beads of lead. In all this, the sound of Stefan Valeriu's own breathing is one more detail, one more little expression of life, no more trivial or essential than a squirrel leaping or that grasshopper perched on the toe of his boot, believing it to be a stone. It's good to be here, an animal, a creature, a nobody, sleeping and breathing on a two-meter patch of grass under a common sun.

If it felt like thinking, how would a cricket think about eternity? And if that eternity had the savor of this afternoon . . . Below, on the guesthouse terrace, chairs and shawls and white dresses can be seen. And beyond, the idyllic, clear, blue lake. A postcard.

Two

Through the cool blue light of evening, muffled sounds come across the lake, from the town, from beyond the distant electric lights. It's Thursday, and a military band is playing in the municipal park. Almost everybody in the guesthouse has gone there, taking the 8:27 boat, to attend. Stefan Valeriu has remained. The whole valley, spread out before the terrace, is suffused with deep blue.

—Do you play chess, sir?

—Yes.

Why did he say 'yes'? It would have been so simple to say no, and then he'd be outside, free to continue his stroll upon the terrace. A hasty 'yes', and now he's in the common room, in front of a chessboard, condemned to concentrate. His opponent is a tall, bony, swarthy, middle-aged man who plays slowly and methodically.

—You didn't go to the concert.

—No.

—Me neither. My wife was dead set on it, so I let her. But me . . .

Stefan has lost a rook, but on his left flank he has constructed a focused attack on the king.

—Are you from the Midi?

—No. I'm Romanian.

—Impossible! You sound like a Frenchman. Or maybe it's

just that I'm not used to the accent here. Because I'm not from France either. I'm Tunisian.

—Tunisian?

—Yes. Well, French from Tunisia. I have plantations there. Marcel Rey's the name.

Stefan's attack has failed, and, having left himself wide open, he loses the game. In the meantime, the concertgoers are returning. Hearing the whistle of the boat from the jetty, they go out to await them. Many lively voices, exclamations, handshakes, noisy greetings.

—Oh Marcel, if you knew how lovely it was . . .

—Renée, please meet a new friend. My wife.

She is a tall, slender woman. In the dim light, only her eyes can be seen. Stefan kisses her hand. A small, cold hand, like any other.

They've been on a little excursion to Lovagny to see a castle. The three of them – Marcel Rey, his wife, and Stefan. And Nicole, the Reys' little girl. They've walked about a lot, laughed, and taken photographs. Monsieur Rey has a small movie camera and sometimes films scenes which he then sends to Paris to be developed.

—Renée, go over there with Monsieur Valeriu. Farther, into the light. That's it, laugh, talk, a bit of action.

—If we're in a movie, Madame, Stefan whispers, then make it a love story.

He says it casually. He is sufficiently offhand for it to pass as a joke, if required.

Renée smiles quizzically, and says nothing. Stefan plays with Nicole's curls. Monsieur Rey films it all.

★

He knows their entire story. They were both born in a small town in Tunisia and are from old colonial families. He came to France only once before, in 1917, took a bullet in the shoulder after two hours in the trenches, and was back home within a week of leaving. This is the first time she has gone farther than Tunis. They married in 1920, had a child – Nicole – in 1921, bought a vineyard in 1922, a plantation the following year, and a couple more each year thereafter. Their town, Djedaida, is fifty kilometers from Tunis. It's a small European settlement, surrounded by native tribes that gather on the outskirts whenever there's a bad drought and wander the little streets looking disaffected. During those periods, the Reys sleep with a gun under their pillow. On Saturday evenings, when the plantation workers are paid, René stands by the telephone, in case it's necessary to call to Tunis for help.

She narrates all this quietly, matter-of-factly. She's a little bit tired and Stefan Valeriu has to ask three questions to receive one answer.

—Can you hand me my shawl from over there? I'm cold.

He throws it over the chaise longue and, in arranging it over her, his hand happens to linger on her knee. She starts with fright and shouts, senselessly, 'Nicole, Nicole!'

In the evening, Stefan replies to some letters from Paris. 'I haven't met anybody. Just a family of Tunisians, him a good chess player, her a virtuous wife. I don't think they're happy together.'

He's taken a boat from the guesthouse's jetty, rowed to where the lake opens out and the view of the steep valley in the