

The victim

Romania, the Holocaust, and
the literature of a country in crisis

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I

In 2007, when my first book was published in translation in Romanian, I was interviewed by the Bucharest daily *Cotidianul*. I answered the usual questions about how I had come to live in Romania, what my influences were, and so on. I was surprised a couple of days later to see my face on the cover of the paper above the words – “Philip Ó Ceallaigh: ‘Romanians believe the lie that they are victims of history.’”

My girlfriend phoned to tell me the interview was on the internet, and comments were coming in. She sounded alarmed.

I got online, and there they were, piling up by the minute. Almost all the comments were hostile, and some went so far as to suggest that I should be located and beaten up.

I had touched a nerve, and not only by suggesting that Romanians were not victims of history. Asked about Romanian literature, I remarked that I had been impressed by an interwar writer called

Mihail Sebastian, not realizing that Sebastian had been the subject of a polemic in Romania since the publication in 1996 of his wartime journals, which revealed much about the involvement of the country’s intellectual class in the rise of Romanian fascism.

The polemic came at a particularly awkward moment for Romania, just as it was trying to shake off its communist past. Romanian communism had been a particularly nationalistic phenomenon, with its grand building and engineering projects, an independent line from Moscow, programmes for population expansion that produced a ban on contraception and abortion, and rehashed fascist notions about eugenics that consigned the destitute and the handicapped to incarceration in horrific state institutions.

After the fall of communism, the literature of that period fell into disgrace. Interwar writers, preeminent among them Mircea Eliade and E.M. Cioran (who emigrated to the United States and France, respectively), became the new Romanian literary heroes. Communism was the source of all evil in Romanian society, therefore the period before it must have been better.

Then Mihail Sebastian’s wartime diaries turned up in Israel, were dusted off, and published. Eliade, Cioran, and others appeared in a new light, as fascist supporters and ideologues, and the fact had to be confronted that it wasn’t the Russians who had introduced totalitarianism to the Romanian nation.

The country was being asked to come to terms with its fascist past

and its communist past all at once, and something had to give. It was simpler to leave the nationalist conception of Romania as a great and suffering nation intact and to dismiss Sebastian as a traitor.

Those who argued that Sebastian's diaries had to be faced, such as the Jewish-Romanian writer Norman Manea – who was, as a child, deported with his family to a Romanian internment camp – became traitors by extension. Or else ignorant foreigners. “Yalta! Yalta! Yalta!” screamed one of the online comments, in reaction to my interview. Had I not heard of Yalta, the crucifixion of the Romanian nation?

Another thing I mentioned in the interview was that I had started to translate into English a 1934 novel by Sebastian called *For Two Thousand Years*. Though set in the 1920s and '30s, it struck me as more real, more explanatory of the mess of contemporary Romania, and its mentality, than anything I could find that had recently been written. Through it, I felt both past and present come into focus. I could see how the past made the present.

This, I felt, was what the literature of a country in crisis must be about.

II

For Two Thousand Years opens in the 1920s. Jewish university students are being attacked and beaten by other students. The nameless young narrator, a Jew, briefly joins, then abandons, a group of

fellow Jewish students who have organized to fight back so they can continue to study. It is not being beaten up that he fears. He fears surrendering his freedom through identification with a group. And he fears that he finds the psychology of victimhood far too attractive. He neither wishes to deny nor be defined by his Jewishness. But he lives in a society determined to define him by this alone.

The narrator describes a meeting with Abraham Sulitzer, a traveling salesman of books, on a train. Sulitzer cuts a ridiculous figure at first, and the narrator is eager not to be identified with him, as a fellow Jew, before others in the compartment. Sulitzer smiles indulgently, saying: “No need to upset yourself, young fellow. The Jew is a man with baggage. Many troubles, and baggage to match.” The narrator now feels ashamed of how cowardly he has been. He buys a book from Sulitzer that turns out to be a history of massacres. Sebastian's narrator states:

I was reading in Șapsa Zwi's history [...] that in 1646, tens of thousands of Jews were butchered in Poland and Russia, hundreds of villages and towns were wiped from the face of the earth, and while the towns were burning, while the spilled blood was pouring like lava from a still active volcano, in the synagogues, among flames and blood, they discoursed over Talmudic texts.

The early part of the book is the story of the narrator's own personal suffering as a result of antisemitism. Later on, the narrator

attempts to understand antisemitism as a phenomenon. He endeavours to see himself – and other Jews – through antisemitic eyes. He is able to distinguish those for whom beating Jews was a student sport from those who clothe violence in ideology.

The Iron Guard, also known as the Legionary Movement – in the ascendent when *For Two Thousand Years* was published – mixed religious mysticism with fascist politics. According to Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the Legion's founder, history and politics was the realm of sin. The individual could transcend the world through sacramental acts of violence that would bring about the purification and rebirth of the Romanian nation. Guardist thinking is presented in *For Two Thousand Years* in the persona of the young ideologue Stefan Pârlea (clearly based on the young E.M. Cioran, a friend of Sebastian's, who would become one of post-war Paris's favourite nihilists). Pârlea requires a conflagration to transform the nation, with Jews as collateral damage: "Any act of violence is good. 'Down with *jidani*' is idiotic, agreed! But what does it matter? The point is to shake the country up a bit. Begin with the Jews – if there's no other way. But finish higher up, with a general conflagration, with an earthquake that spares nothing."

Yet the Holocaust approaches quietly as well, heralded by friends who will calmly discuss the "Jewish problem" with the narrator. In the last pages, a conversation between the narrator and his friend Vieru takes place, and this is worth quoting at length. Vieru portrays

antisemitism at its most refined and rational, in discourse with the Jew himself. Vieru has asked the narrator why he doesn't see him in town any more, and the narrator replies that he's sick of hearing exterminators of Jews declaiming at every streetcorner.

[Vieru] reflected for a moment, hesitating, a little embarrassed, as though he wished to change the subject. Then [...] he addressed me, in that determined manner people have when they want to get something off their chests.

–You're right. Yet there is a Jewish problem, and it needs to be solved. One million eight hundred thousand Jews is intolerable. If it were up to me, I'd try to eliminate several hundred thousand.

[...]He noticed my distress and hurried to explain.

–Let's be clear. I'm not antisemitic. [...] But I'm Romanian. And, as such, all that is opposed to me is a threat to me. There is an aggravating Jewish spirit. I must defend myself against it. In the press, in finance, in the army, everywhere I feel its pressure. If the body of our state were strong, it would hardly bother me. But it's not strong. It's sinful, corruptible and weak. And this is why I must fight against the agents of corruption.

I said nothing for a few seconds, which he had not expected. I could have responded, out of politeness, to keep the conversation going, but I failed to.

–Do I surprise you?

–No, you depress me. You see, I know two kinds of anti-semites. Straightforward antisemites – and antisemites with arguments. I manage to get along with the first kind, because everything between us is clear-cut. But with the other kind it’s hard.

The narrator asserts that he cannot hope to shake Vieru’s intuition that Jews are a threat. Vieru, still convinced he is not an antisemite, assures his friend that “with Jews like you” he has no problem. The narrator knows, however, that when the conflagration comes, no fine discrimination will be made.

One day, the narrator is walking past boys selling newspapers in the street. “Death to the *jidani!*” shouts one of the boys:

I usually walk calmly by, because it’s an old, almost familiar cry. This time I stopped in surprise, as if I had for the first time understood what these words actually meant. It’s strange. These people are talking about death, and about mine specifically. And I walk casually by them, thinking of other things, only half-hearing.

III

In *For Two Thousand Years*, Vieru claims that there were “one million eight hundred thousand Jews in Romania.” The correct figure in 1930, around the period when the conversation was set, was about 750,000, out of a total population of 18 million. This figure probably

fell by tens of thousands through the 1930s as many Jews fled in the face of repression.

It is estimated that over 300,000 Romanian Jews perished in the Holocaust.

The fates of Romanian Jews varied from region to region. Approximately 135,000 died in Auschwitz and other German concentration camps following transportation from the area of northern Transylvania ceded, under German pressure, to Hungarian administration. Some 150,000 Jews in eastern Romania were transported en masse to internment camps to Transnistria (the name given to the area of Ukraine under Romanian administration, between the Dniestr and the Bug), where as many as 100,000 died of hunger, disease and cold, or were massacred by Romanian troops. The Jews of Bucharest and southern Romania, less numerous and less ghettoized than eastern Jews, were not deported, though they were exposed to random acts of violence, and repressive measures intensified into 1942.

In Romania the killing began as a series of pogroms. With the seizure of power by the fascist Iron Guard in September 1940, violence broke out across the country, from individual beatings and murders to mass executions. These actions were usually provoked by the state, which would then express its concern that things had got out of hand. In the words of General Ion Antonescu, the country’s military leader, in December 1940:

I will not protect *jidani* who are for the most part guilty of the

sufferings which have been brought upon this country. But I cannot tolerate, as the Head of Government, acts which compromise the peaceful and orderly redressing which I am conducting, and which is undermined by the casual acts committed daily by some people who do not realize the harm they are doing to the country and the Legionary Movement.

In June 1941, a pogrom, one of the most savage of the Second World War, occurred in the eastern Romanian city of Iași, though the involvement of the Romanian state makes it hard to say where a pogrom ends and a programme of extermination begins. On June 21, General Antonescu ordered the evacuation of all Jews in the region bordering the Soviet Union to a concentration camp in the interior of the country. Iași had a population of about 100,000 people, of which about half were Jews. (Though Jews made up about 4 percent of the Romanian population, they were particularly numerous in the cities and towns of the east.) Many of those rounded up in Iași were shot down in mass executions, corralled into the courtyard of the city's police station. Over 2,500 died of suffocation or dehydration in the train wagons into which they were packed, which shuffled for days in the summer heat between local stations. Estimates of the total number of victims of the violence oscillates between 3,000 and 14,000, but most tend towards the higher figure.

When Romania joined the German attack on the Soviet Union on June 22, further massacres of Jews occurred throughout the east of

the country.

If the Germans were satisfied with the enthusiasm of their Romanian allies for slaughtering Jews, they did have reservations about the style in which operations were conducted. A report from July 1941 by an SS unit stationed in Romania expressed German dissatisfaction under the headings of efficiency and hygiene:

The Romanians act against the Jews with no preconceived plan. Nobody would have anything to say concerning the very many executions of Jews, if their technical preparation, as well as the way in which they are carried out, were not lacking. The Romanians leave executed people to lie where they fall, without burying them. *Einsatzkommando* has demanded that the Romanian police proceed in a more orderly fashion in this respect.

Romanian troops fought with the Germans in what is now Ukraine. Transnistria, which included Odessa, was at this point ceded to Romanian administration. While the Germans pressed the front eastwards, Romanian troops were given the task of concluding the siege of Odessa, home to over half of Transnistria's pre-war Jewish population of 300,000.

The Romanians had trouble taking Odessa, and the Jews were blamed. We have this from Antonescu himself, in a letter to Wilhelm Filderman, the president of a Jewish organization. Responding to Filderman's appeal for leniency towards the Jews of southern Roma-

nia, Antonescu noted: “Your Jews, as Soviet commissars, push the Soviet troops in the Odessa region with unparalleled fury, as Russian prisoners testify, towards a pointless massacre, just to cause us losses.”

In October 1941, Odessa fell, leading to one of the greatest massacres of a civilian population of the Second World War. Many thousands of Jews were simply assembled and machine-gunned to death.

The historian Iulius Fischer estimates that – in addition to the over 87,000 Jews and 25,000 Gypsies from Romania that died following deportation to Transnistria – 130,000 local Jews were killed in Romanian-occupied Ukraine. Raul Hilberg, in *The Destruction of the European Jews*, estimates that “the Romanians killed, in the area of Odessa and Golta, 150,000 local Jews... No other country, with the exception of Germany, participated in the massacre of Jews on such a massive scale.”

It was only the turning of the tide of war against the axis that caused Antonescu to stall the implementation of Romania’s solution to its Jewish problem. Sebastian’s personal diaries record in detail the build-up to the war and its early years as he watches his friends, both fascist sympathisers and others, disassociate themselves from him. He records his bitterness as these friends try to drift back as the tide of war changes. He watches fascists reinvent themselves as socialists, and invite him to rejoin the writer’s union, from which he had been expelled.

IV

It must have been a lonely and dispiriting thing to have published a book as calm and thoughtful as *For Two Thousand Years* in 1934. Sebastian’s attempt to see through to the heart of a problem was misunderstood and rejected.

And it must have been a lonely thing to be a Jewish intellectual in a climate where virtually the entire intellectual class – Sebastian’s friends and colleagues – were at best the reasonable antisemites of the kind Vieru is depicted as being. Possibly out of loyalty, or vanity, or from a generous belief that dialogue was possible with the prejudiced, Sebastian asked the charismatic Nae Ionescu, who was mentor to many young writers – Sebastian, Cioran and Mircea Eliade among them – to write an introduction to *For Two Thousand Years*. Ionescu’s introduction – which Sebastian allowed to be published – blames antisemitism on the Jews, because they insist on being a separate nation:

When someone keeps themselves apart from you because he looks down on you, because he considers you beneath him and not worthy of being in contact with him, there’s a natural reaction: you’ll start to see him as an enemy or, at any rate, basically different to you. The process of separation begun by the Jew is strengthened by others.

The Jews, says Nae Ionescu, believe themselves to be the chosen people because from them the Messiah will come. The Messiah has

already come, says Ionescu. The Jew denies Christ “because pride has put scales on your eyes.”

If Nae Ionescu was able to perceive anything pertinent about Romania’s own crisis in *For Two Thousand Years*, he never let on.

Sebastian understood the mind of the antisemite so well – in its refined, intellectual and metaphysical expressions – because he was himself a product of the intellectual climate from which antisemitism sprang. He was a follower of Nae Ionescu, contributing to Ionescu’s newspaper *Cuvântul* even as it veered to the right. Sebastian understood nationalist ideas because as a young man he had been deeply attracted to them, and only withdrew from them when he saw where fascist ideology could lead. He must have been conscious that, had he not been a Jew, he might even have become an antisemitic ideologue himself.

V

In 1947, Saul Bellow’s novel *The Victim* was published. It is an illuminating study of the psychology of victimhood. The story concerns a man called Levanthal, who is doing his best to ignore his Jewishness and what others make of it, and trying to get on and make a living, like everyone else in New York. The story becomes that of his relentless harassment by a man from his past called Allbee, whom he can hardly remember but who bears him a terrible grudge. While we initially assume that the victim the title refers to is Levanthal, by the

end of the story it is clear that the victim is in fact Allbee. Allbee’s relentless harassment of Levanthal is rooted in Allbee’s conviction that he is the injured party, in his frustration and disappointment with his own life, in his refusal to see his own failings. The novel is a study of Allbee’s sense of victimhood.

The story culminates with Allbee’s attempt to kill himself. Allbee breaks into Levanthal’s home one night and tries to gas himself using the oven. Levanthal awakes in time to avert disaster. Years later the two men meet, and Allbee explains that he never even meant to hurt Levanthal on that night. “I wasn’t thinking of you,” says Allbee. “When you turn against yourself, nobody else means anything to you either.”

Thirteen years, and an ocean, and the Holocaust, separate Bellow’s *The Victim* from Sebastian’s *For Two Thousand Years*, but Allbee’s words can be placed beside those of Stefan Pârlea (E.M. Cioran), the authentic voice of the conflagration to come:

I asked Pârlea:

–Aren’t you afraid it’s going to end again with cracked skulls and broken windows? Don’t you ask yourself if it’s going to end with an antisemitic disturbance, and stop there? Don’t you think calling this thing of yours a “revolution” is using too new a word for such an ancient wretchedness?

He frowned, and answered.

–There’s a drought, and I’m waiting for the rain to come...

With hail, storm, lightning, as long as it comes. One or two will survive the deluge. Nobody will survive drought. If the revolution demands a pogrom, then give it a pogrom. It's not for me, or you, or him. It's for everybody. Whose time is up and whose isn't, I don't care, even if I myself die...

The narrator of *For Two Thousand Years* attends a meeting at which Pârlea speaks. At one point the audience breaks into a chant: "The foreigners and the *jidani*/ All suck us dry, always suck us dry". The sentiment, though crude and passionate, can be set beside Vi-eru's refined arguments, and the comments by Antonescu in the previous section. All exhibit the same underlying sentiment and subscribe to a narrative of victimhood. That the suffering and failure of the Romanian nation is due to the machinations of Jews and other minorities, and foreigners. The sentiment is also echoed in the words of the writer and philosopher Mircea Eliade, recorded in Sebastian's diaries, on the subject of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto: "The Poles' resistance in Warsaw is a Jewish resistance. Only Yids are capable of the blackmail of putting women and children in the front line, to take advantage of the Germans' sense of scruple."

The Romanian national narrative demands that the Romanian nation be a victim. The perpetration of the Holocaust in the name of this myth has never upset this narrative because it has never been confronted. Romania, goes the narrative, came out of the Second World War yet again as a victim, this time of the Yalta agreement

and a political system imposed from without. The peculiarly nationalistic features of Romanian communism are never remarked. Despite Romania's unique independence within the Warsaw pact (no Soviet troops were stationed on Romanian soil), Russia was, according to the narrative, responsible for Romania's failure during these years to achieve greatness, and presumably also for the continuation of Stalinism in Romania three decades after the death of Stalin.

"Romania will regain its senses when the problem of responsibility is posed in earnest," wrote Sebastian in his diaries, at the end of the war.

VI

With the end of the war, people who had looked through Sebastian when they passed him in the street – for six years – would now cross the road to shake his hand. One after another, fascists turned communist overnight. People "rehabilitated" themselves. "There is a frightening spirit of conformism," noted Sebastian, "new in its orientation but old in its psychological structure."

Tom Gallagher writes in *Romania: Theft of a Nation*:

Nationalism, after an interlude of Soviet-sponsored internationalism, was rehabilitated and tailored to suit communist needs; the traditional viewpoint that freedom consisted essentially of freedom from foreign rule and not the right of the individual to dissent from the government or majority opinion

proved extremely useful... A new generation of intellectuals promoting implacable forms of nationalism was groomed by the state, and sometimes pre-1945 chauvinists were able to revive their careers by preaching the catechism of nationalism.

It is not hard to imagine Nae Ionescu, had he lived (he died in 1940) reinventing himself.

Mircea Eliade went abroad and made a career as a philosopher of religion, though his later years were shadowed by revelations of his fascist past. A reading from Eliade's work was given at his funeral in 1986 by his university colleague Saul Bellow. Sebastian's diaries were first published in Romania in the 1990s, and in English – by a Chicago publisher - in 2000. In the same year Bellow published *Ravelstein*, a novel that contained the character Radu Grielescu, a disciple of Nae Ionescu and participant in the Bucharest pogrom, who turns up in Chicago as refugee academic, looking for an influential Jewish friend to be the instrument of his rehabilitation.

The process of rehabilitation in Romania was repeated in 1989. Communists reinvented themselves as democrats, and seized the state's economic assets in the transition to a capitalist economy. The old security apparatus – Securitate – was mostly left in place. This institution, which was responsible for killing, torturing, imprisoning, and persecuting the citizens of the communist state, was not disbanded. Nobody was prosecuted. Though its archives were made public in 1999, access has remained problematic and the victims of

the Securitate regularly find that their files have been tampered with and information deleted.

Communists became patriots. Some of Ceaușescu's circle of poets, such as Corneliu Vadim Tudor, and other intellectuals, turned up after the death of their patron as the most virulent nationalist politicians. Meanwhile, the intellectual class of the country, post-1989, was not made up of dissidents and those who had been forced into exile, but by those who were intellectuals under Ceaușescu.

The playwright I.L. Caragiale said: "Political parties in the European sense of the word, formed by traditions, or by new or more recent class interests, and where programmes are based on principles or ideas, do not exist in Romania." He was describing Romania before World War I, but his words equally describe the interbellum period, and even the situation that prevails today.

Mihail Sebastian, writing in the 1930s, in the wake of the controversy provoked by the publication of *For Two Thousand Years*, recorded the confusion of a French visitor who noted two extremist enemies engaged in an amiable conversation. The friends explain that they are just friends, and such contact does not oblige or compromise them in any way. "How does it not oblige you?" asks the Frenchman. "The slightest gesture compromises one!"

The Frenchman is wrong, says Sebastian: "Such people are not committed to anything: neither to hate, nor love, nor life, nor death. No matter what they do, what they say, there always remains, in

some corner of their consciousness, a smile that annuls what they've done, retracts what they've said. They're free people. Perhaps the only free people in Europe, because they're not bound by their acts, or committed to their ideas."

VII

In a nation where ideas have no real purchase, the nation is the only enduring dream. And if the nation that is great in its dreams finds itself debased in its waking hours, it must resolve the contradiction by continuing to perceive itself as a victim. The problem of responsibility must never be posed.

The Holocaust does not fit into the narrative of victimhood, and so it is as though it never occurred. In post-communist Romania, the dream of the nation does not permit acknowledgment.

In the interbellum period, the dream of the nation was projected into the future. It was a greatness that was yet to come. Now, in a process of mythologization, the dream is projected back into the past. The fascist interbellum, for modern Romania, has become a fictional land.

In this parallel universe, before the intervention of the Russians, Romania was on its way to becoming a mature and prosperous European nation, and possibly an economic superpower. Romania was the breadbasket of Europe, and an oil exporter. The image of interbellum Bucharest as the "Little Paris," a wealthy and fashionable

capital with a cultured middle class, is firmly established in the collective imagination of contemporary Romania.

This image is partially true. Romania came out of the First World War with its area and population doubled. The national dream of a Greater Romania, with all Romanians living in a unified state, was realized. With this expanded internal market and the exploitation of oilfields north of Bucharest, sudden wealth flooded the capital, which had been a small Balkan town only decades previously. Whole neighbourhoods of futuristic Art Deco houses were constructed in the area towards the aerodrome, their streets named after the nation's aviators. It must have been a heady time for a nation so young, with a romantic conception of its destiny, wanting to test its limits.

And yet, just beyond the city, the mass of the population – the peasantry – lived in conditions that had changed little since the Middle Ages. The large Gypsy population had been released from slavery only decades before. And in all the major cities in the newly integrated territories, ethnic Romanians were a minority. The urban centres of Transylvania and Bukovina were more Hungarian and German. The Jewish population was concentrated in urban areas, particularly in the East, an area where they were more likely to have Yiddish or Russian as their language than Romanian.

The intellectual and political life of the nation during the interbellum years was crippled by its obsession with the problem of minorities, and particularly the Jewish problem. The period now romanti-

cized in the popular imagination as Romania's golden age was one in which, as Tom Gallagher writes, Romania "proved incapable of providing adequate defence, civil order, a reliable system of justice, a reasonably equitable taxation system, and a framework for industry and commercial activity. The national interest was reduced to safeguarding territorial gains and realising the historic Romanian mission."

VIII

"...If you don't stand up to the real conditions of life," says a character in a Saul Bellow story, "and stand up to them with strength and shrewdness, you are condemned to live by one poor fiction or another, of which you are the commonplace interpreter."

Romania today is choked by poor fictions. Businessmen masquerade as politicians and compete for influence through their control of the media. Political life, seen through this prism, is a series of intrigues and scandals and accusations, focused on personalities rather than issues, as repetitive and as void of ideas as any soap opera. Wealth, politics and the media is controlled by ex-communists, or the children of those who were well-placed under the old system. Those who dominated their fellow citizens under dictatorship are now patriots of the new capitalist order. Most convenient for the rulers is the idea that the dictatorship demanded complicity and conformity, and that since everyone complied and conformed no further

examination is necessary. Nobody is to blame.

This is the point at which the work of a writer such as Mihail Sebastian, and a book such as *For Two Thousand Years*, becomes a rare and important challenge to the dominant narratives by which a country lives.

It is interesting to contrast the work of Sebastian and that of Eliade, a philosopher and historian of religion, and considered one of Romania's greatest authors of fiction. Eliade's approach is otherworldly, romantic, mystical. Real places, such as Bucharest, are seen through a lens of fantasy.

Eugène Ionesco, once, mocking the style of a novel Eliade had set in India (the author had studied in Calcutta for several years) joked that Eliade had not set foot on the subcontinent at all, but had been holed up in his attic at home in Bucharest the whole time. Yet, the joke could be extended to cover Eliade's depiction of Romania in the 1930s, as represented in his fiction. In an important sense, he wasn't really there. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the Iron Guard as it gained influence in the late 1930s, yet his fiction is imbued with more personal and mystical preoccupations. Eliade emigrated to America after the war. It is very possible that (like Cioran) he was ashamed of having fooled around with fascism. But we don't know for sure, as he went very quiet about his past.

Just as we don't know if he ever felt ashamed of having turned his back on his old friend Mihail Sebastian. He stopped seeing and

speaking to Sebastian as Romania became an ever-more obliging ally of Nazi Germany. We only know that this happened from Sebastian's diaries.

The notion that fiction is an aesthetic or spiritual exercise that has nothing to do with the real world, and steers clear of challenging the dominant fictions, is well established in Romania.

IX

In late 2010 I attended a public interview with the Romanian-born writer Herta Müller, who had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature earlier that year. Her work is an unflinching portrayal of life under communism in Romania. On the day the prize was announced, I went around Bucharest looking to buy a copy of one of her books. I could find not a single copy.

Now, on a winter evening, she was filling a theatre and being interviewed by her publisher, Gabriel Liiceanu, a philosopher and arguably the country's foremost intellectual.

Until she was permitted to leave Romania in 1987, Müller was a victim of relentless Securitate intimidation. But Liiceanu missed the chance to discuss with Müller an issue she has repeatedly raised publicly: that the structures of a dictatorship are still in place. That Romania's communist security apparatus (the Securitate) was never dismantled. That it simply changed its name and employs the same people (or pays them generous pensions). That Securitate files on

those it spied upon and harassed are routinely altered and destroyed, and that access to them is obstructed. That nobody involved in the communist party or the secret police has ever been prosecuted for crimes against their fellow citizens (just as there has never been any guilty verdict ever brought in a corruption case against a high-level politician or businessman since the fall of the dictatorship).

Gabriel Liiceanu, whose career as an intellectual began under communism, had another problem. He didn't like Müller's suggestion that Romania's literary and intellectual class were spineless conformists, and reminded Müller that, under the dictatorship, the only political engagement permitted was active membership of the communist party or reproduction of their slogans. There's another form of political engagement, Liiceanu argued, and this was the refusal to use the prescribed language imposed on a society by its oppressors. "Some of us were naïve enough to believe we were politically engaged," Liiceanu told Müller. "Now we learn from you that this way of not prostituting language was insufficient."

Müller replied that minding your words is not dissidence, and contrasted Romania to other Soviet satellites in which writers and intellectuals were central to dissident movements. In Romania dissidence was confined to a small number of cases, and "those who stuck their necks out were left on their own."

Liiceanu: But about this kind of engaged writer, who did not dirty his words [engage in official propaganda], you once

used the word *Mitläufer*, “one who goes along with the rest, shoulder-to-shoulder with authority.”

Müller: If you’ll allow me to interpret the word... “*Mitläufer*” doesn’t mean to go along with authority. It means to keep your head down, so you don’t have problems. Not shoulder-to-shoulder with authority.

The argument here about the meaning of the word *Mitläufer* has its origin in a public dispute between Müller and Mircea Cărtărescu, widely seen as Romania’s greatest living writer (Liiceanu is Cărtărescu’s publisher as well as Müller’s). In an interview with a German paper, Cărtărescu had said that under communism, writers had enjoyed a certain day-to-day stability. Müller, later asked by a Romanian journalist about these comments, noted with some bitterness that she had never felt such stability, and indeed had feared for her life, and used the word *Mitläufer* to describe the class of writers who went about their business seemingly untroubled by the nature of the society they lived – and were able to publish their work.

In the prose Cărtărescu published in the 1980s, nobody queues for food, shivers in their apartments during winter, has an illegal abortion or snitches on their neighbours to the secret police. Cărtărescu’s Bucharest is, like Eliade’s, a magical sort of place. We can’t look to Cărtărescu to know what Bucharest was really like in the last degenerate days of Romanian communism any more than we can look to Eliade to see the environment that created the Holocaust.

Liiceanu : Do you believe those who – I repeat – who respected language, didn’t degrade it, who never adopted the official way of speaking are “those who kept their heads down”? Don’t you believe that every book – each decent, good, wonderful book – that was born in that time was a way of saying “no” to the world we lived in?

Müller: No. It was a way of avoiding the subject. I’m not blaming anyone – only those who actually produced literature “to order” and shouted slogans – but what you want me to praise seems insufficient to me.

Liiceanu: I didn’t want you to praise. I wanted you not to blame.

Müller: It was a way of remaining honest with yourself, but it was insufficient, it wasn’t an act against the dictatorship. It was something personal – so as not to get your hands dirty. But it wasn’t anything that bothered Ceaușescu’s clique and the secret police, who were all around. I think if a lot of people had bothered the dictatorship, it wouldn’t have been able to have become ever more sinister.

X

It is right that the nature and aim of literature should be debated. And it is a healthy thing that the notion of culture as a form of décor - something that can be enjoyed by those with good taste even when

times are hard - be challenged by the idea that writing must make a stand against dominant fictions.

What is troubling is that in a land dominated by lies – Bellow’s “poor fictions” – literature that acknowledges the real conditions of life, that stands up to them with strength and shrewdness, is seen as a threat. The country’s literary and intellectual establishment, in the face of writers like Sebastian and Müller, run for cover. The debate sputters out when it has hardly begun.

In the days after the public interview, Liiceanu wrote publicly that his role as host and gentleman had prevented him from challenging Müller. Then he proceeded to do so in print, arguing that her career as a critic of the regime only dated from the moment she had left the country. Cărtărescu, who writes a newspaper column, had already expressed his outrage at being represented by Müller as solely to blame, as he put it, for the crimes of communism. And the country’s leading literary critic (and an early mentor to Cărtărescu), Nicolae Manolescu, wrote that Müller had insulted the Romanian nation:

Not only were writers thrown in the lion’s den of her judgments about her colleagues, but the whole Romanian nation was too... Her message is an unrestrained criticism of the behaviour of the Romanian people in the years of communist dictatorship and the lack of sense of civic responsibility displayed by writers.

It was unanimous; the brave struggle of all those who had built

their careers as men of literature and ideas under communism – the same intellectual elite that prevails today – had been dishonoured.

That Sebastian and Müller contest the elaborate fiction that is Romanian nationalism is complicated by the fact that they belong to national minorities, and by the prejudice that they stand outside the nation and are opposed to it. They have betrayed the country by refusing it the role of victim, by exposing its alibis as false. What Sebastian and Müller ultimately pose is the question of individual responsibility.

Philip Ó Ceallaigh’s most recent book is The Pleasant Light of Day, a collection of stories. He lives in Bucharest.