

WOMEN BY **MIHAIL SEBASTIAN** (ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AS *FEMEI* IN 1933)

TRANSLATED BY **GABI REIGH** (AURORA METRO, MARCH 2020)

/ TRANSLATED BY **PHILIP Ó CEALLAIGH**

(PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE, 2019 (US), NOVEMBER 2020 (UK))

BOTH TRANSLATIONS REVIEWED BY **MAX EASTERMAN**

Mihail Sebastian was born Iosif Hechter in 1907 in Brăila on the Danube; he changed his name in 1927 when he became a student in Bucharest, where antisemitism was rife. It would eventually drive him from public life in his home country. He survived the war and the Holocaust, only to die in a car accident in 1945. His best-known work is *For Two Thousand Years*, a document of the rise of antisemitism in 1930s Europe and its devastating effects on Jewish intellectuals.

Mihail Sebastian is not an author I had read before and I came to *Women* not knowing what to expect. What I found is a piercing insight into the experience of love: an odyssey of casual affairs; the superficial observation of others' relationships; the pain of rejection; and a comfortable, successful *ménage à deux*, which is cast aside like an unfinished book. Although *Women* is described as a novel, it is in fact a series of four novellas, linked through Ștefan Valeriu, whom we first meet, in book one, as a medical student in his early twenties, relaxing by a French alpine lake after the rigours of exams.

Ștefan is looking not so much for love, but for the experience of love, of women. His greatest priority is to keep his freedom and independence; in his lakeside hotel, he sets his cap at three women, all very different: Marthe, mature and invulnerable; Renée, inexperienced and desperate; and Odette, at eighteen years old, as he tells her, 'intelligent and wise for your

age'. She ripostes: 'I'm a virgin. That helps me stay intelligent.' For Ștefan, these liaisons are a game which he must win. He spars with the self-confident Marthe, who maintains her distance, intimidates him; his response is to challenge, then ignore. But at their last meeting she quietly leaves him defeated: 'Her response ... destroyed in one stroke the entire victory of the past three days, checkmate in one move.' Odette, who plays him like a trout, rejects him, then finally yields, and immediately walks away untroubled, without a word of explanation. Even Renée, who throws herself at him, realises his shallowness. They are left with only memories of love and loss; but Ștefan comes to realise that forgetting is not an option, love may be transient but memories do not heal.

Mihail Sebastian was, as a Jew, driven to be an outsider in 1930s Romania, and *Women* is essentially about outsiders. Ștefan and the

women in his life are all to some extent at variance with the mores of their time, bent on escaping or ignoring convention. Odette, for example, is 'a boy in a blue beret'. But the complications of being misfits are just what none of them can escape. Émilie, whom we meet in book two, is the saddest of all, a virgin in the low-life *banlieue* of Paris, a world of loose morals where 'to be a virgin older than fifteen was an embarrassment'. Her tragedy is to meet Irimia, a former schoolfriend of Ștefan's, another social misfit. Their story is narrated by Ștefan with an extraordinary mixture of compassion, glee and self-justification. He cannot accept the impact of his own manipulative role in the affair.

Maria, the woman in book three, is the polar opposite of Émilie: older, worldly-wise, yet fearful her love affair with a younger man, Andrei, will compromise her social position. Maria is a long-time friend of Ștefan and her story is a letter to him; he is otherwise entirely absent. He has confessed he loves her and she reproaches him for imperilling their friendship: 'Why did you end up like the others? The fact that you love me ... is an unnecessary complication'. Her story is told entirely from the woman's point of view. She has the insight and sophistication that elude Ștefan. But she too knows her relationship will end and she will be left with nothing but memories.

Arabela is Ștefan's last woman: matter-of-fact, practical, a home-maker. She accepts his irresponsibilities and organises his life. She is 'someone ... to

bear all of life's hardships'. But when the inevitable parting comes, it's as simple and shoulder-shrugging as the way they first got together, and Ștefan is left once again with only memories.

Mihail Sebastian's books are essentially experimental and *Women* sees Sebastian trying out different, alternative narratives. Ștefan's role as the 'link man' is tenuous in several places, yet it works: he tries his hardest to manipulate the women he meets, though he doesn't always succeed. But he is also an experimenter, and he does begin to understand the complexities of his relationships. He moves from a suspicious hostility towards self-confident women to an admiration for them; he accepts his attitudes are often cruel, so that 'love' is rarely permanent; but he begins to open up to his women and allows his vulnerability to show. Mihail Sebastian's skill is to balance the telling of these stories between the man and the women: their voices are often the dominant ones in Ștefan's odyssey.

It's unusual to have two translations of the same book to contrast and compare, and the process has been an interesting one. There are bound to be stylistic differences and in this instance, there's a clear divergence between the UK publication, where the language and tone are 'European' and the dialogue slightly old-fashioned and period – not inappropriate, I think, given the 1920s setting of the book – and the US one, in which the dialogue in particular is very modern American (of course, that

may change if the Americanisms are 'translated' in the forthcoming Penguin UK edition). Overall, I feel that, while Philip Ó Ceallaigh's prose has a directness and power to it, Gabi Reigh's flows more smoothly and the women's thoughts and attitudes are more precisely expressed. Which you choose to read is entirely a matter of personal taste. What I did find surprising was that there are cases where the translations diverge on matters of fact. One example will suffice:

'a woman's voice, perhaps the English girl from yesterday who watched his vigorous front crawl and admired his victory over the water, complaining that she only knew breaststroke.'

and

'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.'

The roles of the two characters are reversed. Which, I wonder, is the correct rendering of the Romanian? They cannot both be right.

Translators are only human: they make mistakes. And they are entitled, expected even, to take liberties with the tone and emphasis of their text, in order to reproduce the thrust and sense of the old in the new; but the above is of a different order. This is not the only such conflict I found and I do wonder how either translator might react on reading the other's words. I'm glad to say, these conflicts did not detract from the overall impact of either version.

Max Easterman