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Literary

The Accident
Mihail Sebastian
Biblioasis Press
978-1-926845-16-6
(March 31, 2011)

Romanian author Mihail Sebastian's *The Accident,* translated into English here for the first time, is a compelling, mercurial novel. French teacher Nora slips while exiting a tram in 1934 Bucharest, sustains superficial injuries, and is rescued by the recalcitrant lawyer, Paul. The hero soon proves a mystery to Nora, one she is determined to unravel. Although this setup maybe well-worn, the pair's story is anything but simple.

A malaise hangs over Paul who, at thirty, reeling from a lost love, has adopted a nihilistic outlook on life. Nora, four years his senior, sees Paul's depression as a challenge—and his entrance into her life as a last chance for love. Her dedication to Paul and the unfolding of his heartbreak drive the novel. Sebastian uses these two opposite characters to wage a kind of intellectual war as Nora's optimism clashes with Paul's pessimism. It is a war with losses as subtle as an ambivalent shrug, the victories of which come in the form of a shared twist-of-phrase and the brief levity two lost people find in each other.

Anticipating the reader's familiarity with the type of romance story he is telling, and the direction of the narrative, Sebastian frequently subverts expectations. *The Accident* is at turns a love story, a lament, a mystery, and a surreal journey into the Transylvanian mountains, but ultimately it's about renewal, as Paul slowly begins to emerge from the cloud of ennui.

The Accident was first published in 1949; despite being Sebastian's first novel to be translated into English it is chronologically the last book of fiction he wrote. A young star of the Bucharest literary world, Sebastian's burgeoning career was interrupted by the rise of fascism in 1930s Romania. The next work the Jewish novelist and playwright published four years later was the account of his harrowing time under fascism in Bucharest, his acclaimed journal *1935-1944: The Fascist Years.*

The Accident can be enjoyed for the dynamic,
confused love story it presents as well as for its historical relevance in the life of one of

Romania's most influential mid-century writers. *The Accident* was published in a country under rule of the anti-Semitic Iron Guard, and although the war is not mentioned directly it is impossible to read now without this shadow hanging over the novel.

Mihail Sebastian's life was cut tragically short in 1945 when, in an accident eerily similar to the inciting incident of his novel, he was stuck down by a truck in the streets of Bucharest. Sebastian was thirty-seven. The author's last work of fiction is a tale of the struggle to regain hope after embracing hopelessness. Two of his plays staged soon after his death became wildly popular, and, at the time of his death, Sebastian's own emergence, like his character Paul in *The Accident*, was perhaps just beginning.

Michael Beeman