

IDEOLOGY AND FICTION IN ION D. SÂRBU'S NOVELS

Narrative Strategies in the Works of Ion D. Sârbu

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Abstract: The present paper is an analysis of the narrative strategies the author uses in his work. Therefore, I shall examine the four novels that are eloquent and aim at redefining Ion D. Sârbu's writing approach. Apparently exploring the real, his work becomes both creation and interpretation of it. In a postmodern manner the real and the fictional are mixed in order to amplify the dimension of his writings, the narrative discourse is hyperbolized, creating interest and fascinating the reader.

Keywords: narrative discourse, hyperbolized, utopia, metamorphosis

„ Sunt dintre acei nefericiți care și-au trăit literatura, au consumat-o și au ars-o. Pentru mine, viața nu e, nu mai poate fi deloc aceea pe care am trăit-o de fapt, ci aceea pe care am visat-o, am gândit-o, am creat-o eu. Și această viață nu tinde spre adevăr și istorie, ci spre poveste, mit sau literatură.”¹ (“I am among those miserable people who lived their literature, used it and burned it. For me life is not and cannot be anymore what I actually lived, but what I dreamed, thought and created myself. And this life doesn't ask for truth and history but myth and literature”).

This is the credo of Ion D. Sârbu, the great revelation of the Romanian literature since 1989, both for specialists and readers. He was part of the Literary Circle in Sibiu, novelist and a famous essay- writer.

Born in Petrila, Ion D. Sârbu fought unsuccessfully to push his work in order to be read by the great public, most of his novels being not published before 1989. However, his figure became central when his books of different genres appeared such as *Farewell to Europe!*, *The Wolf and the Cathedral*, *The Journal of a Journalist without Journal I, II*, *Letters to God*, *Crossing Curtain*, books that established new ideas in his work, as the author was known as one whose formula was allegorical.

¹ Ion D. Sârbu, *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal* (The Journal of a Journalist Without Journal), vol. I, Ed. Scrisul Românesc, Craiova, 1991, p. 27

His prose includes two novels, *Farewell to Europe!* and *The Wolf and the Cathedral* as well as two novels for children *The Dance of the Bear*- novel for children and grandparents and *Why is Mother Crying*- novel for children and parents.

It should be also mentioned that both the writer and his complex work have the privilege of being well received by readers. The two novels *Farewell to Europe!* And *The Wolf and the Cathedral* oscillates between irony and sarcasm, Daniel- Enache Cristea confessing that 'laughter and tears, comic and tragic merge in a completely synthetic prose'. *Farewell to Europe!* is in fact an amazing construction, carefully written and well articulated in its components. The two parts gather a typical narrative strategy in order that the logic and what is common is replaced by dogmatism and an alienating spirit.

It seems difficult or almost impossible to characterise the epic formula of the writer, because this novel can be considered an allegory, a parable and an irony, an essay bearing reminiscences of the journal and of the fable. Nicolae Oprea added that what is essential in his narrative is the digression that produces the impression of a giant structure. An opinion about the value of his work cannot exist only after reading the second part. As a result it can be seen that the novel takes some data, figures and elements belonging to the diary, proposing a fictional area similar to the anti-utopias of the XX th century, a fact noted by Eugen Simion: „Romanul este o reflecție epică despre condiția intelectualului într-o lume meschină, complice, fanariotă”.² (“The novel is a reflection about the condition of the intellectual in a bad, planarity world”).

The relationship between the diary and the novel itself is evident because both the author of the diary and the novelist has a look upon the same history and recreate the same fantasies.

However the strategy exploited by Ion D. Sârbu gives much credibility to his writings, so that we can say that the autobiographical narrative has what his novel lacks, the feeling of authenticity.

In his approach Ion D. Sârbu combines his autobiography with the diary, so that we have the feeling that he is writing for someone, that someone being above all the literary chronicle.

The plot of the novel consists in the echo triggered by an incident that would have been trivial in a normal world, but in this case it has major effects, causing an irremediable disaster. Candid's laughter is the one that undermines the inertia of the system and the novel's plot is

² Eugen Simion, *Romanul eseistic* (The Essay-like Novel), în *Literatorul*, nr.38-39/1992, p.8

treated both in the comic and tragic register. The text draws the background of this alienated regime, populated by emblematic characters, without feelings.

The writer uses the strategy of the parable to parable so that the proportions and details of the reality are blurred. The novel consists of essays, elements that have philosophical origins, whose meanings are analyzed from various angles. It can be easily seen that the substance of the book focuses on installing and removing the communist utopia.

The narrator blends reality with imagination, with sources of fiction in an open and heterogeneous discourse. The events presented increase the conflict of the novel, the narrative discourse takes a hyperbolic turn and plenty of information is added to support his ideas.

The author uses in his writings the radiography of a disconcerting reality, in which characters are presented from an organic, biologic and physiologic point of view revealing the capacities of the human being.

Farewell to Europe is considered by critics the second allegorical novel in Romanian literature, it takes the parable from *Ieroglifica History*, the allegory being accessible, so that we can easily recognize that Isarlik is Craiova, Oltenia is Alutania, Genopolis is the name for Cluj, Cibinium is Cluj, Silvania is Transylvania.

Regarding the characters their names matches with reality, the Professor is Lucian Blaga, Sârbu's mentor, Tutila the second is the careerist Pavel Apostol, Olimpia is Elisabeta Sârbu, the author's wife, Ion Negoitescu appears as Nemo or Ramn. We also noted that the main character, Candid and the writer- Ion D. Sârbu have a common identity map.

These characters live their lives in a grotesque world, full of nightmares and not far from hell, so as the route chosen by Candid is similar to Dante's journey through Hell. The epic as well as the characters are minimized so that the heroes become mere messengers of the principle of good and evil: Osmanescu, Ilderim, Tutila, Caftangiu, Omar Omarovici are on one side and Candid Dezideriu, his wise wife- Olimpia, Marin and Florica, Brutus Burra- the driver are on the other side.

Ion D. Sârbu's characters are forced by their creator to carry a masque due to the ideology they are forced to join, which provokes laughter and participation of the readers.

The Communist world is described in a descriptive style, both trilling and satirical, with the use or I might say abuse of synonyms and antonyms, stylistic methods that support the writer's ideas.

In his prose Ion D. Sârbu is a master of irony and of ironic expression, which he confesses in the preface of *The Ark of Good Hope*, „prietenii mei de o viață cunosc apetența-mi temperamentală «mama mea a fost cea mai teribilă povestitoare din Valea Jiului» pentru bârfa gratuită, verbul vesel și acidulat, pentru autoironia păgubos-țărănească: ei știu că, din motive foarte, foarte obiective, drolaicele aventuri ale propriei mele vieți le-am cheltuit povestindu-le, le-am ars sub forme de râs cotidian, acel râs petrilean de care nu m-am putut niciodată lipsi”.³ (“My friends know that I’ve got a great talent for humour, gossip, irony, being a master of ironic expression as my mother was the most terrible story teller from Jiului Valley and I spent most of the time telling funny adventures of my own life as I couldn’t get rid of that petrilean humor”).

Referring to the complex narrative resources, Eugenia Tudor Anton says that „umorul naratorului e spumos, ironia atotprezentă oxigenează fraza, iar sarcasmul tensionează lectura în acest roman unde nu acțiunea, cât dialogurile ori tiradele numeroaselor personaje dau culoare și mai ales, comentariul savuros, scăpărător, mordant, expresie, uneori, a disperării.”⁴ ‘the narrator’s humour is sparkling, the irony oxygenates the sentence, the sarcasm amplify the reading in this novel where the characters have an important role as well as the mordant comments, sometimes expression of despair’.

In his approach, Ion D. Sârbu combines the serious tone of his writing with irony and sometimes a spontaneous twist of phrase. The names mentioned by him as well as the events drawn from the author’s personal life are important elements that define the character of his autobiographical novel.

If we compare the novel to the journal, it can be easily seen that the writer defines the formula of the diary which is not diary, „Îmi dau seama, tot mai des și mai dureros, că rezultatele experienței acestor caiete nu prezintă nici o valoare obiectivă de comunicare. Nu sunt nici literatură și nici filosofie. Nici critică și nici meditație sau jurnal literar”.⁵ (“I realise more often and more painfully that the results of the experiences of these books does not have any objective value of communication”).

³ Ion D. Sârbu, *Adio, Europa! (Farewell to Europe!)*, Ed. Corint, București, 2006, p.573

⁴ Eugenia Tudor-Anton, „Despărțirea de Marx”(The Separation from Marx), în *Romania literară*, an 1993, nr.21, 2-8 iunie, p.8

⁵ Ion D. Sârbu, *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal (The Journal of a Journalist Without Journal)* I, vol. I, Ed. Scrisul Romanesc, Craiova, 1991, p. 266

Ion D. Sârbu is not selfish in using vocabulary, as Nicolae Manolescu stated his prose is made up of different registers. „Autorul nu-și alege vorbele și nu face economie” (“The writer does not choose his words, does not go easily on them”).

In his novel *Farewell to Europe* the writer makes a sort of a puzzle, in which the character's speeches lead to a pamphlet, resonating with the motto from Orwell, standing at the beginning of his book: „Pamfletul trebuie să fie forma literară a unei epoci cum este cea a noastră. Trăim într-un veac unde pasiunile politice sunt vii, unde mijloacele de liberă expresie devin din ce în ce mai rare. Pentru a umple lacunele Istoriei, pamfletul este mijlocul ideal.”⁶ (“The pamphlet must be the literary form of an age as ours. We live in an age where political passions are alive, where the means of free expression are becoming increasingly rare. To fill those gaps that exist in history, the pamphlet is the answer”).

On the one hand the writer is the owner of a prose that talks about taboos, about what hasn't been written so far, grateful to the moral law derived from his Father, always written with capital letter and his mentor Lucian Blaga.

On the other hand Ion D. Sârbu is a director that puts its characters on a scene, presents their speech full of revolt, so that his prose become a safe place where allegory and irony meet.

From a structural point of view, each chapter is preceded by a summary, which can be an evidence of the fact that emphasis is not placed on the epic. His prose is populated by different kinds of funny sayings, ironical remarks such as: “I only know that I don't know anything”. Most of his quotes are borrowed from his mentor, Lucian Blaga”.

Sârbu's novel is charged with a satirical dimension, amplified by his character's odd laughter: „Sunt nevoit să admit că diavolul există și că el e cel cu care stau cel mai des de vorbă. În curând am să-l văd, nu ar fi exclus să devenim nedespărțiți prieteni. (I have to admit that evil exists and he is the one with whom I talk most of the time. Soon I shall see him, and maybe we shall become friends forever.)

Unlike Caragiale's carnival, Ion d. Sârbu's ends tragically with the death of his wife, Olimpia. However his writings are full of contradictory formulas, which make his texts to be seen not as some literary works but as texts taken from a subjective perspective. The way his novels are structured does not recommend Ion D. Sârbu as an omniscient narrator, situated above his heroes. Its position is not safe; he is both the narrator of the text and the actor as well, each of

⁶ George Orwell, *The Collected Essays*, 1968, vol. II, p.285

these instances proving the author's lucidity. For example the main character, Candid Deziderius does not only tell what happens but also adds comments according to his predisposition.

Each event is analyzed, as it becomes an excuse for what will happen. In such a world they are aware of the carnivalesque nature of the society they live in, a society where values have distorted proportions, hierarchies are overturned and the truth is relative.

His writings are thus a tool for clarifying the contradictions of this world, dominated by the communist regime that shadows the society of those times, as well as Romanian literature and culture.

His second novel, the dystopian novel *The Wolf and the Cathedral* is based on a fact also stated in his correspondence: : „Într-o noapte de februarie 1951, un lup tânăr, singuratic, deosebit de frumos și puternic, coborî pe Feleac și, traversând cetatea, ajunse până în fața Catedralei, unde se opri. Ninsese proaspăt. Spre dimineață, niște sergenți au tras în el. Și l-au omorât. La autopsie a reieșit că nu era deloc flămând. Și cu toții, cutremurați, ne-am întreat: «De ce a coborât? Pentru ce a părăsit pădurea în care era în siguranță? De ce s-a oprit chiar în fața Catedralei? »”.⁷ (“One night, in February 1951, a young wolf, lonely and very beautiful and strong, came down the Feleac, crossed the fortress, reached the Cathedral, where he stopped. It has just snowed outside. In the morning some soldiers killed him. The autopsy revealed that he wasn't hungry. And we all wondered: Why did he come down? Why did he leave the forest where he was protected? Why did he stop in front of the cathedral?”)

This novel combines the initiation and the crisis in an epic space that lacks digressions but is dominated by symbols. The writer borrows symbols from mythology but also from the philosophy of Lucian Blaga. In this narrative we can find signs and symbols which make characters move through symbols and myths.

Thus, as Alex. Stefanescu says: „ne putem lăsa în voia plăcerii de a citi un text nervos și plin de idei, care mai este și o demonstrație de artă, întrucât Ion D. Sârbu intră fără ezitare în rolul de bărbat tânăr, încă în formare, capabil încă să se mire de ceea ce descoperă în jur.”⁸ (“We have the pleasure of reading a nervous text, full of ideas, which is also a demonstration of art, as Ion D. Sârbu takes the role of a young man, able to wonder about what he finds out around him”).

⁷ Ion D. Sârbu, *Lupul și catedrala*, (The Wolf and the Cathedral) Ed. Casa Școalelor, București, 1995, p.3

⁸ Alex. Ștefănescu, „Ion D. Sârbu-La o nouă lectură” (Ion D. Sarbu- A New Lecture), în *România Literară*, nr.26, 1999, p.1

The same feeling and tension is found in the substance of his novels for children, the pleasure of reading them is hand in hand with the pleasure of writing such novels. Roland Barthes in the *Pleasure of a Text* discusses about the relationship between pleasure and boredom, saying that the latter is just the delight seen from the banks of pleasure, because a text simply read for pleasure is just as the flight of a fly in a room.

Ion D. Sârbu does not only write but also thinks about his writings and how are they going to be tasted by readers. In his writings for children he changed his narrative strategy, replacing the dialogue and the long discourses with funny and interesting stories.

In conclusion the narrative approach and strategies used by Ion D. Sârbu in his work are designed to enhance convergence of literary genres, in this way giving us a convincing picture of the metamorphoses of the epic in the post-war Romanian literature.

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