

ION D. SÎRBU: THE THEATRICAL TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE BIOGRAPHY

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*Abstract: Ion D. Sîrbu (1919-1989) is perhaps one of the most unexpectedly fascinating authors to emerge from the “dark ages” represented by the forty years of Romanian Communist Dictatorship. His posthumous novels – *Adio, Europa!* and *Lupul și catedrala* – together with his exceptional *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal* and his intense correspondence, bring forth the image of a writer who chooses to scatter biographical elements in his fictional worlds and fictional components in his autobiographical works, to the extent to which any complete retracing of the “real” Ion D. Sîrbu becomes a game of mirrors. The paper focuses on these theatrical devices employed by Ion D. Sîrbu in order to dissociate between “life as I actually lived it” and “life as I imagined it”. As understood here, Ion D. Sîrbu appears as both a “director” and an “actor” of a complex theatrical arrangement that encompasses his life, his literary works and, equally important, the overall structure of the political system of oppression and the ensuing implications for the lives of the individuals.*

Keywords: biography, autobiography, theatrical, dissimulation, buffoon

1. Introduction: The *theatrical* contradictions of Ion D. Sîrbu’s writings

The case of the author Ion D. Sîrbu (1919-1989) is without a doubt an extremely interesting one, because his destiny, synonymous with the socio-political destiny of Eastern Europe, Romania in particular, throughout the second half of the 20th Century, is a revealing testimony of the hardships endured by individuals behind the Iron Curtain and, at the same time, a striking account of a personal “battle” for moral integrity and self-affirmation, in times when these fundamental traits were frowned upon by an oppressive political system that forcibly installed uniformity and demanded obedience. Son of a miner from Petrila, a miners colony from Transylvania, student of Liviu Rusu and Lucian Blaga, and later, for a brief time, teaching assistant at the University of Cluj, founding member, together with I. Negoïtescu, Radu Stanca, Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, Deliu Petroiu et al., of the literary group “Cercul literar de la Sibiu”¹ [The Sibiu Literary Cenacle], soldier on the Eastern Front during World War II, member of the Communist party in its early clandestine phase, theatre reviewer, political prisoner, miner, playwright, novelist, literary secretary, dissident writer, unpublished author, fervent opposer of the Communist dictatorship, Ion D. Sîrbu represented one of the greatest revelations of Romanian Literature immediately after the fall of the Communist Regime, in December 1989. Alongside Nicolae Steinhardt’s *Jurnalul fericirii* [The Diary of Happiness],

¹ “Cercul literar de la Sibiu” was a literary group which officially came into existence in 1943, after the publishing of its “manifesto” – “O scrisoare către d. Eugen Lovinescu a Cercului literar de la Sibiu” [A Letter to Mr. Eugen Lovinescu from The Sibiu Literary Cenacle] – in the magazine *Viața*, issue 743 (May 13th 1943). The members of the Cenacle were students of the “King Ferdinand” University of Cluj, at the time in exile in Sibiu because of the war. For further details see, for instance, Petru Poantă, *Cercul literar de la Sibiu. Introducere în fenomenul originar* (Cluj Napoca, Clusium Publishing House, 1997).

Ion D. Sîrbu's posthumous works (two novels, his atypical "journal" and his vivid and numerous letters) constitute the only examples of "desk drawer writings" in Romanian Literature, which is to say literary works prohibited from being published by the censorship apparatus of the Communist Regime.

The reasons for the "so very empty desk drawers of Romanian writers"² in the aftermath of the five decade long Communist dictatorship have been investigated by critics in recent years³, and in this context of unmet expectations, Sîrbu's posthumous works – *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal* [The Journal of Journalist without a Journal] (volume I, "Glosse" in 1992, volume II, "Exerciții de luciditate", in 1993), and the novels *Lupul și catedrala* [The Wolf and The Cathedral] (1995) and *Adio, Europa!* [Farewell, Europe!] (volume I, 1992, volume II, 1993), as well as his correspondence (the volumes *Traversarea cortinei. Corespondență cu Ion Negoitescu, Virgil Nemoianu, Mariana Șora* [Crossing the Curtain. Correspondence with Ion Negoitescu, Virgil Nemoianu, Mariana Șora], 1994; *Printr-un tunel. Corespondență cu Horia Stanca* [Through a Tunnel. Correspondence with Horia Stanca], 1997; *Scrisori către bunul Dumnezeu* [Letters to the Good Lord], 1998; the "epistolary" novel *Iarna bolnavă de cancer* [The Cancerous Winter], 1998, and many other letters published in different literary magazines – constitute a surprise, not only with respect to the overall relationships between the Romanian authors and the political system of oppression, but also with respect to the status of Ion D. Sîrbu himself within the canon of Romanian Literature.

Although a published author during his lifetime as well, Sîrbu's anthumous works – his three volumes of plays: *Teatru* [Theatre], 1976; *Arca bunei speranțe* [The Ark of Good Hope], 1982; *Bieții comedianți* [The Poor Comedians], 1985; two volumes of short stories: *Povestiri petrilene* [Stories from Petrila], 1973 and *Șoarecele B și alte povestiri* [The Mouse B and other stories], 1983, and two novels for children: *De ce plânge mama?* [Why Is Mother Crying?], 1973 and *Dansul ursului* [The Dance of the Bear], 1983 – only managed to gain him the reputation of a "minor" author, and these works published during his lifetime, more or less overlooked by critics at the time of their issuing, were reevaluated only after the posthumous publication of his "desk drawer" manuscripts. Critics unanimously agree that there are great qualitative discrepancies between Ion D. Sîrbu's anthumous writings and his posthumous writings and that he truly is, in Nicolae Oprea's words, an author "who didn't manage to impose his value during his lifetime"⁴.

In the light of these discoveries – and through his posthumous works, Sîrbu is indeed an exceptional discovery – exegetes rightfully speak of "two Ion D. Sîrbu": "in its entirety, the anthumous oeuvre (plays, short stories and novels) presents the portrait of an author, while the posthumous oeuvre (novels and especially his correspondence) reveals a completely

² Monica Lovinescu, *Insula Șerpilor. Unde scurte VI*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 1996, p. 355 (Our translation, E.W. Unless otherwise mentioned, all the ensuing quotations from works originally written in Romanian belong to the author of this paper).

³ Thorough analyses of the relationships between the Romanian authors and the political system of oppression during the Communist Regime, of the subsequent transformations of the literary works written during Communism, and, consequently, of the valorization and revalorization of these works after the fall of the dictatorship, are offered, for example, by Sanda Cordoș' study, *Literatura între revoluție și reacțiune. Problema crizei în literatura română și rusă a secolului XX* (second edition, Cluj-Napoca, Apostrof Publishing House, 2002), or by Eugen Negrici's study, *Literatura română sub comunism. Proza*, (Bucharest, Pro Foundation Publishing House, 2006).

⁴ Nicolae Oprea, *Ion D. Sîrbu și timpul romanului*, Pitești, Paralela 45 Publishing House, 2000, p. 159.

different writer.”⁵ Another critic, Bogdan Crețu, observes: “One of the most surprising discoveries after 1989 was represented by the desk drawer writings of Ion D. Sîrbu, a member of the Sibiu Literary Cenacle, whose profile, as shaped by the works published during his lifetime, did not permit or deserve encomiastic appreciation.”⁶ We are therefore confronted with an author whose life and works permit, demand even, a *theatrical* approach.

If further investigated, this disparity between the “two distinct authors” can offer not only a comprehensive outlook on the dissimulations, transformations, “masks” of his literary works (which account for a *theatrical* trajectory), but it can also provide a complete account of the biography of this “chameleonic” author. Not surprisingly, Sîrbu is an author which not only “camouflages” his writings, but also “forges” his biography, to the point to which a complete “portrait of the artist” and his literary works is only possible *a posteriori* and it proves to be a *work in progress*, as biographical elements are continuously added⁷ and there are still unpublished manuscripts (different letters, for example). From this *theatrical* perspective, Ion D. Sîrbu’s destiny and that of his literary works are interconnected to the point to which they become inseparable. Understanding Sîrbu’s *theatrical* relationship to his biography – the modalities in which he chooses to interpret and present events – will in turn shed light on the theatrical transformations of his works, whether anthumous or posthumous. In the midst of a dehumanizing political regime, Sîrbu opposes the overall falsity of the dictatorial society, refuses to comply with its grotesque rules and chooses to deploy *theatrical devices* as means of individual and aesthetic survival. As understood here, *theatricality* is the core dimension of both Ion D. Sîrbu’s life and his literary works.

Therefore, the present paper is less concerned with accurately tracing Sîrbu’s biography⁸ and focuses primarily on highlighting the *theatrical* dimensions of the author’s autobiographical accounts, the ways in which biographical elements are *theatrically mystified* by Sîrbu and the modalities through which the *memoirs* and the *autobiography* overlap and converge towards a *theatrical fiction*, meant to replace the biographical truth. “The truth about myself is unknown even to me”⁹, and my *authentic* portrait, the author implies, should not be sought in the “series of errors lived in horror”¹⁰ that made up my destiny, but in the way I chose to perceive and *interpret* them: “For me, life is not, it can no longer be the one I actually lived – but the one I dreamt, imagined, created myself. And this life does not aspire towards the historical truth, but towards story, myth and literature.”¹¹

⁵ Ovidiu Pecican, “Al doilea Sîrbu”, in *Verso*, year 4, no. 71, 16-31 October 2009, p. 9.

⁶ Bogdan Crețu, *Utopia negativă în literatura română*, Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House, 2008, pages. 200-201.

⁷ Ion D. Sîrbu’s file from the archives of the Secret Police has recently been brought to light and analyzed by Clara Mareș in *Zidul de sticlă. Ion D. Sîrbu în arhivele securității* (Bucharest, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2011). The seven volumes (1680 pages) of this file that emphasize the battle between the audacious author and the fierce political system represent a valuable “puzzle piece” in retracing Sîrbu’s destiny.

⁸ There are excellent monographs of Ion D. Sîrbu’s life and work which can be consulted for further reference: Nicolae Oprea, *Ion D. Sîrbu și timpul romanului* (Pitești, Paralela 45 Publishing House, 2000); Antonio Patraș, *Ion D. Sîrbu – De veghe în noaptea totalitară* (Iași, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University Publishing House); Daniel Cristea-Enache, *Un om din Est: studiu monografic* (Bucharest, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2006).

⁹ Ion D. Sîrbu, *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal*, volume II, *Roman politic*, editor Elisabeta Sîrbu, preface by Marin Sorescu, Craiova, Scrisul Românesc Publishing House, 1993, p. 297.

¹⁰ Ion D. Sîrbu, *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal*, volume I, *Glosse*, editor Marius Ghica, Craiova, Scrisul Românesc Publishing House, 1991, p. 34.

¹¹ *Idem.*, pages 81-82.

2. Ion D. Sîrbu and the spectacle of life

As mentioned in the previous section, Ion D. Sîrbu's complete and authentic portrait has only posthumously begun to be "reconstructed", from the many puzzle pieces scattered in his works, in his personal accounts, in his letters or in the files of the Secret police.

From the descriptions of those who knew him, fellow students, colleagues from the Sibiu Literary Cenacle, former students or mere acquaintances, the image of a gifted, amusing, histrionic storyteller emerges. Always ready to entertain, he apparently didn't miss any opportunity to tell a story, most often than not meant to emphasize his histrionic nature. Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, to give just one example, speaks about Sîrbu's "innate tendency towards play, even farce"¹², about his play "of exuberance" which "was an amusing and refreshing performance, first of all for himself: he was the most Dionysian of us all, like a young satyr tasting Pan's exhilaration"¹³.

A gifted storyteller, Ion D. Sîrbu willingly transformed his life in a theatre performance, always succeeding in capturing the theatrical potential of any event, no matter how banal, and using it as a pretext for a *mise en scène*. Simple, inessential events (like buying live poultry at the local market, for instance), or even serious, dramatic events (like his war front experience), when described by Sîrbu, are implicitly "directed" in order to speculate their theatrical potential and determine the "spectator" (listener or reader) to react. A self-proclaimed "buffoon", Sîrbu uses his talent as a storyteller not only to captivate his interlocutors – he considers the *dialogue* with his friends or colleagues to be "an existential need"¹⁴ – but also as a weapon¹⁵ against the falsity and imposture of a society perverted by the Communist dictatorship: "*Faire l'idiot devant les imbeciles* – this is the *sine qua non* condition of surviving here."¹⁶ Sîrbu possessed an "extraordinary inventiveness"¹⁷ which allowed him to permanently "stage" all events, whether autobiographical or otherwise, and he did this not to mislead¹⁸, but to produce a strong dramatic effect and thus to extract from each event "the essence of the *authentic*"¹⁹.

Ion D. Sîrbu never wrote his autobiography. It remained a desideratum which was always postponed, both because other literary projects seemed more urgent, and also as a form of protection: "I am alive only because I keep saying *urbi et orbi*, that I no longer have a

¹² Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, "<<Măștile>> lui Ion D. Sîrbu", in *Caiete critice*, no. 10-12/1995, p. 68.

¹³ *Idem.*, p. 70.

¹⁴ Ion D. Sîrbu, *Traversarea cortinei. Corespondență cu Virgil Nemoianu, Ion Negoițescu și Mariana Șora*, Timișoara, Editura de Vest, 1993, p. 333.

¹⁵ In *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal* he writes: "Mockery, irony, disdain, gossip, derision, laughing in the face of trouble etc. – I consider them to be the secret weapons of the under-privileged." (*Jurnalul...*, vol. I, p. 9).

¹⁶ Ion D. Sîrbu, *Printr-un tunel* (correspondence), editor Dumitru Velea, Petroșani, Ed. Fundației culturale "Ion D. Sîrbu", 1997, p. 82.

¹⁷ George Popescu, "Ion D. Sîrbu – ereticul corsar", in Nicolae Coande, Ioan Lascu (editors), *Caietele Colocviului Național "Ion D. Sîrbu". Craiova, 27 iunie 2009*, foreword by Ioan Lascu, Craiova, Universitaria Publishing House, 2009, p. 147.

¹⁸ Ștefan Aug. Doinaș observes: "Always capable of farce, mockery, sarcasm, Ion D. Sîrbu was never capable to deceive. (...) his tendency towards inventing situations, which were meant to express more than the events themselves, determined him to some times depict events in a blatant way." ("<<Măștile>> lui...", in *op. cit.*, p. 69).

¹⁹ Jeana Morărescu, "Starea răsturnată a <<paradoxului>> Cioran", in *Caiete critice*, no.10-12/1995., p. 79.

memory, that I have forgotten everything.”²⁰ This “rejection” of the biography can also be explained by the fact that “life as actually lived”, with all its unfortunate events, is considered by Ion D. Sîrbu to be less important than the “imagined life”: “I am incapable to write my memoirs (I am an oral storyteller par excellence), they would have become my best unwritten novel.”²¹ In Sîrbu’s opinion, his life cannot be much different from those of his contemporaries, as there are all subjected to the same hardships, they all face the same problems. Therefore, he chooses to *interpret* all biographical events with sharp irony, primarily directed at himself, and these mystifications of the biography are humorous, meant to emphasize the *ridiculousness* of the existence. Here is an illustrative example extracted from *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal*: “According to *Limpi*, I am a writer which always makes his debut (unsuccessfully but with some successes), a socialist without an ideology, a Christian without a religion, a philosopher without a system or memory, a tolerated semi-citizen, a Transylvanian rejected by Cluj but not fully assimilated in Oltenia, an Austro-Hungarian Romanian, an anti-Stalinist in love with Russian civilization, a Communist contemporary with butterflies and Joseph Arimateia, an East-ethic aesthetician, a liberal in love with his chains, a former Don Juan currently in love with his old woman, a proletarian full of lumpen-diplomas, a miner without a lamp, a mini Socrates who has never seen Athens and isn’t able to procure hemlock, a child’s mind in an old body (...) a poor sergeant in an army that has been retreating for the past 40 years, a zoon anti-politikon, a monkey of the Good Lord, a piece of shit in the rain, a...”²². This short characterization will be “borrowed” to the character Mefisto from the posthumous novel *Lupul și catedrala*²³.

From this self proclaimed position of “buffoon of his generation”²⁴, Ion D. Sîrbu understands to always speak the truth, regardless of the risks, and in order to carry out such a task, one has to be a lucid observer of life in all its aspects. For Ion D. Sîrbu, life is essentially *theatrical* (“nothing is possible without theatre”²⁵), it is a *spectacle* in which he is both an actor and a lucid spectator: “The truth is that, apart from some small inconveniences, in relation to the Theatre of the World, I have, here, a **orchestra seat**: I read and think like an expert observer, I can feel the actors, the drama, the tragedy: I amuse myself, I laugh, I cry, and in the end, in the most Wallachian way possible, I exclaim: indeed, all is vanity – and this life is nothing more than a Shadow and a Dream.”²⁶

The fundamentally theatrical human existence, if unspoiled by external, forcefully imposed masks alien to its nature, can become a splendid *spectacle*, worthy of being contemplated. In the circumstances of an oppressive political system however, people are forced to abandon their natural “role” and as a result, the entire human spectacle becomes *negatively theatrical*, it is transformed in a *spectacle of derision*, “a schizophrenic ball”, “a

²⁰ Ion D. Sîrbu, *Printr-un tunel*, p. 82.

²¹ Ion D. Sîrbu, *Traversarea...*, p. 74.

²² Ion D. Sîrbu, *Jurnalul...*, vol I, pp. 149-150.

²³ See Ion D. Sîrbu, *Lupul și catedrala*, editor Maria Graciov, Bucharest, Casa Școalelor Publishing House, 1995, pages 223-224.

²⁴ Ion D. Sîrbu, according to Elvira Sorohan, “sets himself as the exponent of his generation, as if responsible for their faith and the sense and essence of their exceptional human existence.” (Elvira Sorohan, *Ion D. Sîrbu sau Suferința spiritului captiv*, Iași, Editura “Junimea”, 1999, p. 30).

²⁵ Ion D. Sîrbu, *Scrisori către bunul Dumnezeu*, editor Ion Vartic, Cluj, Biblioteca Apostrof Publishing House, p. 28.

²⁶ Ion D. Sîrbu, *Traversarea...*, p. 385.

fair of delirium and generalized thoughtlessness”²⁷. In *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal* he notes: “<<Acting>> means playing for the theatre. But I seek (and I can’t find even in the extended English-Romanian dictionary) the phrase <<acting out>> which I sometimes find in psychology or sociology studies. I am however thinking of the phrase <<acting in>> which I don’t think exists, but should be invented by us, here. <<Acting in>>, meaning acting on the inside, the carefully hidden interpretation, the willing inhibition of <<acting out>>.”²⁸ In this “monde à l’envers”, the individuals act in a “compulsory theatre performance”: “it is not the Caesar that offers *panem et circenses* to the people, but it is the people that, in its spare time, offers the Caesar a non-stop circenses”.²⁹

When Ion D. Sîrbu assumes the role of “buffoon”, he does so wholly in accordance with the coordinates of this negatively theatrical social structure: it is his “moral obligation” to do everything in his power to convey the truth to his contemporaries and “give testimony” in front of the future generations. Given the circumstances of a fierce and unequal “battle” between the abusive acts of the political system and the nature impulse towards self-affirmation, Sîrbu believes that only he who understands the “theatrical mechanisms” of the world will be able to emerge as a winner. Therefore, Ion D. Sîrbu chooses to meticulously orchestrate, *direct*, his entire existence: not only biographical data, but his system of beliefs as well. This willing resort to dissimulation techniques and theatrical instruments has a double purpose: it allows the preserving of individual dignity and manages to convey, in a world defined by falsehood, an *authentic* and *sincere* message.

The author’s innate talent for *storytelling* and *dissimulation* – the assumed position of “buffoon” – which on the one hand amuses, but on the other always speaks the truth – the tendency towards a benign “forging” of the biography meant to emphasize its theatrical dimension, determine us to perceive Ion D. Sîrbu as an attentive and lucid “stage director” of both his biography and his fictional works. From this *theatrical* perspective, Sîrbu’s entire literary project is revealed as one in which all “accidents” are controlled and anticipated, the conscious result of “performing” which provided Ion D. Sîrbu with the necessary means to survive with dignity, to preserve his lucidity, to keep his friends close, to not give in to the pressures of the oppressive political system and most importantly, to *testify* about “what happens at the bottom of the Athanor of our history”³⁰.

In retrospect, “the two Ion D. Sîrbu”, the anthumous and posthumous literary works, the biographical events and their autobiographical theatrical deformations, all manage to reveal a comprehensive portrait of a Romanian writer who managed to become “the most incorruptible mind of his generation”³¹.

²⁷ Ion D. Sîrbu, *Jurnalul...*, vol. II, p. 19.

²⁸ Ion D. Sîrbu, *Jurnalul...*, vol. I, p. 129.

²⁹ Ion D. Sîrbu, *Jurnalul...*, vol II, p. 184.

³⁰ Ion D. Sîrbu, *Traversarea...*, p. 257.

A fragment from the eulogy delivered by Ștefan Aug. Doinaș at Sîrbu’s funeral. In Clara Mareș, *Zidul de Sticlă. Ion D. Sîrbu în arhivele Securității*, preface by Antonio Patraș, Bucharest, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2011, p. 358.

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