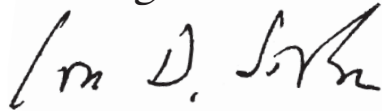


The Failed Recovery of Dissidence Literature in Romania

ANCA URSA I. D. Sîrbu—An Exemplary Case

*“I remain suspended
between a generation who
wants to forget me and
another who has no interest
in noting that I was born.”*



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Coordinates of the Romanian Literary Dissidence

UPON THE fall of communism in Romania, everyone was awaiting the emergence of a sizable desk drawer literature, evidence of the resistance through culture during totalitarianism. It is known that Romania is the only country in the former Soviet bloc where there was no samizdat (Linz and Stepan 1996, 352–353). The Czech Republic or East Germany used to be models in this respect, as copies of books written by hand or typed were circulating among intellectuals in the first case and via numerous illegal publications in the former GDR. There were also other forms of samizdat, with an identity-ethnic character among the Russian Hebrew community (Smola 2011, 63), or discursive-undermining for the communist ideology, with movements like Seminar and Synthesis in Bulgaria (Lutzkanova-Vassileva 2009, 133). As there was no internal movement of resistance and solidarity, Romanian literary dissidence—in the

country, not in exile—manifested itself either through desk drawer writings or through encoded subversive elements, which could pass censorship.¹ Although the collective imagination envisaged hundreds of books that were to come out of the drawers of known writers, Romanians were surprised to find that the '90s saw only 4–5 volumes of fiction written in the communist period: A. E. Baconski's *Biserica neagră* (The black church), Ion Eremia's *Gulliver în Țara Minciunilor* (Gulliver in the Land of Lies), I. D. Sîrbu's *Adio, Europa!* (Good bye, Europe!) and *Lupul și catedrala* (The wolf and the cathedral). None of these novels knew a runaway success, aesthetically or as a document of the time. Although the reasons may be diverse, we will try to identify the possible causes of the public resistance to I. D. Sîrbu's novels, a representative case for the category in discussion.

Ion Dezideriu Sîrbu's biography (1919–1989) is not much different from that of other “enemies of the regime.” His academic debut in 1947 at the University of Cluj, as an assistant to Liviu Rusu, was discontinued definitively two years later, when he refused to sign a denunciation against Lucian Blaga, his mentor and doctoral thesis advisor. After some provisional jobs in various places in the country and in Bucharest, he came to the attention of the Securitate again in 1956, suspected of collaboration with anti-revolutionaries in Budapest. An aggravating episode, his repeated refusal to inform on his friend and colleague in the Sibiu Literary Circle, Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, got him seven years in jail, followed by house arrest in Craiova and an informative tracking docket from the Securitate until the end of his life, in September 1989.²

Although his dramatic destiny and posthumous writings have aroused admiration and praise from important Romanian intellectuals of the last two decades,³ we cannot speak about a real public success of his anticommunist novels. *Adio, Europa!* has 3 printed editions—two at Cartea Românească (1992–1993 and 1997) and one at Corint (2005)—and a free one in electronic format at LiterNet. *Lupul și catedrala*, the other novel, was published in only one edition, at Casa Școalelor (1995). In what follows we will not talk about the reception and the role of Sîrbu's memorial writings—that is, *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal* (Diary of a journalist without a journal) and three volumes of correspondence—but we will focus exclusively on the reception of his anti-totalitarian novels within the paradigm of the recovery of desk drawer literature.

Canons and Literary Generations

THEORIES OF reception, derived from the analysis of canon evolution, are a first key to understanding why Sîrbu's books fall in the category of mediocre literature. Harold Bloom highlights the crisis of the Western canon, altered by excessive politicization/ideologization at the expense of aesthe-

tics (Bloom 1994, 441, 527). The readers of Romanian literature went through a prolonged identity crisis, when the canon was subordinated to the demands of socialist realism, and manifested a reluctance to everything associated with ideology since 1989. Even if Sîrbu's Romanian discourse includes ideology at thematic levels only as a deconstruction of communism, as anti-ideology, it seems that the prefix cannot counterbalance the semantic load of the root, triggering a reaction of rejection from readers.

The public's political experience is not negligible at all, being either immediate or mediated by the deluge of written confessions after the Revolution, made by former political prisoners. Surely, until the publication of Sîrbu's novels, prison testimonies already had time to establish hierarchies and achieve publishing success, with top books like *Închisorile mele* (My prisons), by Ion Ioanid, or *Jurnalul fericirii* (The happiness diary) by N. Steinhardt. The horizon of expectation has no place to grow and the depicted violence of the communist anti-utopia does not raise the same echo in a supersaturated imaginary. If the parabolic novels in a political key that slipped past the censorship in the '70s and '80s were a long-awaited breath of fresh air, the post-revolutionary literature of this kind got nowhere. Allusions and indirect metaphors are insufficient doses when trying to heal through reading the traumas of a beleaguered generation, at both social and individual level.

Another important theorist of reception, Robert Escarpit, theorized the "Generation Syntony" that generates a crisis of the writer, with the decrease of the influence on the general public opinion that consecrated him (Escarpit 1970, 12). Such a perspective would justify the position of the inglorious literary writer, if the work published during one's lifetime had brought literary fame, but this was not the case. The real readership should have been born after the advent of the posthumous writings. At one time Sîrbu himself was aware of his status of *persona non grata* with any possible reader: "I remain suspended between a generation who wants to forget me and another who has no interest in noting that I was born" (Sîrbu 1998b, 151).

Why is his generation so interested in forgetting him? Obviously, he refers primarily to the literary generation to which he belongs. In Romania, as mentioned above, we cannot speak of a samizdat, a cultural solidarity involving mutual support among members and the promotion of fellow writers. On the contrary, opportunism, compromises with the Securitate and solitary creation were common and more representative for the Romanian writers.⁴

Given his great character, disinclined to moral compromise, Sîrbu did not hesitate to criticize and ridicule the small ambitions, fears, lack of authenticity or the cultural and political careerism of the writers around him. The colorful violence with which he portrays them reaches alarming levels. For example,

about Eugen Barbu he says in one of the letters that “he had everything; everything a Vlach who left the pit needed, he could, he had the obligation to write a great work and he had everything he needed to write it; he missed one thing: character. Here the language does not forgive him; it executes him, it puts him on the rack like a Sisyphus of ignorance . . . all his novels are tribes of hyper-culture and sophistication, Balkan kitsch, small deals with eternity” (Sîrbu 1994, 42). About Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, whom he refused to give away to the Securitate, he says: “the other lines—may he forgive me—are perfect, fantastic, but artificial; his language writes for itself, like King Midas—what he touches turns into verse and poetical composition” (Sîrbu 1998b, 135). The novelists of that time are not exempted from Sîrbu’s diatribe, either: “I know snobs in my town who pretend to be crazy about the latest novels of Breban or D. R. Popescu; studying them closely, I have found that most of them confuse the torment of not understanding with the feeling that they are witnessing a miracle, a mystical revelation. Verbs are distinguished: reading separates from making you read, understanding from making you understand.” Adrian Păunescu “was withdrawn the endorsement of metaphysical language, he will continue to write verse, but poetry... *nevermore*” (Sîrbu 1996, 117). The ’80s generation representatives are equally mocked: “Our ‘modern’ writers (oneiric, textualist, surrealist, hermeneutic, etc.) are full of talent. But this talent grinds words, style, formulas, producing some indigestible games and artifices . . . if you strive to read Nedelciu, Agopian, Iliescu or Crăciun to the end you remain with the feeling that you’re lost, you have turned into an idiot . . . Anytime, even drunk and hanging from a lamp, I can write with my left hand an oneiric text or some textualist mumbling” (175–176).

The opinions and verdicts of this type brought I. D. Sîrbu no support, no posthumous promotion. No need for a conspiracy theory to understand the widespread reservations with regard to his writings. All the more so since many writers who had ingratiated themselves with the regime continued after the ’90s to play the literary games of the moment.⁵

The Narrative Formula

IF THE previous paragraphs focused on the extrinsic criterion for assessing and promoting Sîrbu’s novels, equally important are the intrinsic measures, the way of constructing the narrative and discursive architecture. The first one is relevant through the way in which the storyline advances and the planes interfere more or less coherently.

Both his posthumous novels can be summarized in a few sentences, after identifying the narrative common thread running through them. In *Adio, Europa!*, the plot is triggered by the Homeric laughter of the main character, Candid Desiderius, in front of a poster with reading recommendations for children: Karl May was replaced there by mistake with Karl Marx. The laughter is heard by someone benevolent to the local authorities. From that moment on, the character will be followed and interrogated endlessly, but guided and protected by his wise wife, Olimpia. The communist hierarchy is allegorized, but the symbols are transparent: Isarlâk is Craiova, the High Porte is Bucharest, and the Sublime Porte is Moscow. *Lupul și catedrala* proposes a young character, an engineer who lives the obsessive decade questioning reality, the changes, the new world. At the end of the novel a seemingly real story is told. A wolf appeared one winter in front of the cathedral in Cluj and was shot. The symbol of censored freedom is quite transparent.

We intentionally simplified the texture of the novels, just to emphasize the presence of a narrative coherence that links the beginning to the end both times, but which countless times breaks and loses pieces of itself. More important than the narrative evolution are the parentheses, digressions, metaphors and ample allegories of reality, secondary planes, and independent narrative episodes. It seems that the author writes a thesist work, and successively placing the emphasis on arguments which serve him is more important than any narrative coherence.

Much has been written about the epic barriers by which I. D. Sîrbu feels suffocated,⁶ perceived as Romanian limitations. But the passion for the fragment as a puzzle piece needed to create a complete picture of communism neutralizes the narrative or rather transforms it from a frame into an instrument, for the same persuasive-demonstrative purpose. Of course, this maneuver makes reading difficult and culls the readers dramatically.

Discourse Architecture

AS IF the essay's fragmentation within narrative conventions were not sufficient, in certain paragraphs there often appear heavy rhetorical syllogisms, the removal of sophistry, unexpected extrapolations, and countless erudite citations requiring from the reader a mental gymnastics usually practiced in the case of texts other than the novel.

The philosophical references are of the most diverse, the author quotes from Heraclitus and Plato, or Heidegger and Ricœur. From literature, he takes ideas from Moldavian chroniclers and from freshly-published South American writers,

with the same ease. He makes references to mythology, anthropology, history, recent scientific discoveries etc. Intertextuality is not free, channeling the views of others to legitimize his perspective on certain fundamental truths. Almost anything can be turned into a pretext for the incrimination of the communist disaster: a greening willow in the winter is the symbol of the rebirth of a people. *Gostat*⁷ chickens are a genuine opportunity for philosophical dissertations, also with political connotations. But the risks are high, “the tense cerebral character spews sententious, apodictic expressions everywhere, risking the reader’s fatigue” (Sorohan 1999, 23).

Besides the multitude of references, Sîrbu’s discourse is characterized by a fine intellectualization in the argumentative construction. Some notations are organized on the model of ancient rhetoric, comprising five parts devoted to: 1. intro (*exordium* or *proemium*); 2. story (*narratio*, i.e. the presentation of facts); 3. proof (*argumentatio* or *probatio*); 4. combating contrary assertions (*refutatio*); 5. subscription (*peroratio* or *epilogus*) (Reboul 2009, 74). The fragment below, from *Adio, Europa!* and featuring Limpi’s monologue, is representative in this respect:

I dream of a world without ideology [exordium] without a High or Sublime Porte, without a Koran, without infallible presidents-sultans: a world without meetings, to be allowed to sit at my desk, let me smoke a cigarette and let me sip a coffee, not always feel like starting a class struggle, a caste struggle, a race battle from the beginning. That’s it. I know, inequality is a huge pain in the world. This gentleman [Karl Marx], doctor of philosophy, indicated a means of healing. [narratio] What a shame, it was found now, after thirty years of intensive treatment (following another sixty), inequality no longer hurts precisely because the treatment is so painful and bestial that nothing else matters [probatio]. Will we heal some day? I do not believe so. Along the way we will forget why we accepted this surgery without anesthesia, the body will get used to the pain of every day, and we will get sad the day when we are not badgered or we do not applaud crows and painted numbers. We’ll be in awe when our beylerbey finally learns the multiplication table and when the beylerbey starts to study astronomy [refutatio]. It will be all right, and the summer warm... [peroratio]. (Sîrbu 1997, 223)

The only binding element of the digressions and the meditative-ironical speculations is a cohesion strategy specific to the essay: the constant presence not of the subject carrying out the process of reflection, but of the reader who restores it in the act of reading, following the regrouping of semantic units or filling in the areas of indeterminacy.

Therefore, the reader with an insufficient culture or any “comfortable” reading is refused from the beginning when trying to approach writings like *Adio, Europa!* and *Lupul și catedrala*. The same happens with the expert reader with high expectations related to the conventions of the species and the authentic construction of narrative elements. Who, then, remains the faithful audience? Maybe those already passionate about the writer’s diary and letters. Or the elitist readers who see in Sîrbu’s baroque novels a refined essayistic approach to a Balkan a world turned upside down by a hysterical history. Either way, the readers remain in limited numbers, so the success of the two novels of dissent and, by extension, of the desk drawer writing genre, remains an illusion. □

Notes

1. Virgil Ierunca, one of the writers in exile constantly pursued in Paris by the Securitate, said that the Romanian dissidence lacked a civil dimension: “I believe that Romania is the only country in the Eastern bloc failing the samizdat. However, books would be published which, by their artistic stance, were somewhat in opposition to the regime, but only from the esthetical point of view” (Ierunca 2006, 8).
2. The researcher Clara Mareș investigated I. D. Sîrbu’s secret docket and published a volume impressive not only for the amount of inedited information, but also for the refined analysis regarding the evolution of an unfortunate destiny.
3. Elvira Sorohan, *I. D. Sîrbu sau suferința spiritului captiv* (Iași: Junimea, 1999); Lelia Nicolescu, *Ion D. Sîrbu despre sine și lume* (Craiova: Scrisul Românesc, 1999); Nicolae Oprea, *Ion D. Sîrbu și timpul romanului* (Bucharest: Paralela 45, 2000); Antonio Patraș, *Ion D. Sîrbu, de veghe în noaptea totalitară* (Iași: Ed. Universității Al. Ioan Cuza, 2003); Gabriela Gavril, *De la “Manifest” la “Adio, Europa!”: Cercul Literar de la Sibiu* (Iași: Ed. Universității Al. I. Cuza, 2003); Daniel Cristea-Enache, *Un om din Est* (Bucharest: Curtea Veche, 2006).
4. The most documented series about the dynamics of the relations between writers under communism is probably that of Eugen Negrici, *Literatura română sub comunism* (2002, 2003, 2010).
5. “This is an exacerbated continuity. All those who praised, who used to sing odes to Ceaușescu can be found today in key positions in culture—publishing houses, journals, etc., which makes it so that retrograde literature is today encouraged by the very same people” (Ierunca 2006, 8).
6. “The rules of fiction represent for him a kind of writing bureaucracy, that he either observes with exasperating consciousness, or violates impetuously, soaring to interminable divagations” (Ștefănescu 1999, 6); “I. D. Sîrbu (1919–1989) published too little before 1989 and too much after. His quota has increased enormously in recent decades. Today he is paying, seemingly, for the exaggeration of the value of

some honorable works, but no more than that. The man was undoubtedly superior to his work, by his character, but also by an uncommon biography, which could offer material for both fiction and memoirs” (Manolescu 2008, 1431).

7. *Gostat*: abbreviation for state farm, which held the exclusive monopoly on the organized growth of chickens. The products were known for their poor quality.

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Abstract

The Failed Recovery of Dissidence Literature in Romania:

I. D. Sîrbu—An Exemplary Case

Because there was no samizdat literature in Romania, historians, men of letters, the public in general were eagerly awaiting the '90s desk drawer writings of the communist period. The first surprise was that the number was smaller than imagined and then came the revelation that the much-awaited great literature did not bring too much, either as a mirror of the time, or aesthetically. The posthumous novels of Ion D. Sîrbu (1919–1989)—an undeniable victim of the regime—are representative of the censored literature, and their lack of success is a social-literary phenomenon that, once investigated, may explain the singular manner of resistance through culture.

Keywords

dissidence, samizdat, censored fiction, desk drawer writings, literary canon