

I.D. SÎRBU – AN UNLIKELY INTELLECTUAL AS SELF-PORTRAYED IN *ADIO, EUROPA! (I)*

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Abstract

*I.D. Sîrbu represents a particular case in the Romanian literature as he has been, for decades, unjustly overlooked by critics and readers alike. The scales have been somewhat adjusted with the publication in 1992 of the first volume of *Adio, Europa!*, which created quite a stir in the Romanian literary world. The present paper focuses on the main character of the novel, Candid Desiderius, who is an alter ego of the author himself. The question raised by the paper is how representative such a personality is of the Romanian intellectual as presented against the background of a fierce communist regime.*

Keywords: the Romanian intellectual, communism, dissidence, irony, moral character.

1. Introduction

Ion Dezideriu Sîrbu, a larger than life character, encapsulates three different personae, the writer, the philosopher and the dissident, none of them being given enough coverage in the Romanian cultural environment. If, during the communist regime, censorship was the norm, and writers who ‘stubborned’ into freedom of speech were kept under wraps, the lack of visibility after 1990, except for academic circles, remains a mystery. Although the 1992 publication of the first volume of *Adio, Europa!* created quite a stir in the Romanian literary life, the author has entered, yet again, a shadow cone.

The paper focuses on a theme not yet enough researched in I.D. Sîrbu’s novel *Adio, Europa! (I)*, that of the intellectual and their status within the communist dictatorship during the 80s in Romania, therefore the proposed Research Question is: How representative is Candid Desiderius of the Romanian intellectual as presented in *Adio, Europa! (I)*? The method that has been used is *qualitative content analysis* based on the online edition republished in 2004 by LiterNet.

According to Klaus Krippendorff, qualitative content analysis is about interpreting the text, making sense of it and quoting well-defined parts in order to support the researcher’s conclusions (2004:6). Conclusions can be drawn about the text itself, the writer of the text as well as the sociocultural background and the effect of the message (White & Marsh, 2006:27). Following this line of thought, the present paper focuses on the main character, who is identical with the communicator and creator of the text, placed within the context of the communist regime of the 80s in Romania.

2. Literary Review

Critical attention has focused on both the personality and the literary work of I.D. Sîrbu. He has often been compared to Mihail Bulgakov, whose masterpiece, just like in the case of I.D. Sîrbu, was published posthumously, from his “painful drawers”, as he himself declared in a letter addressed to Maria Șora (Oprea, 2007).

A flamboyant personality and an aficionado of “bon mots”, as Ștefan Augustin Doinaș describes him, I.D. Sîrbu is often ready to compromise with the truthfulness of a story for the sake of memorably wording it

(Doinaş quoted in Gavril, 2003: 253). It is exactly this histrionic aspect that Daniel Cristea-Enache manages to discern when making an in-depth analysis of I.D. Sîrbu's work and life in *Un om din est*. The book is based on his doctoral thesis and is, perhaps, the most comprehensive monograph study, to date, on I.D. Sîrbu, self-recommended by the objectivity and unbiased approach of the author (Patraş, 2010).

Gabriela Gavril allots a whole chapter to I.D. Sîrbu in her book about the "Literary Sibiu Circle" and its members ("cerchişti" in Romanian), and distinguishes between the literary productions published during his life and those published posthumously. She notices the fact that I.D. Sîrbu's latter work has become an "ideological object" with a conjectural component due to the social background (Gavril, 2003: 257). Although Gabriela Gavril does not launch herself into purely aesthetic comments, I.D. Sîrbu's style has incontestable value and, as Daniel Cristea-Enache remarks, a certain versatility which allows the author to change "instruments" and move from one genre to another (Cristea-Enache, 2006: 143).

Alex Ştefănescu is the first to introduce I.D. Sîrbu in a history of Romanian literature (*Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1941-2000*), which means an official recognition as an author of consequence. However, Alex Ştefănescu does not shy away from criticizing some aspects in the novel *Adio, Europa!*, including the style. In the critic's opinion, the book will be perceived by the reader as "rather noise than text" (Ştefănescu, 2005: 527)¹, which, personally, I believe to be greatly exaggerated and undeserved.

The prison years are reflected in Clara Mareş' book, *Zidul de sticlă, Ion D. Sîrbu în arhivele securităţii*, where we can actually witness the true novel of I.D. Sîrbu's life, as if a proof that sometimes reality beats fiction. Documented from the CNSAS archives (The National Council for Studying the Securitate Archives), the book dissipates any doubts as to the possibility that I.D. Sîrbu might have exaggerated or even invented some of the stories in connection with his political detention.

His moral stamina and verticality contaminate his literary work too; Constantin Tuchilă perceives I.D. Sîrbu as a moralist writer who manages, through "talent, culture and literary intelligence... irony and self-irony", to distil the moralizing demonstration of his discourse (Tuchilă, 1988: 238). Irony is, in fact, one of the major tools that I.D. Sîrbu will use throughout his entire work, the novel *Adio, Europa!* being, from this point of view, the quintessential example.

3. Short Biography

Soon we will be celebrating his birth centenary, as I.D. Sîrbu was born in 1919, on the 28th of June. The son of a miner from Petrila, he would remain true to the proletarian origins of his birth, embracing left political convictions and attitudes, which made him become a member of the communist party since illegality. Later on, when he saw that the ideals in which he believed were used as a mere pretext for abuse, dictatorship and Soviet servitude, he denounced the communist system for what it was.

3.1 Tuition and Great Encounters

His thirst for education was not easy to pursue because of financial difficulties, yet I.D. Sîrbu managed to support himself through high school, then at the "King Ferdinand" University in Cluj. To be noted that it was Lucian Blaga who convinced the young academic aspirant to opt for philology instead of law, as he initially intended. His student activity would be interrupted by the war in which he participated from a frontline position, thus witnessing, first hand, the battles of Odessa and Stalingrad. Between 1941 and 1944 he would be alternating between University and the front, living life to the maximum in both cases. That is why, in 1943, he was one of the founding member of the Literary Sibiu Circle, where his path

¹In the original text: „Cartea rămâne în mintea cititorului mai mult ca un vacarm decât ca un text.”

intersected with what was going to constitute heavy names in Romanian literature, Ion Negoițescu, Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, Ovidiu Drîmbă, Radu Stanca and Nicolae Balotă, to name just a few.

In 1945 he defended his Bachelor degree thesis entitled *De la arhetipurile lui C.G. Jung la categoriile abisale ale lui Blaga* (*From C.G. Jung's Archetypes to Blaga's Abyssal Categories*), which came as a complete novelty in the Romanian intellectual landscape of the day. A year later, in 1946, I.D. Sîrbu was a Ph.D. student with the thesis entitled *Funcția epistemologică a metaforei* (*The Epistemological Function of Metaphor*), under the supervision of none other than Lucian Blaga. In 1947 he was appointed Reader with the Conservatory of Music and Dramatic Art in Cluj, then Assistant Lecturer with the Faculty of Philosophy in Cluj.

3.2 Dissidence

What started like a promising academic career was reshuffled at a stroke with two abusive convictions to prison, both of them for the same accusation. On the 17th of September 1957, I.D. Sîrbu was arrested for having written and presumably sent abroad the play *Sovrom-cărbune* considered subversive. A second accusation was in connection with a discussion among friends generated by the events of 1956 in Hungary, and which was considered by the communist tribunal as an omission to denounce the activity of a counterrevolutionary organisation. On the 14th of February 1958 he was sentenced to a year in prison and taken to Jilava. In August 1958, when his release date was approaching, another set of interrogations commenced. As a result, instead of being released, I.D. Sîrbu received another sentence, this time for seven years, for exactly the same accusation for which he had already done time. That was the beginning of an extermination regime of detention and forced labour conducted in the toughest communist prisons and concentration camps in Romania, Gherla, Balta Brăilei, Salcia, Stoenеști, Giurgeni, Strâmba and Periprava.

The real reason for I.D. Sîrbu's imprisonment was his refusal to make accusations towards his spiritual master and inspiration, Lucian Blaga. He actually told the Security that he could anytime counter-argue the great philosopher's ideas, but never the person and never under false pretence.

On the 6th of February 1963, I.D. Sîrbu was released, but freedom meant a series of interdictions, including being denied access in Cluj and Bucharest, as well as the right to sign any piece of writing. Actually, he was deprived of any right to publicly express himself as a professor, writer and even as an elementary school teacher. Therefore, at the age of 44 he had no option but to return to Valea Jiului, his place of origin, and work as an unskilled miner. He himself would declare later, in an interview in 1989 that he used to be the youngest University lecturer in 1949, only to become the oldest miner in 1964. Such marginalization of a high class intellectual was, in fact, the direct result of his constant refusal to become an informer for the communist security. The prison years together with the years in which he was treated like a pariah kept I.D. Sîrbu for 17 years away from any manifestation in the literary and cultural Romanian life. Most of his colleagues from the Sibiu Circle were rehabilitated and launched on the literary scene whereas he was denied the same treatment. He would not be published again until 1973 with *Povestiri petrilene* which, deliberately or not, recorded little critical impact.

In 1964 I.D. Sîrbu was appointed literary secretary (officially machinist) with the State Theatre in Petroșani, then transferred, a few months later, to the National Theatre in Craiova on the same position. I.D. Sîrbu was going to be under the Security's relentless observation and scrutiny until his death in 1989. The paradox is that, in time, the official stand of the communist party will coincide with I.D. Sîrbu's, and the very play for which he did time would be staged in several theatres; however, his guilt would never be erased, nor would he be reinstated. The novel *Adio, Europa!*, with obvious autobiographical elements, depicts events from I.D. Sîrbu's life while in Craiova.

4. The Context Offered by *Adio, Europa! (I)*

The very title of I.D. Sîrbu's novel *Adio, Europa!* sounds like the Dantean warning, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter". Any future one might envisage for Romania within a European context is gone. This sounds like the ultimate desperation cry of somebody who no longer sees a change for the better in the society in which he lives.

The farewell in the title is not only intended to the civilized world but, at the same time, to the true communist ideals to which he genuinely adhered in his youth and which generated abuse, fear and decay in a society where noble ideals were just a pretext to cosmeticize a brutal and primitive behavior set out to destroy intellectual and moral values. The communist juggernaut would label as foe whatever they could not understand or whoever did not comply with the party policy.

4.1 Literary Context: Style and Structure

Adio, Europa! had been I.D. Sîrbu's constant preoccupation for the last seven years of his life, but it was finalized during the years 1985-1986. It was published posthumously, thus benefitting from an uninhibited style and uncensored content, as the author had given up any hope of making it public during the communist regime. I.D. Sîrbu felt free to speak out his mind in an uncompromised way for which he had paid with a marginalized position in the Romanian literary environment.

The novel is structured like a chronicle, with deliberate 'oldish' flavour, reminding of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* and the incipient days of the novel as a literary category, by using a short summary of what is to follow as introduction for each chapter. Perhaps the sources of inspiration can be traced even further back into the literary history, to Rabelais and the Renaissance novels. Actually, there is a whole panoply of writers to whom the novel is artistically 'indebted', from Nicolae Filimon, to Dimitrie Cantemir and André Malraux. Conceptually, the main character of the novel relates to the misfits of the universal literature, like Don Quixote, Gulliver or Holden Caulfield. To be noted that I.D. Sîrbu himself was a source of inspiration for Marin Preda's Victor Petrini, the central character in *The Most Beloved of Earthlings*.

The text is imbued with irony and subtle allusions which makes each and every sentence heavy with meaning and message. Every word has its well defined place in the economy of the whole writing – nothing can be taken away or added without ruining the effect in its entirety. He uses words belonging to the so called *wooden language* of the day, "I live as I can, sometimes materialistically, other times only dialectically, in a peaceful and reciprocally advantageous cohabitation with both Mater (...) and conscience" (Sîrbu, 2004:28)². These are words that, normally, go unnoticed because of their frequent use, especially in socialist slogans. Taken out of their usual context, they sound peculiarly fresh, attract attention and have a boomerang effect by suggesting the opposite.

4.2 Social Context: Communism

The novel presents the situation of the 1980s in Romania, which is the time when Ceaușescu's dictatorship is at its fullest, with exaggerations worthy of Orwell's *1984*, which are debunked by I.D. Sîrbu head-on, with biting irony. At a time when the cult of personality was at its peak and the 'pens' of the day were crowding to eulogise the dictator into a national hero of mythical proportions, I.D. Sîrbu cries out, "the emperor is naked". He writes about "the Sultan and his harem of eunuchs", about the queuing up, about the indoctrination through "political education meetings", about the lack of freedom of speech, about

²All quotes from *Adio, Europa! (I)* have as reference the Romanian variant and have been translated into English by the author of the paper.

people's being thrown into gaol for the slightest allusion (intended or not) to the regime so as to instil a reign of terror and mistrust.

The exaggerated way of presenting the dictator, never by name, but by pompous periphrases, all hinting at the Medieval Turkish history, therefore at the retarded Romanian society, but worded like the Romanian slogans of the day, is a caustic in two directions. Firstly to Ceaușescu himself, blinded by the cult of personality and probably believing that he was entitled to all that praise and secondly to a whole gang of 'eunuchs', morally emasculated, who clap on command. The implosion of the two worlds and epochs into slogans that anybody who experienced the communist regime can understand is hilarious, yet bitter: "Our Suleiman is the most magnificent prophet and thinker of all times", "Suleiman: the Magnificent, the Genius, the Infallible, Hero among Heroes! The most beloved son of the people" – (in the original "cel mai iubit fiu al poporului") being a phrase much used in the day. It is exactly this phrase pattern that was going to be used by Marin Preda, and thus mislead the censorship, when he wrote *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* (*The Most Beloved of Earthlings*) and which was, paradoxically, not inspired by Ceaușescu, but, as already mentioned, by I.D. Sîrbu himself.

The locus chosen for the events is an imaginary Isarlâk (Craiova) hinting at the luminous and idyllic realm created by Ion Barbu in *Joc secund*, but distorted here by stupidity, cowardice and fear. The sonority of the place is seasoned by that of the characters' names (Osmănescu, Caftangiu, Omar Caimac), thus transporting the reader into a Turkish sounding and Medieval behaving environment. I.D. Sîrbu equates the communist era with the Phanariot age, dark and rotten, "at the back of God and Europe" (Sîrbu, 2004:32). Isarlâk is in the middle of nowhere, a "province of the provinces", a space which is not on the map of the civilized world, yet, very importantly it is "at the gates of the Orient" where "everything is taken seriously" (Sîrbu, 2004: 60).

How do people manage to survive in this God forgotten place? They are all under the sign of ambivalence, of pretence and of make-believe, they are all actors at the backstage of history. The illusion they are experiencing has nothing to do with the philosophical concept of Aristotelian origin, it is rather a grotesque acquiescence of a megalomaniac play staged at national level. The social tiers are sarcastically reconstructed in the novel following the Ottoman model, sipahis, pashas, beys, capucus etc. and then moving on to non-categories, among which are "professional bastards and amateur bastards", "the members, the non-members", "the beautiful sad girls and the sad beautiful girls", the basic idea being that of subordination, therefore of depersonalisation. Everything is in place, everything belongs to a category, everything has a name because an organized world makes sense and therefore the top of the hierarchy will feel reassured and safe. Subordination goes as far as to diminish, hide and deny whatever merits or qualities a subordinate might possess above his superior in rank, as Olimpia tells Candid, "... you should seem less smart than this Tutilă, me uglier and more stupid than Madam Tutilă, our kinds, if we had any, they should seem uglier, more stupid and more flung than Tutilă's offsprings" (Sîrbu, 2004:34). This "Turcocracy" is a dystopian world, "the best of the impossible worlds" (Sîrbu, 2004:162), as the author chooses to paraphrase Leibniz.

Ambivalence goes as far as to erect a statue with a removable head so as to change it according to the power of the day (Sîrbu, 2004:122). This is a society where 'to seem' is more important than 'to be', where everything is cosmeticized, where reports are good as long as the figures contained are good, although they have nothing to do with reality.

5. Candid Desiderius and the Condition of the Romanian Intellectual

The central character of the novel is Candid Desiderius whose personal data coincide in an almost one-to-one parity with that of I.D. Sîrbu; he was dismissed from the Chair of Philosophy in Genopolis (Cluj), he fought on the battlefield, he went to prison being accused of 'absence of denunciation', he then worked in

the mine. His wife, Olimpia in the novel, abides by him in all circumstances and sometimes even plays dirty only to save her husband's neck, as she is the pragmatic half of the pair – this is humorously acknowledged when the professor is called “Mr. Olimpia”.

The name of the protagonist is not randomly chosen, the first name, Candid, refers the reader to Voltaire's hero, while the surname, Dezideriu (or Desideriu), hints at Desiderius Erasmus de Rotterdam who “wrote an ode to insanity” (Sîrbu, 2004: 104) and is also I.D. Sîrbu's second Christian name, thus completing the picture of the idealist intellectual that both character and author share in a perfect match of reality and fiction.

The story of *Adio, Europa! (I)* is told by Candid Desiderius himself in a mixture of deep thinking and philosophical hints spiced up with vulgar curses, histrionically juxtaposed in order to attract attention and create reaction. If, in *Waiting for Godot*, the intended effect is to make the character block any response towards stimuli, here, in *Adio, Europa! (I)* the ‘guinea pig’, no longer the character, but the reader, is expected to react, therefore bombarded with stimuli in the form of language, ideas, imagistic effects and, ultimately, paradoxical situations that add to the general confusion.

5.1 Types of Intellectuals

The intellectual life in Isarlâk follows the same paradigm of ambivalence like the rest of the society. On the one hand we have the fake intellectuals who obtained their diplomas by “demijohns and fat turkeys” (Sîrbu, 2004:114) and, on the other, the true intellectuals. This category is also split into two, the intellectual with impeccable moral stamina, who must keep a low profile in order to survive and the “minus-character” who trades his intellectual assets for more material ones.

This is the case of a former friend of his who lies at his own convenience, ‘delivers’ whenever he is summoned and gets rewarded not only by the internal system quintessentially represented by the ‘Securitate’, but also by the Western society by means of an American life pension for “special merits in worldwide fight against treacherous bastards” (Sîrbu, 2004: 95). Later on, this character who “completely lost his character” becomes a much appreciated professor at a French University where he teaches nothing less than morals.

The meek intellectual who keeps a low profile and humbles himself into survival, like Sommer, is also presented with a chameleonic aura, a many-faceted individual, “which Sommer?, Sommer number what?” (Sîrbu, 2004: 123), without, however, forgetting to appear modest and blend in, “Sommer who looks either as a shabby Alecsandri, or as an elegant Quasimodo” (Sîrbu, 2004:122). The true intellectuals must be humble and obedient at all times because they are guilty of knowledge – the Biblical leitmotif applied grotesquely to a society ruled through imposture and crime. The ironically self-accepted profile of the true intellectuals is “We are stupid, we've read too many books, our minds are distorted with unprincipled readings” (Sîrbu, 2004:115).

5.2 The Unlikely Intellectual

The ex-professor and his wife are reduced to a minimalist existence from all points of view, with the status of tolerated citizens in a society that they dared question. They are supposed to behave themselves, meaning that they have to keep to themselves and, above all, their mouths shut (Sîrbu, 2004:36).

Nothing is left to chance in a society that dreads intellectuals and the effect that they can have on a social order that needs to be preserved at all costs. So, they are under the direct protection (and supervision) of one of the men in power, Tutilă Doi, their Godfather. Even without Mario Puzo's bestseller and Francis Coppola's movie, the reference is obvious so that we can detect the elements of a mafia-like society. The

solution to all this is “making fun” (“bășcălia” in the original), “My God, I said to myself, we are lost, both me and Limpi, if, we give up making fun, we might start thinking seriously” (Sîrbu, 2004:130).

Like any intellectual who did “intelligent prison”, as one of the characters says (Sîrbu 2004:43), Candid Desiderius needs to play by the rule, pay his dues to his protector, which is another staged formality acknowledged by everybody and tributary to the Medieval world, “the oligarchic game of rapports between up and down, forever cursed, but never changed” (Sîrbu, 2004:44). He is nothing but “a serf with a criminal record and diplomas accepted in Isarlâk for rehabilitation and penitence” (Sîrbu, 2004:52).

After doing time for political reasons, Candid does his best to adjust, not out of fear because, “What else is prison – for a true intellectual – but a long summer course where they learn how to get rid of all forms of fear, cares, trembling, earth trembling etcetera?” (2004:133), but out of pure survival instinct. He has a modest job, he makes no unnecessary comments and even shifts to the use of “perfectul simplu”, typical for the Alutan (Oltenia) dialect, from “perfectul compus”, the past tense of preference in Genolpolis (Cluj). In this strictly organized hierarchy, normal things become a luxury, like having a beautiful wife or laughing, “I laugh only at home, after my kids have gone to bed” (Sîrbu, 2004:47).

This is the world that ex-professor Candid Desiderius ‘candidly’ destabilizes on a Friday, the 13th, by laughing out loud at a public announcement of a conference in science-fiction literature where Karl May’s name is mistakenly replaced by Karl Marx’s, probably as an automated response to utmost indoctrination. The problem is that the mistake was validated by “three stamps, five visas and seven signatures”, therefore there could be no mistake. A whole mechanism starts grinding and blows out of proportions the professor’s reaction because the opposite faction perceives in it the perfect opportunity for obtaining supremacy. What starts out as a hilarious mistake due to illiteracy and cultural brainwash, is amplified into a rabid fight for power which will have its casualties and, as usual, the innocent will suffer the most.

If we are to consider I.D. Sîrbu’s philosophical formation and the fact that he himself encouraged his students to read an author’s piece of writing through the context of all his work, then I think we are entitled to decode the world that he is depicting in *Adio, Europa! (I)* like a big illusion, a Maya, which is all we have access to in this world. Not in the sense that it does not exist, but in the sense that this is an alternative reality of limited duration, therefore which needs not be taken too seriously so as to make compromises of an eternal nature.

This argument is supplementary supported by I.D. Sîrbu’s theatrical inclinations, Isarlâk being a stage - “of course, everybody in Isarlâk was pretending” (Sîrbu, 2004:44) - where the actors are unfolding their story, sometimes by the book, sometimes by improvisation, responsible only “in the face of the organs and God” (Sîrbu, 2004:42). From this perspective, I think that the author’s status is somewhat different from the one of the other intellectuals who are “cultural wardens” (Sîrbu, 2004:43), whereas, Candid manages, in the end, to rise above all this, overcoming his initial condition of “somebody who only knows what he doesn’t want” (Sîrbu, 2004:43).

6. Conclusions

The novel *Adio, Europa! (I)* is a fresco of incredible force and veracity of a social system which excelled in fake and manipulation and where the intellectual, as a potential debunker, was silenced through fear or bribe. Against this background, Candid Desiderius, alias I. D. Sîrbu, is an intellectual who chooses to be different, who chooses to swim upstream. He is among the few Romanian intellectuals who had the courage to do this, but, as compared to the great majority, he managed to live through the ordeal of communist prisons, refuse any compromise with the regime and tell the story.

The text that was under scrutiny in the present paper has still so much to offer in so many directions; further research can follow through linguistically, stylistically and conceptually. The particular topic that was studied here could help to the inclusion in the mainstream Romanian literature of authors that do not receive enough attention and therefore are not given a chance to the qualitative judgment of future generations.

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