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Ion D. Sîrbu's Anthumous Works as (Re)valuable Residues

Abstract: Ion D. Sîrbu (1919-1989) represented one of the major surprises of post-communist Romanian literature and his posthumous masterpieces, *Adio, Europa!* (the first volume in 1992 and the second volume in 1993), *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal* (the first volume in 1991 and the second volume in 1993), as well as his vast correspondence, have managed to bring forth an author worthy of praise. The paper however, will focus on the “other Ion D. Sîrbu,” the prolific, yet unsuccessful, anthumous playwright and novelist. We will discuss these “minor” works, attempting less their canonical revaluation, but rather aiming to see whether their very “residual” status can offer a valuable insight into understanding the inconsistencies in Sîrbu’s literary trajectory.

Keywords: Anthumous Works; Posthumous Works; Literary Residues; Canonical Periphery; Aesthetic Revaluation.

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*Millions of artists create;
only a few thousands are discussed
or accepted by the spectator,
and many less again are consecrated
by posterity.*

Marcel Duchamp

1. The strange case of Ion D. Sîrbu and... Ion D. Sîrbu

On June 3rd 1989, just a few months before his death from cancer, in his farewell letter to Virgil Nemoianu, his pen pal “beyond the Iron Curtain” (residing in the US), Ion D. Sîrbu (1919-1989) stated: “Philosophically speaking, now, when I am 70, I can ironically say that I have won all my battles, but not without losing my life, my career, my oeuvre in the process. (...) My best books remain unwritten, this disease has hit me like an arrow through my back.”¹ An emotional and heavyhearted message from an author who, from his debut in 1956 to 1985, when his last anthumous volume, the collection of plays *Bieții comedianți* [*Poor comedians*] appeared, had managed to publish a significant number of works (two children’s novels, two short story volumes, three theatre volumes), as



well as have his plays performed on various stages from the country.

Why, might one ask, did this prolific author feel so distrustful of his legacy, as if confessing to his addressee that it was not his published works that he wanted to be remembered for, but rather those “unwritten” books, “my best works”? The question is, of course, rhetorical, as, no later than a few months after Ion D. Sîrbu’s passing (September 17, 1989) and, soon after, the December 1989 revolution that brought about the end of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s Communist dictatorship, the Romanian literary world would get to know a completely different Ion D. Sîrbu: a fierce and incorruptible opponent of the oppressive regime, a rational and witty writer, the author of some remarkable literary works (the novels *Adio, Europa!* [*A Farewell to Europe*] and *Lupul și Catedrala* [*The Wolf and the Cathedral*], as well as the “clandestine journal”²² *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal* [*The Journal of a Journalist without a Journal*]).

Ion D. Sîrbu’s (re)discovery after 1989, hailed especially as the author of *Adio, Europa!*, “the only important desk-drawer writing of Romanian literature during Communism,”²³ led critics to rightfully observe the existence of *two distinct Ion D. Sîrbus*: “almost his entire anthumous works (plays, stories, novels) present the face of one author, whereas his posthumous works (his novels and especially his correspondence) reveal a completely different author.”²⁴ If the works published during his lifetime – two volumes of short stories *Povestiri petrilene* [*Stories from Petrila*] (1973), *Șoarecele B și alte povestiri* [*Mouse B and Other Stories*] (1983), ten plays, social dramas and “essay-comedies,” gathered in three volumes: *Teatru* [*Theatre*] (1976),

Arca bunei speranțe [*The Ark of Good Hope*] (1982) and *Bieții comedianți* [*Poor Comedians*] (1985), and two children’s novels *De ce plânge mama?* [*Why Is Mother Crying?*] (1973) and *Dansul ursului* [*The Dance of the Bear*] (1988) – “didn’t deserve too encomiastic considerations from critics,”²⁵ the entirety of his posthumous works managed to transfer Ion D. Sîrbu “from the second library shelf to the first.”²⁶

Indeed, Ion D. Sîrbu’s trajectory in Romanian literature is that of a prolific author who “didn’t manage to impose his value during his lifetime,”²⁷ and who was reconsidered by the literary canon only after the emergence of his revelatory posthumous works. The author’s “desk-drawer” writings managed to simultaneously eclipse his anthumous works and shed new light on them, as these “minor,” “leftover” writings, however unaccomplished,²⁸ appear now as both necessary and valuable “residues” in reassembling the portrait of this unique, “peculiar,” Romanian writer in its complexity.

2. “A Certain Ion D. Sîrbu” and his “Residual” Anthumous Works: Aiming for the Periphery

The “phenomenal surprise”¹⁰ represented by Sîrbu’s unpublished works as worthy examples of our “feeble desk-drawer literature”¹¹ prompted a critical reevaluation of the author’s entire works, alongside an interest in his troubled biography, as it became clear that it would be an impossible and counterproductive task to ignore the deep interconnections between the writer’s life in the social, political, cultural context of Communist Romania and the



obvious qualitative discrepancies between his various literary works.

What most critics remarked when analyzing his anthumous works – short stories, children's novels, plays – is their heterogeneity, both in terms of structure and style – “As a reaction to the stylistic excess of the contemporary prose, the writer's style is, paradoxically, evidenced by a *lack of style*”¹² – and as far as their aesthetic value is concerned:

If Ion D. Sîrbu's dramaturgical experiences represent a relatively homogenous chapter in terms of their value (without many artistic successes, without great dysfunctions), the space of the prose is, on the contrary, an “uneven” one, characterized by various aesthetic land forms and irregular in terms of its evolution.¹³

Therefore, it would be legitimate to wonder, what would Ion D. Sîrbu's place in the Romanian literary cannon be if one was to take into consideration only his anthumous works? How would the author be perceived today if his entire works had not been reanalyzed and “salvaged” in light of his posthumous masterpieces?

To critics, Ion D. Sîrbu's plays appear as minor accomplishments that are “difficult to read,”¹⁴ as “a background phenomenon of contemporary literature,”¹⁵ or as “simple rhetorical demonstrations of the genre made by a theoretician tormented by nostalgia.”¹⁶ This is one of the reasons why, despite the fact that they had been staged in various theatres during his lifetime (Piatra Neamț, Brașov, Craiova, București, Petroșani, Oradea etc.), with the exception of *Pragul albastru* which premiered

in 1991 (director Cristian Hadji-Culea), none of Sîrbu's other plays were staged after his death, nor have his theatre volumes been republished so far. Unanimously seen as a “loop, a ‘deviation’ from the long and sinuous journey of the prose,”¹⁷ Ion D. Sîrbu's entire corpus of plays, written between 1964-1966, upon his release from prison, but published only years later, lay now almost forgotten. They were “medium-level plays, whose value decreased because of the concessions made to the conjectural, the ideological.”¹⁸ In other words, they were “residual” pieces in the history of Romanian theatre.

At the same time, an almost unanimous unfavorable reception of his early prose¹⁹ led to the “anthumous” Ion D. Sîrbu being “known and unrecognized at the same time”:

Of all the dictionaries dedicated to contemporary literature (or also including this period), only the second edition of Marian Popa's dictionary, from 1977, mentions the author of *Arca bunei speranțe*, assigning him 27 lines, as opposed to 37 and 17 respectively, assigned to Sîrbu, Cristian and Sîrbu, Ion Valeriu, in between whom Sîrbu is placed.²⁰

In his nights of desperation, Sîrbu himself appeared, at times, to have lost hope in the destiny of his published works and his legacy: “Nobody will ever speak of me – not even after my death. My name is locked in my manuscript desk-drawer... I am so full of incurable wounds!”²¹

The “residual” attributes of these works may appear unexplainable in light of Sîrbu's universally-acclaimed posthumous



works, and it is only fair to wonder whether or not it is in their very “residual,” “unaccomplished,” “vestigial” characteristics that “value” itself resides, and whether or not the actual merit of these works resides in their very classification as “minor.”

As stated above, Ion D. Sîrbu’s literary destiny is synonymous with the harsh social and political climate of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s Communist dictatorship and the specification is not without importance in our attempt at contextually circumscribing the “standards of value” that determined both the reception and the creation of Sîrbu’s anthomously published works.

In an article entitled “The Qualities of Literatures. A Concept of Literary Evaluation in Pluralistic Societies,” Renate von Heydebrand and Simone Winko explain the concepts of “literary value” and “literary evaluation” as “by no means limited to professional judgments on literary texts,”²² but, on an equally important level, also influencing the writing process itself:

In the *production* of literary texts, evaluations can influence the act of writing either beforehand – for example, in the choice of subject-matter or the conception of certain characters – or during the writing process – e.g. in the use of particular stylistic devices, such as emphasizing the significance of a piece of information by metaphor or repetition or by putting the information in a position where the reader is bound to notice it.²³

As the concept of *value* can encompass both attributes “pertaining to a criterion or standard on which an evaluation is based” and “characteristics of the object

itself,” the authors distinguish between *standards of value*, “in the subjective realm,” and *attributive values*, “in the domain of the object.”²⁴ Their theorization can prove useful in attempting to understand Ion D. Sîrbu’s own conception of “literary value,” his own *subjective standards of value*.

Bearing in mind that Renate von Heydebrand and Simone Winko’s “model of literary evaluation” is designed for modern “pluralistic societies,” understood as societies that “specifically assume the coexistence of a large number of cultural and literary canons, each having its own internal criteria and its own patterns of context-dependent behavior and interpretation,”²⁵ and that tightly controlled Communist Romania could hardly fit this definition, we believe nonetheless that the model can prove useful in understanding Sîrbu’s “subjective standards of value” with regard to his own writings and those of his peers:

Subjective standards of value cause an object or a property thereof to seem valuable or worthless; their validity is context-dependent and historically variable. This means that an object is not *intrinsically* valuable or worthless, regardless of context; instead, it only acquires an (attributive) value in relation to a standard of value. The impression that objects have an intrinsic value depends entirely on the stability of standards and contexts.²⁶

In this respect, considering the “context-dependent” essence of subjective standards of value, we can understand the literary works Ion D. Sîrbu published during his lifetime as conscious endeavors to aim



towards the *periphery* of both the officially and unofficially accepted (instilled with value) literary canons of the time, as he appears to take a stance against both the officially imposed doctrine of socialist realism, not even considered an option, and, more overtly, against the alternative, the then widely acclaimed, unofficial, “subversive literature.” His subjective standards of value determine him to see in the “residual,” the no longer “fashionable,” the “obsolete,” the only possible alternative to the two literary trajectories, both regarded as morally reprehensible, even dangerous.

Upon a more thorough analysis of his anthumously published novels, short stories and plays – a reevaluation, one must add, possible only in light of the critically recognized merits of his posthumous works –, Sîrbu thus appears to position himself differently than his contemporaries with regard to literary expression. Overtly pleading for a morally and socially responsible literature,²⁷ Sîrbu seems disheartened by the aesthetic options of his contemporaries (Marin Preda, Marin Sorescu, D.R. Popescu, Laurențiu Fulga, Eugen Barbu and others) whose works, in the increasingly bleak political context of Communist Romania, he perceived as dangerously irresponsible towards their readers. As a writer and playwright, Ion D. Sîrbu valued, and highlighted, the social responsibility of his works above anything else and, consequently, in “the anthumous works the *composition, elaboration* and *self-control* are evident, representing discreet but unavoidable forms of self-censorship.”²⁸

Sîrbu cherished the truth,²⁹ the honest message, and considered that by deploying in their works “defensive formulae

and protective solutions”³⁰ and relying “on the stereotypes of a subversive jargon,”³¹ all *publishable* literature was, in fact, tacitly legitimating the political regime.³² As far as he was concerned, he understood that in the case of a future aesthetic reevaluation, however improbable it may have appeared at the time, these literary works would not be able to withstand the test of time:

Our *modern* writers (oneiric, textualist, surrealist, hermeneutical etc.) are very talented. But this talent grinds words, style, formulae, creating games and artifices that the everyday, common, unprofessional reader digests with difficulty, without any gain or pleasure [...] I am beginning to think that this literature belongs and contributes, *here* (in our special case), to the general process of alienating the spirit [...] You read three subtle books, you can easily write the fourth [...] The censorship – intelligent, calculated, cynical – writes on these manuscripts: *approved for print – they present no problems* (to present to today’s censorship, which doesn’t permit such words as *strike, union, cross*, about 500 pages of prose and be published without one censored word is a fantastic achievement. But what good does it do?).³³

This form of “approved” subversion which dominated the literature and theatre of the time conflicted with the *ethical* mission which Sîrbu believed all literature should have in times of need, and, as a result, he consciously opted for the clarity and sincerity of the literary message, denouncing all aesthetic embellishments: “In



a world hyper-saturated with prose, yes, experiments can appear, but in our world (where ignored truths walk the streets screaming), the excess of style is synonymous with the excess of caution [...] We cover in layers of cotton an entire train of words only to hide, in the last carriage, a needle of irony,³⁴ or, somewhere else, “stupidly and Candide-like, I remain in the eighteenth century, I believe that being simple is very complicated and writing clearly is infinitely harder than writing hermetically.”³⁵

Veraciously anti-regime, he often accused the writers of his time of abandoning their ethical mission and unwittingly believing that “obscurity and compositional chaos equal modernity and European alignment.”³⁶ Consequently, in his anthumous works, Sirbu knowingly strives for a “lack of style”³⁷, focusing less on the formal aspect of his literature and aiming to emphasize the accuracy and honesty of the written message: “I do not wish to hide behind a style, I do not even have a style, I do not want to write in a different manner than others, I want to write of something different than these others do.”³⁸

Conclusions

Socially and professionally ostracized, alone and isolated, almost a pariah-like figure in the literary world,³⁹ Sirbu seems to have correctly understood the “historically variable” nature of all standards of value and the relative, context-dependent, status of his “residual” literary works. The 1989 revolution and the additional social and political changes brought about a revaluation of the Romanian literary canon of the second half of the twentieth century as

well. In consequence, literary works that, at the time, appeared as “subversive,” courageous pieces of literature actually “made sufficient compromises to not annoy the regime that had approved their publishing. Not denying the impact these works might have had at the time they were written, it is diminished upon a critical reevaluation of Romanian literature after 1989.”⁴⁰

Without overlooking the structural and formal imperfections of Ion D. Sirbu’s anthumous writings acknowledged by his critics, and despite the striking differences between them and the posthumous works, upon revaluation they are nevertheless instated with value, as they are capable to reveal the author in all his complexity, as well as his consistent struggle for moral and aesthetic survival. Towards the end of his life, Sirbu, bitterly, but, as his posthumous revaluation reveals, not entirely rightfully, remarked: “Our battle was long! We have won! Even though we have lost everything in this battle.” The *reception* of these works as “residues” of the Romanian literary canon tends to shade away in light of their valuable “residual” essence, the overtly stated (*production*) objective of the author to separate himself from the questionable aesthetic choices of his contemporaries.



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NOTES

1. Ion D. Sîrbu, *Traversarea cortinei. Corespondență cu Ion Negoîțescu, Virgil Nemoianu, Mariana Șora*, Timișoara, Editura de Vest, 1994, p. 535.
2. Nicolae Oprea, *Ion D. Sîrbu și timpul romanului*, Pitești, Paralela 45 Publishing House, 2000, p. 150.
3. Ovid. S. Crohmălniceanu, Klaus Heitmann, *Cercul literar de la Sibiu și influența catalitică a culturii germane*, Bucharest, Universalia Publishing House, 2000, p. 71.
4. Ovidiu Pecican, "Al doilea Sîrbu," *Verso*, no. 71 (2009), 16-31 Oct., p. 9.
5. Bogdan Crețu, *Utopia negativă în literatura română*, Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House, 2008, p. 201.



6. Cornel Ungureanu, "Notă asupra ediției sau Despre tragicul de uzură," in Ion D. Sîrbu, *Iarna bolnavă de cancer*, Bucharest, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 1998, p. 5.
7. Nicolae Oprea, *Ion D. Sîrbu*, p. 159.
8. In his preface to *Traversarea cortinei...*, Virgil Nemoianu states: "However, I was not impressed by I.D. Sîrbu's writings, I considered them to be unpoetic and provincial (...) I was not interested in his plays and I only perused them superficially. *Dansul ursului* seemed to me nothing but a plaything. His short stories are definitely more serious accomplishments, some of them anthological, but still insufficient quantitatively to consider Sîrbu a prime example of postwar literature" (in *Traversarea cortinei...*, pp. 5-6).
9. Sîrbu attributes this quote to Andrei Băleanu, one of his most fierce detractors, whose accusations in the press – as a response to an unfavorable theatre review Sîrbu had written about Alexandru Mirodan's socialist realist play *Ziaristi* [*The Journalists*] – eventually led to Sîrbu's seven-year imprisonment (in the Jilava and Gherla prisons and the Grindu, Periprava, Salcia labor camps) and his exclusion from the literary world.
10. Adrian Dinu Rachieru, "O victorie postumă," *Caiete Critice*, no. 10-12, 1995, p. 201.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Nicolae Oprea, *Ion D. Sîrbu*, p. 140.
13. Daniel Cristea-Enache, *Un om din Est. Studiu monografic*, Bucharest, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2006, p. 245.
14. Nicolae Manolescu, *Istoria critică a literaturii române. 5 secole de lectură*, Pitești, Paralela 45 Publishing House, 2008, p. 1432.
15. Mircea Ghișulescu, *O panoramă a literaturii dramatice românești contemporane*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia Publishing House, 1984, p. 82.
16. Sebastian Vlad-Popa, "Femei nobile," *Caiete critice*, no. 10-12, 1995, p. 232.
17. Daniel Cristea-Enache, *Un om*, p. 246.
18. Antonio Patraș, *De veghe în noaptea totalitară*, Iași, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, 2003, p. 68.
19. For instance, Ilie Guțan reviews *De ce plânge mama?* in the following terms: "The substance of the book is of minor importance and insignificant in the natural order of things, as it is based on a false premise and on an implausible development." (Ilie Guțan, "Ton D. Sîrbu, *De ce plânge mama?*," *Transilvania*, no. 6/73, year II, Sibiu).
20. Valeriu Cristea, "Singer în oceanul de proză," *Caiete critice*, no. 10-12, 1995, p. 102.
21. Ion D. Sîrbu, *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal*, volume I, Craiova, Scrisul Românesc Publishing House, 1991, p. 253.
22. Renate von Heydebrand and Simone Winko, "The Qualities of Literatures. A Concept of Literary Evaluation in Pluralistic Societies," in Willie van Peer (editor), *The Qualities of Literature. Linguistic Studies in Literary, Evaluation*, vol. 4, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008, p. 225.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 226-227.
27. Subtly echoing Monica Lovinescu's theories, Sîrbu writes in a letter to Virgil Nemoianu: "more recently, I am beginning to write AESTHETICS = EAST-ETHICS. Do you like it?" (Ion D. Sîrbu, *Traversarea...*, p. 283).
28. Ioan Lascu, *Un aisberg deasupra mării. Eseu despre opera postumă a lui Ion D. Sîrbu*, Craiova, Ramuri Publishing House, 1999, p. 81.
29. Not even his toughest critics could overlook the author's moral verticality. Nicolae Manolescu, for instance, states: "The man was unquestionably superior to the work, due to his character, and to his extraordinary biography, which could have offered material for both fiction and memoirs" (in *Istoria critică...*, p. 1431).



30. Eugen Negrici, *Literatura română sub comunism. Proza*, second edition, Bucharest, Fundația Pro Publishing House, 2006, p. 75.
31. Sanda Cordoș, *Literatura între revoluție și reacțiune. Problema crizei în literatura română și rusă a secolului XX*, second edition, Cluj-Napoca, Apostrof Publishing House, p. 186.
32. “The censors understood this ‘game’ and, content and superior [...], overlooked these playful shenanigans, welcome in such grey times. Sometimes a text would be under scrutiny because of the denunciation – written or oral (whispered) – of some envious peer or because of an overzealous disgraced superintendent trying to regain his favors. A rumor of scandal would quickly spread. The popularity of the author would suddenly surge and, for a while, we would all feel encouraged by this sublime heroic act. [...] The only now visible weaknesses of the literature of the last two decades are a result of these texts aiming for an immediate effect, in other words, as a result of their intentionality. [...] Simultaneously conceived for two recipients (the censorship and the reader avid for truth), the two tendencies of such texts – to be at the same time understood and not understood – produce a disturbing effect, similar to that of baroque literary works in which such contrary forces are confronted. The ‘baroque’ of the golden age however, was a schizoid one.” (Eugen Negrici, *Literatura română*, pp. 75-76).
33. Ion D. Sîrbu, *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal*, volume 2, Craiova, Scrisul Românesc Publishing House, 1993, p. 183.
34. Sîrbu, *Traversarea cortinei*, p. 282.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 337.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Nicolae Oprea, *Ion D. Sîrbu*, p. 140.
38. Ion D. Sîrbu, *Traversarea cortinei*, p. 93.
39. “How do I get rid of my brave visitors? I tell them: ‘I will give you a *secret* page to read. It has not been approved, it will be our secret!’ From that moment on, my friend, a distinguished academic, will never set foot in my house again, and on the street he will greet me like an old and dangerous shadow.” (Ion D. Sîrbu, *Scrisori către bunul Dumnezeu*, edited by Ion Vartic, Cluj-Napoca, Apostrof Publishing House, pp. 167-168)
40. Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Gulagul în conștiința românească. Memorialistica și literatura închisorilor și lagărelor comuniste. Eșeu de mentalitate*, second edition, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 2005, p. 307.