

THE BROWN BEAR IN THE NOVEL OF ION D. SÎRBU: FOLK-MYTHOLOGY IN THE SATIRICAL FABLE *THE DANCE OF THE BEAR*

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ABSTRACT. *The Brown Bear in the Novel of Ion D. Sîrbu: Folk-Mythology in The Satirical Fable The Dance of the Bear.* Ion D. Sîrbu's last anthumous novel, *The Dance of the Bear*, subtitled *A Novel for Children and Grandparents*, displays a highly nuanced understanding and symbolization of the animal world. This study aims to analyse the novel which, as the title suggests, abounds in animal imaginary, by focusing on its fable-like characteristics and the elements of Romanian folklore incorporated by the main prose writer of the Sibiu Literary Circle. Like most of Sîrbu's anthumous works, *The Dance of the Bear* anticipates the critical and satirical attitude towards the totalitarian regime(s) that would later define the better-known posthumous books of Ion D. Sîrbu. The Aesopic dimension of the novel is facilitated by the clever instrumentation of the animal reference. One such reference is that of the Romanian mythological fauna, in the analysis of which, Mihai Coman's *Romanian Traditional Mythology* proves to be revealing.

Keywords: *Ion. D. Sîrbu, Sibiu Literary Circle, fable, Romanian folk mythology, eco-ethology, post-war Romanian literature, satire*

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REZUMAT. Ursul brun în romanul lui Ion. D. Sîrbu: Mitologie populară în fabula satirică Dansul Ursului. Ultimul roman antum al lui Ion D. Sîrbu, *Dansul ursului*, purtând subtitlul “*Roman pentru copii și bunici*”, demonstrează o înțelegere și o simbolizare foarte nuanțate a lumii animale. Acest articol își propune să analizeze romanul care, după cum sugerează și titlul, abundă în imaginar animal, punând accent pe caracteristicile sale de fabulă și pe elementele folclorului românesc încorporate de principalul prozator al Cercului Literar de la Sibiu. La fel ca majoritatea operelor antume ale autorului în cauză, *Dansul ursului* anticipează atitudinea critică și satirică față de regimurile totalitare care avea să definească ulterior cele mai cunoscute cărți postume ale lui Ion D. Sîrbu. Dimensiunea esopică a romanului este facilitată de instrumentarea inteligentă a referinței animale. O astfel de referință este cea a faunei mitologice românești, în analiza căreia lucrarea lui Mihai Coman, *Mitologie populară românească* se dovedește revelatoare.

Cuvinte-cheie: Ion D. Sîrbu, Cercul Literar de la Sibiu, fabulă, mitologie populară românească, eco-etologie, literatură română postbelică, satiră

“If you are not a beast to humans,
you cannot be humane to beasts”² –
Ion D. Sîrbu to Horia Stanca, June 10, 1988

A brief history of an underrated novel

In a 1987 letter to Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, with whom he had a most complicated literary friendship, Ion D. Sîrbu wrote the following lines while he was waiting for the authorities to deny him yet another request to travel to the West: “I am working on my *Bear*, I want to become a great animal writer, I only write about beasts and other animals”³ (Mareș 2011, 355). Leaving the satirical and political implications aside, the novelist was justified to categorise himself as such, considering the titles of the two latest novels to be found in his (feared) drawer at that time: *Lupul și Catedrala* [*The Wolf and the Cathedral*] and *Dansul Ursului* [*The Dance of the Bear*]. The former is a novel that was completed and submitted by Ion D. Sîrbu and rejected by *Cartea Românească* publishing house because the text failed to pass through the censorship grid of the State Security. The latter, not yet completed at the time of the aforementioned letter, was published in 1988 and was the last novel to publicly appear during the author’s lifetime.

² “Dacă nu ești fiară cu oamenii, nu poți fi om cu fiarele.” Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

³ “Eu lucrez la Ursul, vreau să ajung un mare scriitor animalier, scriu numai despre fiare și alte animale.”

The existence of the novel is owed to what literary criticism considers “an editorial strategy”⁴ (Enache 2006, 265). No little amount of bravery was involved in it. Since *The Wolf and the Cathedral* was deemed unpublishable by *Cartea Românească*, Ion D. Sîrbu, after multiple efforts of persuasion (including the threat of writing his lucid, uncensored, dangerous memoirs), withdrew his manuscript in April 1987 (Mareş 2011, 334) and decided not to submit it to other publishing houses. Instead, the novel was to appear posthumously, its potential success having already been guaranteed by the decent underground circulation of the manuscript among writers and friends (representing one of Romanian literature’s few but iconic cases of *samizdat*). On the other hand, his editor Maria Graciov, an admirer of Sîrbu’s novel, unwilling to accept the compromise of modification, encouraged her writer to submit another manuscript and maintain, thus, his place in the editorial plan (Graciov 1995, 116). After 9 months of writing and some months of impediments (Mareş 2011, 381), *The Dance of the Bear* was published in July 1988 by the same *Cartea Românească*. As is the case with any book, the editorial history of this novel was doubled by a more intimate one. According to Ion D. Sîrbu’s letter to Virgil Nemoianu from January 18, 1984, the origins of the story can be traced back to a real-life event:

I sat for hours looking down at a Carpathian bear, circling at the bottom of a concrete cave. Then I heard a real story: it would make the subject of a future children’s novel, which I should write, if my inventory didn’t lack about 15 good, irretrievable years.⁵ (Sîrbu 1994, 249-250)

The “real story” did eventually serve as a theme for a children’s novel. The author had been storing the following memory since the 1960s, when, after being released from detention and spending several more months working in the Petrila Coal Mine, Craiova became Ion D. Sîrbu’s compulsory residence.

Three children [...] decided to release that bear. I don’t know how, they got the guard drunk, they starved the bear, so that one night, opening the iron grate, they would lure it with pieces of meat, sprinkled every hundred meters. The park is on the outskirts of the city, from there, through a deserted hippodrome, through a tarnished, old gypsy camp (which I study with special futurological zeal) you can reach the bridge over Jiu. From there, immediately, the forests of Bucovăţ start, stretching all the way to the Baia de Aramă forests.⁶ (Sîrbu 1994, 250)

⁴ “şi a apărut dintr-un motiv, mai degrabă, de strategie editorială.”

⁵ “Stăteam cu orele privind în jos un urs carpatin, învârtindu-se în fundul unei grote de beton. Atunci am auzit o întâmplare reală: ea ar fi tema unui viitor roman pentru copii, pe care ar trebui să-l scriu, dacă nu aş avea lipsă un inventar circa 15 ani buni, irecuperabili.”

⁶ “Trei copii [...] au hotărât să elibereze ursul acela. Nu ştiu cum, au îmbătat paznicul, au flămânzit ursul, ca, într-o noapte, deschizându-i grilajul de fier, să-l momească cu bucăţi de carne, presărată din sută în sută de metri. Parcul e în marginea oraşului, de acolo, printr-un hipodrom pustiu, printr-o amarnică,

The same geographical references are used in the novel. However, if spatiality is left intact, Ion D. Sîrbu alters the temporal register significantly. The main part of the story unfolds in 1944 and the three children are therefore war orphans. Moreover, the novel also aims to recapture the disheartening collective atmosphere following the trauma of the Vienna Diktat, when Northern Transylvania was assigned from Romania to Hungary.

I don't know how far the children managed to lure that bear. (They were tried for their actions by the pioneer organization). What hurt me in this incident [...] was a life-saving detail for those "bad" children; namely, the fact that the bear, after being tired of the meat sprinkled along this road to freedom, instead of advancing to the forest, like the fool that he was, turned back towards his concrete cave, where... to the despair of the children, he returned and went to sleep...⁷ (Sîrbu 1994, 250)

With a few significant differences, the fragment serves as a summary of the 1988 book, subtitled *A Novel for Children and Grandparents* (in order to emphasize both the kinship and the difference from a 1973 project of Ion D. Sîrbu, *Why is Mother Crying?*, subtitled *A Novel for Children and Parents*). More precisely, it is the summary of the novel's core narrative, as the story also possesses an unsymmetrical narrative frame.

Having learned a lesson after the incident with *Lupul și Catedrala*, but not at the cost of his lucidity or morality, "Ion D. Sîrbu avoids direct satire by crafting a 'fable'"⁸ (Patraș 2003, 170) or "an allegory of freedom and imprisonment"⁹ (Oprea 2000, 103). Although the novel benefited from the interpretation and commentary of few but subtle and skilled exegetes, perhaps not enough emphasis was put on the animal figures of the "fable." Romanian literary critics mentioned the animals of *The Dance of the Bear* insofar as they served ideological or biographical readings of the novel. The fact is completely understandable and the input of the critics valuable. However, there is more to contribute to the zoomorphic aspects of *The Dance of the Bear*.

To synthesize the exegesis concerning the animals of *The Dance of the Bear* is to engage in the ideological reading of the novel, which, in this case,

veche țigănie (pe care o studiez eu cu osebită osârdie futurologică) se poate ajunge la podul peste Jiu. De acolo, imediat, încep pădurile Bucovățului, ele se țin lanț până la codrii Băii de Aramă."

⁷ "Nu știu până unde au reușit copiii să momească ursul acela. (Au fost judecați pentru fapta lor de către organizația de pionieri). Ceea ce pe mine m-a durut în această întâmplare [...] a fost un amănunt salvator pentru acei copii "răi"; și anume faptul că ursul, după ce s-a cam săturat de cărnurile înșirate de-a lungul acestui drum spre libertate, în loc s-o ia înainte spre codru, ca un prost ce era, a luat-o înapoi spre grotă sa, unde... spre disperarea copiilor, s-a întors și s-a culcat să doarmă...."

⁸ "Ion D. Sîrbu evită satira directă, construind o 'fabulă'."

⁹ "alegorii despre libertate și încarcerare."

ultimately implies the biographical reading as well. The first animal character in which the reader immediately distinguishes the author's voice is Gary the donkey. The association is obvious, first of all, because Ion D. Sîrbu borrows his own nickname and correspondence alias to the hoofed philosopher of the fable. In addition to a nickname, the donkey inherits the lucidity, the reflexive tendencies, the stoic patience and a limited theatrical career from his author. The Romanian literary critics agree on (but use different terms for) the role Gary plays in the economy of the novel. The donkey has been called "a projection of the writer himself in the animal-symbolic plan", "incarnation", "*alter-ego*" (Enache 2006, 265-267) or "*raisonneur*", "symbolic hero", "reflector-character" (Patraş 2003, 172-178)¹⁰. It is because of Gary's ability to lucidly think and share his wisdom with the reader (or with Carin the white mule filly) that the novel can withstand the affinity with the fable literary genre. Moreover, the moralist donkey's fondness for the children of the novel – Lucian Rogoz (the younger self of the frame-story's narrator), Silvia Decuseară and Roland Redont – together with his exhaustion and defeat in the face of history strengthen the link with the author's outlook on life in his old age.

Less obvious, and therefore less dangerous and less likely to cause a problem that would interfere with the publication of the novel by a state publishing house, Ion D. Sîrbu's second animal avatar in the novel is the Carpathian Bear, Buru. Very briefly, the capturing and imprisonment of the brown bear by the German soldiers, his unnatural captivity which, however, causes the bear to befriend three smart and empathetic children, the chance to escape to his natural habitat together with the missed opportunity of doing so, and finally, the return to the cage are the symbolic counterparts of impactful events in Ion D. Sîrbu's life. They stand for the author's many years of political detention, for decades of suffering at the hands of the totalitarian regime(s) in Romania, for forced domicile, for the three months journey to the West and the 1982 return to his home country - out of self-imposed moral duty, but also out of an incompatibility with the Western way of living, owed to the scars of a lifetime in chains. The balance sheet of Ion D. Sîrbu's penance is to be found in the splendid 2011 book by Clara Mareş, *Zidul de sticlă: Ion D. Sîrbu în arhivele securităţii* [*The Wall of Glass: Ion D. Sîrbu in the Archives of the Security*].

However, even before Clara Mareş' investigation, the literary critics of the post-communist years agree on considering Buru as the other allegorical projection of the writer. The "key" of the novel was provided by Ion D. Sîrbu himself in his posthumously published diaristic and epistolary writings. For instance, in a 1988 letter to Mariana Şora, the author confesses that:

¹⁰ "proiecția în plan simbolic-animalier a scriitorului însuși", "în Asinul Gary s-a încarnat scriitorul însuși", "*raisonneur* și erou simbolic al romanului", "personaj-reflector."

The Dance of the Bear is meant for children like me and grandparents like Ramon; a kind of bet of mine, wanting to prove to myself that one can write major literature by mimicking minors, philosophizing like in fables, the heroes of the novel being a Bear (which resembles me, the portrait being of the author in his youth) and a Donkey, named Gary, this is my perfect portrait, here and now.¹¹ (Sîrbu 1994, 486)

The examples can continue with other letters: to Viorica Guy Marica in November, 1988 (Marica 1995, 56), or to Horia Stanca in July, 1988 (Sîrbu and Stanca 1997, 133). Although perhaps almost as interesting a connection with the symbol of the bear was one Ion D. Sîrbu had been unaware of. During the 1970's, the pseudonym that the State Security gave the author in the *DUI* (abbreviation for the Romanian "*Dosar de Urmărire Informativă*"), meaning informative tracking file, was none other than "URSU", the Romanian word for "the bear." While the 1980's *DUI* of the same author bore the name "SURU" which is phonetically close to Buru, the name of the 1988 novel's bear. However, the Romanian word *suru* translates to "the grey", which causes Clara Mares̃ to write:

but the name is more reminiscent of the grey wolf, the same wolf who was locked in the writer's drawer, waiting for his audience in front of the cathedral of time. Involuntarily, the Security honors Sîrbu by likening him to the wolf or the bear, the two *totem* animals of the Romanians. Coincidence and paradox have accompanied him all his life, how can they desert him in the security files? (Mares̃ 2011, 249)¹²

The totemic bear

When referencing *The Dance of the Bear*, the word *totemic* is recurrent in the various monographs dedicated to Ion D. Sîrbu. In the fragment above, Clara Mares̃ also subtly points at the theme of national identity which constantly follows the author, being a very important aspect of the novel. While the enduring bear is the allegorical projection of Ion D. Sîrbu in the novel, it also stands for the Romanian identity during the Communist regime and throughout

¹¹ "*Dansul Ursului* e pentru copii ca mine și bunici ca Ramon; un fel de pariu al meu, dorind să-mi dovedesc că se poate scrie literatură majoră mimând minorii, filosofând ca în fabule, eroii romanului fiind un Urs (ce-mi seamănă, portretul fiind al autorului în tinerețe) și un Măgar, pe nume Gary, acesta fiind perfectul portret al meu, acum și aici."

¹² "Însă numele amintește mai de grabă de lupul cel sur, lup care se afla și el închis în sertarul scriitorului, așteptându-li publicul în fața catedralei timpului. Involuntar Securitatea îl onorează pe Sîrbu asemănându-l lupului sau ursului, cele două animale totem ale românilor. Coincidența și paradoxul l-au însoțit întreaga sa viață, cum l-ar fi putut părăsi în dosare?"

all of our history as well. As Antonio Patraş brilliantly summarizes: "Buru's destiny is exponential, his defects being ours, as a nation: too much ingenuity, sometimes close to stupidity, and an extraordinary ability to endure, close to resignation"¹³ (Patraş 2003, 175).

The critical discourse has deciphered the two plans in which the fable ought to be confronted:

one symbolic, in which the bear appears as a kind of national totem, and another of strictly political topicality, in which the imprisonment and taming of the beast indicates the surrender of the spirit to brute force, to history, acceptance of slavery, misery, death. (Patraş 2003, 175)¹⁴

However, the exegetes never dwell on the animal as much as they do on what it represents politically or biographically. They mention the link with the Romanian folk-mythology or with the author's knowledge of ethology, but only briefly, without exemplification or analysis. We hope to fill a part of that gap.

Lucian Rogoz, the frame-story's narrator, is a chief engineer of a forest district in Maramureş, and the story of Buru is a recollection of his childhood, triggered by an unhappy bear incident that took place in Chamonix. More important than Lucian's occupation is his origin. The background of the narrator is a profoundly rural one, thus, on the verge of old age, the narrator is not only a specialist in the ethology of the fauna within his district, but also in the mythological fauna of the country. By choosing such a narrator, Ion D. Sîrbu is allowed to display his knowledge of animals and folk-mythology, along with other universal legends surrounding the figure of the bear. In the words of Antonio Patraş:

Ion D. Sîrbu writes a real treatise on bearology, proving, with arguments from zoology, mythology, history and literature that Buru - this is the Dacian resonant name that children give to the prisoner - is the real "ancestor", our true national totem.¹⁵ (Patraş 2003, 175)

Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu also tried, though in a single note, to point at some of the main sources the author used for his "treatise": "I. D. Sîrbu mobilizes his extensive knowledge, his readings from Brehm and his associative fantasy, to

¹³ "Destinul lui Buru este exponenţial, defectele sale fiind şi ale noastre, ca neam: o prea mare ingenuitate, vecină uneori cu prostia, şi o extraordinară capacitate de a îndura, vecină cu resemnarea."

¹⁴ "unul simbolic, în care ursul apare ca un fel de totem naţional, şi altul de strictă actualitate politică, în care încarcerarea şi îmblânzirea fiarei indică cedarea spiritului în faţa forţei brute, în faţa istoriei, acceptarea robiei, a mizeriei, a morţii."

¹⁵ "Ion D. Sîrbu realizează un adevărat tratat de ursologie, demonstrând, cu argumente din zoologie, mitologie, istorie şi literatură că Buru - acesta e numele cu rezonanţă dacică pe care copiii i-l dau prizonierului - este autenticul "strămoş", veritabilul nostru totem naţional."

create a mythical aura of the forest giant”¹⁶ (Crohmălniceanu, Heitmann 2000, 406n). In her article entitled *Un roman pentru copii, bunici și disidenți* [*A Novel for Children and Dissidents*], Ștefania Mihalache, a specialist in children’s literature, considers that the two main labels that can be applied to this novel are: “self-reflexive novel” and “novel for children”, and that the achievement of *The Dance of the Bear* is precisely the intertwined functioning of the two dimensions (Mihalache 2019, 41). For anyone who has read the novel it becomes clear that the author’s target audience (via the novel’s subtitle) is taken seriously. Therefore, the novel for children also serves didactic purposes. In the words of Simon Flynn:

If animals have generally been portrayed as instruments of satire in adult fiction, in books for children they have also been used to educate children both linguistically and socially. (Flynn 2004, 419)

The Dance of the Bear does both while also pointing the satire at the author himself. One of the didactic purposes of the novel is educating others on topics that Ion D. Sîrbu is clearly passionate about. To name a few, these subjects are: Romanian folklore, zoology, mythology in the broadest sense, storytelling, national history and, most importantly, the theme of freedom (and imprisonment).

Besides creating a fable of his own suffering and his country’s penance at the hands of the twentieth century, Ion D. Sîrbu offers his readers a *tour de force* concerning the “cultural sign” of the bear. Buru is an unfortunate specimen of the brown bear, *Ursus arctos*, a species which is indeed remarkably presented in Alfred Brehm’s *Life of animals* (Brehm 1895, 244-250). In fact, Sîrbu homages the German zoologist by quoting his important and charming study midway through his novel: “Therefore, you will be able to read and translate what this very learned German named Dr. Alfred Brehm writes here about bears... in *Life of animals* (*Tierleben*- 1864, six volumes)”¹⁷ (Sîrbu 1988, 163). However, the Romanian author carefully selects fragments from Brehm’s description of bears in order to resemble Sîrbu’s apprehension of *Romanianness*. Consequently, Brehm’s brown bear has the following traits:

‘No other predator is as funny and humorous as our good Meister Petz (This would correspond to our Romanian *Moș Martin*). The bear has an open, genuine nature, lacking anything cunning or false. [...] When he attacks, he attacks directly, when he steals, he steals openly. Lo, in other

¹⁶ “I. D. Sîrbu își mobilizează întinsele cunoștințe, lecturile din Brehm și fantezia asociativă, ca să creeze o aură mitică a uriașului pădurii.”

¹⁷ “Așadar, vei putea citi și traduce ce scrie aici despre urși acest foarte învățat german pe nume doctor Alfred Brehm ... In *Viața animalelor* (*Tierleben*- 1864, șase volume).”

words, he only becomes dangerous when he is attacked and realizes that he cannot avoid fighting. At that point he is brave, he fights openly, often standing up; he knows neither fear nor flight from danger or death...’ This is what Dr. Brehm writes.¹⁸ (Sîrbu 1988, 163-164)

The mythological bear

The novel is abundant both in “scientific” data and traditional mythology lessons regarding this “totem animal.” Shifting from literary history to Romanian ethnology, it is important to highlight that two years before the appearance of *The Dance of the Bear*, Mihai Coman’s *Mitologie populară românească* [*Romanian Traditional Mythology*] (Volume I, 1986) was published. The 1986 volume inaugurates and covers the research direction of the Romanian zoomorphic mythology. Both the donkey and the bear are treated in this mythological bestiary. Each chapter of the *Romanian Traditional Mythology* is a synthesis of the animal’s characteristics as they are reflected by the Romanian traditional thinking. Most probably, Ion D. Sîrbu was aware of Mihai Coman’s study, or, if not, of multiple primary bibliographical sources used by the ethnologist. Therefore, reading the study dedicated to the mythological bear, while bearing in mind Ion D. Sîrbu’s novel, it is interesting to observe that most of the characteristics treated by Mihai Coman find a correspondent in the novel.

Since Mihai Coman’s study of the bear is almost nine pages long, we will try to summarize and extract the aspects that are relevant to *The Dance of the Bear*. Explicitly formulated by the specialised characters of the novel (including the narrator), or only hinted at by the regular unfolding of the action, all the attributes selected below have a correspondent in *The Dance of the Bear*. However, due to space reasons, we will not be able to exemplify exhaustively:

1) The ambivalent ways of relating to bears of the Romanian popular culture, between consecration and derision (Coman 1986, 174). From this point of view, no other animal of the Romanian mythological bestiary would be more fitting for Ion D. Sîrbu’s plans. For every cosmic attribute of the bear described or illustrated in the novel, there is a humiliating situation, a historical irony diminishing the bear’s prestige. In a sense, Buru is the successor not only to the

¹⁸ “Nici un alt animal de pradă nu este atât de nostim, cu un umor atât de simpatic și drăgălaș, ca bunul nostru Meister Petz. (Asta ar corespunde cu Moș Martinul nostru românesc.) Ursul are o fire deschisă, naturală, fără nimic șiret sau fals în ea. [...] Când atacă, atacă direct, când fură, fură pe față. Ia, cu alte cuvinte. Devine periculos abia când e atacat și când își dă seama că nu poate evita lupta. Atunci e brav, luptă deschis, de multe ori ridicându-se în picioare ; nu cunoaște nici frica și nici fuga de pericol sau moarte ...’ Așa scrie dr. Brehm.”

chthonic bear, but to the fairy tale bear who was tricked by the fox in losing his tail. It is because of this aspect that Sîrbu's satire can also be seen as a self-satire. One such example can be found in the penultimate and most satisfying chapter of the novel, presenting Buru's journey towards freedom:

Three dead drunk brothers-in-law were leaning against the giant oak [...] Buru immediately felt that these three [...] smelled exactly as he liked. He swayed (the children were again terrified of what might have happened), swayed to the three very happy brothers-in-law, smelled and licked them with friendliness. They were so intoxicated that they rejoiced: who knows what was or wasn't in their head? [...] They thought it was just a mask, [...] a faire joke. They wanted to give him a drink, the bear refused, only smelling and licking their red, sweaty faces sufficed.¹⁹ (Sîrbu 1988, 267-268)

Many humorous examples could have been provided to illustrate the bear's trajectory towards derision. However, when using an ethnological lens on the second to last chapter, interesting details might appear. For instance, given the fact that the bear's escape turns out to be a failure, Buru's odyssey proves to be nothing more than just a walk. A connection which other exegetes failed to provide (perhaps because they deemed it too unsubtle) is that the novel's climax is just the narrativization of a Romanian common expression: *plimbă ursul* (its word for word translation would be "walk the bear!"), meaning "begone!" or "take a hike!."

2) The bear as the wild *alter ego* of the human / the bear as the mythical ancestor of the human / the bear as a pre-human evolutionary stage (Coman 1986, 174-176; Talos 2001, 179). In another mythological dictionary published, however, after Ion D. Sîrbu's death, Ivan Evseev uses the expression "the zoomorphic twin of man"²⁰ (Evseev 1994, 476) when referring to the bear. Both in the frame-story and in the core-narrative, the folkloric connection that ontologically ties the bear and the human is taught, first by Lucian Rogoz to his French counterparts, second by professor Lupaș, a specialist in folkloric music, to the children protagonists, third by professor Cucu, a teacher of natural sciences, to her students: "But in our country, the bear, as a symbol and a legend, is considered a kind of ancestor.

¹⁹ "Trei cumnați, morți de beți, erau rezemați de uriașul stejar [...] Buru simți de îndată că acești trei gravi cumnați [...] miroseau exact așa cum îi plăcea lui. Se duse (copiilor le fu dat din nou să se îngrozească de ceea ce s-ar fi putut întâmpla), se duse legănat spre cei trei foarte veseli cumnați, îi miroși și-i linse prietenos. Aceștia erau atât de amețiți, încât se bucurau: cine știe ce era în capul lor, ce nu era în capul lor? [...] Credeau că e doar o mască, [...] o glumă de bălci. Voiau să-i dea să bea, ursul nu voia, lui îi ajungea să-i miroasă și să le lingă fețele roșii și transpirate."

²⁰ "geamănul zoomorfic al omului."

Ancêtre.”²¹ (Sîrbu 1988, 22); “I know the Romanian village, I have gathered folklore and old customs. To me, the bear is a holy animal. Yes. A kind of ancestor”²² (144); “He is very similar to humans: this bear looks more akin to us than, say, a gorilla or a chimpanzee. Which, as you’ve just learned, would be the relatives of our Darwinian ancestors. The peasants of the mountains, in any case, consider him an ancestor.”²³ (152). It is important to note the playful manner in which Ion D. Sîrbu creates his own narratives in the spirit of Romanian folk-mythology and serves them as authentic *lore*, instead of simply borrowing from the source material that Mihai Coman also used regarding the origin stories for bears and humans.

3) The woman-abducting bears and the legendary humans with bear parentage (Coman 1986, 175). A frequent occurrence in the epic tales, beliefs or fairy tales of the Romanians is the abduction of women by bears who have their own households but cannot master fire. Some heroes of the Romanian folklore are sons of bears or half-human, half-bear beings. In Ion D. Sîrbu’s novel, this aspect is mentioned as well: “Women should beware of the bear’s gaze, his embrace. The whole north of our Earth is full of kings, heroes and gods born of a bear who managed to marry a beautiful girl, a princess even ...”²⁴ (Sîrbu 1988, 23). Mihai Coman notes that the gesture has an ambiguous echo: “there is a feeling that his deed expresses a propinquity to the cultural space, a certain (natural) desire for reintegration into the neighboring and related world”²⁵ (Coman 1985, 175).

4) The apotropaic attributes of the bear (178-179):

For us Romanians, who were once a people of slaves and serfs, Bear is a name of endearment. And healing. Young women, when asked what their husband is like, say proudly, blushing a little, ‘He’s a bear!’ The magical power of this name passes through the diseased body and heals it.²⁶ (Sîrbu 1988, 23)

²¹ “Dar la noi ursul, ca simbol și legendă, este considerat un fel de om-strămoș. *Ancêtre*.”

²² “Cunosc satul românesc, am adunat folclor și obiceiuri vechi. Pentru mine, ursul e un animal sfânt. Da. Un fel de moș-strămoș.”

²³ “Seamănă foarte mult cu omul: mai mult seamănă acest urs cu noi, decât, să zicem, o gorilă sau un cimpanzeu. Care, doar ați învățat, ar fi rudele strămoșilor noștri pe linie darwinistă. Țăranii din munți, în orice caz, îl consideră un strămoș.”

²⁴ “Femeile trebuie să se ferească de privirea ursului, de îmbrățișarea lui. Întregul nord al Terrei noastre e plin de regi, eroi și zei născuți dintr-un urs ce a reușit să ia în căsătorie o fată frumoasă, o prințesă chiar...”

²⁵ “există sentimentul că fapta sa exprimă o apropiere de spațiul culturii, o anumită dorință (firească) de reintegrare în lumea vecină și înrudită.”

²⁶ “Pentru noi, românii, care am fost cândva un popor de robi și iobagi, Ursu e un nume de alint. Și de vindecare. Femeile tinere, întrebate cum le e bărbatul cu care s-au măritat, spun cu mândrie, roșind un pic: ‘e un urs!’ Dacă un copil se îmbolnăvește grav, maică-sa îl botează a doua oară și-i dă numele Ursu. Puterea magică a acestui nume trece prin trupul bolnav și îl vindecă.”

The healing powers of the bear and his ability to detect and banish evil spirits, although awe-inspiring, relate to the novel in ambiguous ways. Those were precisely the attributes for which bears were captured, abused, domesticated. The apotropaic proprieties of the animal are mentioned in the discourse of the specialist Lucian Rogoz, but they are also in direct link to the saddest kind of bear in the novel. We encounter the wild bear, the captive bear, and the “domesticated” one, out of which the third kind is the most disheartening. Buru, though part of the second type, finds himself in a downward trajectory.

5) The dance and cult of the bear (Coman 1986, 178-180). Another tool Ion D. Sîrbu uses to illustrate a disillusioned worldview is the history of the practice that inspired the title of the novel. In customary thinking, the Bear Dancers brought with them an elemental power, from nature into culture, that the people in the households made use of. Mihai Coman argues that the original meaning fell into decay, the whole magical and ceremonial complex turning over time into a spectacle, or even worse, into a masquerade. Out of what once was a ritual of healing, only the clumsy moves of the domesticated, in pain bear, survive. That is why the moments of the novel when Buru starts to dance are never a laughing matter.

It was obvious that the poor bear was dancing before them, just as he used to do in front of that wretched lying mirror. ‘My God,’ cried Silvia, ‘look at him! Buru is dancing. He is dancing for us! To call us, to seduce us ... It’s awful, I can’t see him anymore, I can’t ...’²⁷ (Sîrbu 1988, 278-279)

Romanian literature knows another case in which the mythical values of the bear’s dance undergo drastic changes and turn into a different, desacralized narrative at the hands of a ludic author. Andrei Oișteanu’s interpretation of *Harap-Alb*’s first trial, obtaining the salad from the garden of the bear, is famous (although not flawless). According to Oișteanu, Ion Creangă’s episode preserves the memory of a ritual of initiation common to peoples of tribal organization practicing a totemic religion. Therefore, the dance of the bear “is an initiatory dance, a ritual of agriculture and healing, in which the neophyte gestures for the first time what he will then repeat all his life, in the fields of his tribe”²⁸ (Oișteanu 2012, 48). In the case of Ion D. Sîrbu’s novel, “the bear’s dance comes as a consequence of his captive state. [...] Placed in front of a mirror (face to face with his own

²⁷ “Era evident că bietul urs dansa în fața lor, la fel ca odinioară în fața acelei nenorocite oglinzi mincinoase./- Dumnezeuule, strigă Silvia, priviți-! Buru dansează. Dansează pentru noi! Ca să ne cheme, ca să ne înduplece... E groaznic, nu mai pot să-l văd, nu mai pot...”

²⁸ “Este un dans inițiativ, ritual agricol și curativ, în care neofitul produce pentru prima dată gesturi pe care le va repeta apoi toată viața, în grădinile și pe ogoarele tribului.”

theatricality), he will start dancing, but not instinctively”²⁹ (Wohl 2012, 164-165). By choosing this bear as his *alter-ego*, Ion D. Sîrbu exposes, in Eugen Wohl’s words, “the author’s posture as a *performer*”³⁰ (169).

6) The holidays of the bear (Coman 1986, 180-181; Taloş 2001, 179-180); As Lucian Rogoz explains to Leo Glaser, a Czech soldier in the German army and friend of the three children: “August the 1st, in our mountains, is the day of the bear said Lucian. We also have a wolf day, but that is sometime in the spring”³¹ (Sîrbu 1988, 227). Besides August the 1st (*Macoveiul* in the Romanian customary calendar), Romanians also dedicated the day of February 2nd (*Stretenia*) to the bear. The symmetrical bear holidays are placed at the peak (and therefore also at the start of the decline) of the major seasons. The fact that in Ion D. Sîrbu’s novel, the day in which the bear is offered freedom and the happiest day of the children’s summer vacation is precisely the holiday of the bear is of no little importance and aesthetic value. Moreover, if we consider the year in which the action takes place, the fortunate holiday marks not only the triumph of the juvenile protagonists in their attempts to restore cosmic order, but the beginning of the Warsaw Uprising: “And behind all these people was his Majesty the forest. Which was silent, but shone cheerful and fresh in the rose light of this Sunday, August 1, 1944” (Sîrbu 1988, 270).

7) The bear and Zamolxis (Coman 1986, 180-181). In his attempt to strengthen the symbol of the Bear as the rightful ancestor and representative of the Romanians, Ion D. Sîrbu could not exclude from the novel the connection between the bear and the most important deity of the Geto-Dacians. Although there are similarities with Mihai Coman’s text, in this particular aspect Ion D. Sîrbu chooses to literally instrumentalize the theory of another ethnologist:

Zamolxis, their high priest, wore on his shoulders a ‘nebrida’, a bear-skin cloak. Some scholars even believe that ‘Zalmo’ means his skin or fur, and ‘Olxis’ meant, in the Thracian language, bear. Zamolxis being the one who wears bear fur, being a bear himself...³² (Sîrbu 1988, 144)

The origins of this theory can be traced back to Porphyry of Tyre (Evseev 1994, 476) However, the author chooses to ignore Mihai Coman’s criticism of the

²⁹ “dansul ursului vine ca o consecință a statului său de captiv. [...] Pus în fața unei oglinzi (față în față cu propria *teatralitate*), el va începe să danseze, însă nu instinctiv.”

³⁰ “postura de performer a autorului.”

³¹ “La întâi august, în munții noștri, e ziua ursului, zise Lucian. Avem și o zi a lupilor, dar asta cade cândva în primăvară.”

³² “Zamolxis, marele lor preot, purta pe umeri o ‘nebridă’, o manta din piele de urs. Unii savanți cred chiar că ‘Zalmo’ înseamnă piele sau. blană, iar ‘Olxis’ însemna, în limba tracă, urs. Zamolxis fiind cel ce poartă blană de urs, fiind el însuși urs....”

etymological speculation and therefore prefers the interpretation of ethnologist Romulus Vulcănescu, which is, indeed, more literary potent, but scientifically unfounded. According to Vulcănescu,

Zalmoxis was a Grand Pontiff of a religious congregation of the *Männerbund* type, the *bear brotherhood*, in which he undertook the mythological reform we know and after which he was proclaimed a god.³³ (Vulcănescu 1985, 502)

The resemblance in formulation is to be observed: *high priest* in the text of Sîrbu and *Grand Pontiff* in that of Vulcănescu. The same ethnologist offers a more detailed exposition of this theory in a previous study dedicated to Romanian traditional masks, in which the analysis of the bear mask occupies an important position (Vulcănescu 1970, 106-115 *passim*). Mihai Coman objects to that theory by pointing out that “the historical documents do not provide enough information to support with certainty the prolongation of a local totemic cult in the figure of the great Dacian god Zalmoxis”³⁴ (Coman 1986, 180). Perhaps the reason Sîrbu chooses to ignore that criticism lies in the literary strength of Romulus Vulcănescu’s hypotheses in general. The latter’s tendency for using “poetical thinking”³⁵ (Coman 2008, 315) in a scientific approach has been pointed out before.

8) The association between the bear and the rhythms of nature (Coman 1986, 180-182; Taloş 2001, 179-180). In the old religions the bear was the embodiment of the divinity of nature that dies and rises again (Evseev 1994, 476). In ancient mythologies the bear is a lunar animal, associated with the goddesses of nature. In the Romanian customary calendar, the days of the bear are placed symmetrically in crucial moments of the year, when, at its peak, the warm season, or the cold one respectively, starts to decline. Mihai Coman argues that the bear is therefore placed in the gallery of those deities of nature which, according to the logic of the myth, can determine the rhythms of the cosmos. Therefore, they also possess meteorological powers. In Ion D. Sîrbu’s novel such an ancestral bear appears only once and is never mentioned again.

From leaf to leaf, from ridge to ridge, like a mute signal of misfortune and alarm, the bad news reached the top, in the lair of the old bear, whom the whole nature of the Parâng Mountains called ‘Muma’. She

³³ “Zalmoxis a fost un Mare Pontif a unei congregații religioase de tipul Männerbund-ului, confreria ursinilor, în cadrul căreia a întreprins reforma mitologică pe care o cunoaștem și după roadele căreia a fost proclamat zeu.”

³⁴ “Documentele istorice nu oferă suficiente informații pentru a susține cu certitudine prelungirea unui cult totemic local în figura marelui zeu dac Zalmoxis.”

³⁵ “Gândirea poetică.”

listened and understood. She sighed, muttered. She did not weep - only humans have the gift of weeping outside: animals weep from within, like trees, like rocks. The mother went out into the night.³⁶ (Sîrbu 1988, 147)

The she-bear emerged from a mythical universe to acknowledge the cosmic implications of imprisoning sacred life. 'Muma' descended briefly into history where she no longer has the power of shaping the elements, like in the creation myths of Romanian folklore. Nonetheless, she participates in the lament of nature following the catastrophe and delivers a prophecy.

The she-bear stretched her neck to the sky. She didn't pray. She was not asking for help. She was cursing. In her own way... "My son, my son, she said, 'everything in life pays off. Everything in life takes revenge. You lived like a bear, now you die like a bear. Among the innumerable stars in the sky, you will find peace and eternity."³⁷ (Sîrbu 1988, 147)

Therefore, in Ion D. Sîrbu's novel three types of bears can be identified based on the criterion of their freedom: the wild bear – Muma; the captive bear – Buru; the domesticated bear – Pierre and Jaques, and the tamed bear in the gipsy camp or the one in professor Lupaş' recollection of Lucian Blaga in Sibiu (Sîrbu 1988, 175-177). A step down on this scale means also a step down from sacredness into derision.

Conclusion

The many resemblances between Ion D. Sîrbu's discourse concerning bears and the 1986 volume *Romanian Traditional Mythology* place Mihai Coman alongside Alfred Brehm, whose work is mentioned in the novel (Sîrbu 1988, 163-164; 195), as the two main sources the author uses when "mimicking encyclopedism"³⁸ (Patraş 2003, 171) concerning the bear. Other sources, such as Romulus Vulcănescu's *Mitologie Română [Romanian Mythology]* (1985) and *Măştile Populare [Traditional Masks]* (1970) can be identified when observing Sîrbu's instrumentalization of the cultural sign of the bear. The understanding of Ion D. Sîrbu's literary universe does not have to follow the lines of biographical

³⁶ "Din frunză în frunză, de pe o creastă pe alta, precum un mut semnal de nenorocire și alarmă, vestea cea rea ajunse sus, în viziuna bătrânei ursoaice, căreia întreaga fire din munții Parângului îi spunea Muma. Ea ascultă și înțelege. Oftă, mormăi. Nu plânse - numai oamenii au darul plânsului în afară : animalele plâng pe dinlăuntru, ca și copacii, ca și stâncile. Muma ieși în noapte."

³⁷ "Ursoaica își întinse gâtul spre cer. Nu se ruga. Nu cerea ajutor. Blestema. În felul ei... „Fiul meu, fiul meu, zicea ea, totul în viață se plătește. Totul în viață se răzbună. Ai trăit ca un urs, mori acum ca un urs. Între nenumăratele stele de pe cer, îți vei găsi și tu liniștea și veșnicia."

³⁸ "Enciclopedismul este totuși adesea mimat."

and ideological readings alone. After all, the author is the faithful follower of Lucian Blaga, from whom Ion D. Sîrbu inherits the respect and fascination with the Romanian folklore and mythology in general. Applying an ethnological lens on the works of Ion D. Sîrbu reveals an author whose understanding of the Romanian mythological reference is impressive. Similar approaches might be conducted on other characters of the novel (such as Gary the donkey), on the author's other novels or on Sîrbu's dramatic writings which abound in folkloric references.

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