

GARY AND BURU AS A DOUBLE ALTER EGO IN *THE DANCE OF THE BEAR* BY ION D. SÎRBU

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Abstract:

Often looked upon from the perspective of his biography in relation with his works, Ion D. Sîrbu published the novel “Dansul ursului” [The Dance of the Bear], apparently a children’s book, in 1988. The key protagonists, Buru the Bear and the Gary the donkey are both lively alter egos of the writer. At the surface, the narrative builds on characters whose life is upset by World War II, while in fact the main theme concerns physical and intellectual freedom. This paper draws on studies referring to repression under the communist regime (Mareş, 2011), the novelist’s personal correspondence (2020, 1998, 1994) and his confessions (2009), to examine whether, and how, the imaginary has its roots in one’s personal experience. What happens to humans, domestic and wild animals when they lose the routine and values of their existence? Who are Gary and Buru, in fact? Is this work truly “a novel for children and grandparents”¹ as the subtitle states? While interest in Sîrbu’s personality and works does not fade, this particular narrative opens as a combination of multiple connections, resistance and learning.

Keywords: Ion D. Sîrbu; *Dansul ursului*; Gary and Buru; initiation; freedom; anthropomorphism.

Introduction

In his works, Ion Dezideriu Sîrbu (1919–1989) explores identity, language and culture, as well as the relationship between memory and meaning in life. Autobiographical elements mix with intricate imaginary representations, the narrative being both realistic and fluid. Abundant references to philosophy, history and literary productions make for a dense

¹ Romanian: „roman pentru copii și bunici” (Sîrbu, 1988: 3). The author of this paper translated all quotes from the Sîrbu’s novel (1988), as well as references from Romanian periodicals.

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canvas, contributing to a construction in which humour coexists with folklore-inspired idiomatic structures. His novels, stories or plays always have a deep moral message. In *Dansul ursului* [*The Dance of the Bear*], first published in 1988, the plot appears straightforward at first glance: three children find out about a lone bear in captivity in Romanescu park, close to Craiova, and decide to set him free. The key events, relationships and dialogues/monologues in the story actually concern the notions of freedom, bonding, growing into adulthood and departure into the hereafter. The author had added the subtitle “a novel for children and grandparents”, which was meant to distract the attention of communist censors. This stratagem worked well according to contemporary reviews (Ungheanu, 1988: 2, Popa, 1988: 6, Tuchilă, 1989: 11, Regman, 1989: 89-90, Țicudean, 1989: 48). Secondly, the novelist appears to have stepped away from typical narratives addressing adults: this is a nostalgic reflection by Lucian Rogoz, an elderly forester and main protagonist, on his coming-of-age.

More recently, Ștefania Mihalache discusses the novel as targeting children, grandparents and dissidents (2019). Looking at the main characters, but also at the events unfolded by the narrator, Mihalache brings forward a pertinent, more extensive interpretation of this work compared to earlier reviews. Complementing her contribution, this paper examines main and secondary protagonists learning about their own experiences. The novel was more than a simple literary product for the novelist; it spoke about his own moral fibre. The writer confessed to Maria Graciov, his editor, about his plan for its publication:

“if [t]he [Dance of the] Bear comes out, I'll leave the Wolf [and the Cathedral] for post-mortem. If not, I'll start writing my memoirs and memos to the Reign. I have not the vocation of a coward, nor have I lost my pride in the intelligentsia. I am not afraid of death, but mortality, I do not wish to vanish licking my superb political scars...” (Mareș, 2011: 343).²

² Romanian: „Dacă îmi apare Ursul, atunci las Lupul pentru post-mortem. Dacă nu, încep să-mi scriu memoriile și să scriu memoriile către Stăpânire. Nu am vocația

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Along the same lines, in an interview with journalist Ion Jianu, who was also an informant to the Securitate, which was included in Sîrbu's surveillance file, the novelist openly declares: "Last year [1988] I published the novel *The Dance of the bear* 'for children and grandparents'. It sold out terribly fast. I don't know whether it was appreciated, **and, in particular, whether they got the subtext**" (Mareș, 2011: 367)³. In order to have a wider perspective, I use both the novel, other works by Sîrbu and articles/interviews about the writer's biography.

2. Autobiography, identity and hybridity

From the onset, Gary the donkey, a naturally-born mediator and philosopher in disguise, aspires to "freedom and equality among all beings in the world" (1988: 150). He is aware that he is a humanist: "If I look deep inside myself, I am three quarters history and memory" (Sîrbu, 1988: 150). The forest is a welcoming and generous territory, yet the gentle Gary is the one looking for meaning and communicating on his own. There is both a natural, as well as a huge gap between Gary and Buru. While Buru's personality is dominating and permanently mysterious, Gary displays the tender, meditating side of a herbivore. The donkey wisely reflects on his own past in a composite flashback about those who once rode him: from beautiful Esther in the Bible to fictional personae such as Scheherazade, Sancho Panza and Lucius in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. Like a fairy tale, there is an indistinct and immemorial background to the narrative, in which both time and morals work together: "[t]ime, one knows, is coloured in blue, ages are grey, good blends with evil, luck with bad luck, and freedom with serfdom, while hours have, in turn, all of the colours in the solar spectrum" (1988: 125). In fact, the writer does provide a particular temporal reference, mentioning the second bombing of Ploiești, which – the journal *Știință și tehnică* points out – took place on 1 August 1943 (1992:

de laș și nici mândria de clasă intelectuală nu mi-am pierdut-o. Nu mi-e frică de moarte, ci de murire, nu vreau să pier lingându-mi superbe mele răni politice..."

³ Text underlined by the Securitate officer; in Romanian: „Anul trecut am publicat romanul «pentru copii și bunici» *Dansul ursului*. S-a epuizat teribil de repede. Nu știu dacă a plăcut, **dacă a fost, mai ales, subînțeles**”.

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14). The story thus develops during the turbulent times of the war, in Romanescu park and the forest of Bucov. The main human protagonists are: head shepherd Cosma, auntie Verona and youngsters Lucian Rogoz, Silvia Decuseară and Roland Redont. Typically for Sîrbu's writing, autobiographical sources or those extracted from the past feed the narrative. Gary, the introspective white donkey, bears the nickname assumed by the writer himself in his private correspondence,⁴ while Redont is equally suggestive, being the surname of the French architect who designed Romanescu park.⁵ The writer himself directly acknowledges Redont's contribution to the city as he mentions the park being commissioned by mayor Nicolae Romanescu (Sîrbu, 1988: 70).

One brief episode in the novel concerns three brothers from Novaci, Nicolae Ursu, Ilie Ursu and Florea Ursu, this surname being identical to that of Sîrbu's maternal grandmother. Nicolae was the given name of his paternal grandfather. Sîrbu states in *Iarna bolnavă de cancer* [*The cancer-ridden winter*] that his grandmother's name was Maria Ursu, a surname meaning "bear" in Romanian (1998: 123). When Trifu, a local worker, wishes to shower and humiliate Buru the bear,

⁴ See, for instance, Ion D. Sîrbu, *Traversarea cortinei. Corespondență cu Ion Negoîtescu, Virgil Nemoianu, Mariana Șora* [Crossing the curtain. Correspondence with Ion Negoîtescu, Virgil Nemoianu, Mariana Șora], Editura de Vest, Timișoara, 1994; Ion D. Sîrbu, *Iarna bolnavă de cancer* [*The cancer-ridden winter*], Bucharest, Editura Curtea Veche, 1998.

⁵ Ilie Purcaru writes, in his article „Podoaba verde” [“The green jewel”]: “(...) in Craiova, there is, as everyone knows, the well-known Park of the people, the former Romanescu park, one of the most attractive in the country or, the experts say, maybe even on the continent or maybe even in the world. This park, the work of the landscape architect E. Redont, who was awarded the gold medal at the 1900 Paris Exposition, whose small but rich and highly expressive verdant little universe of 600,000 square metres masterfully illustrates an important stage in the development of landscape art in the world (the romantic-era park) [(...) in Craiova există, precum se știe, celebrul Parc al Poporului, fostul parc Romanescu, unul din cele mai frumoase ale țării, ba, zic experții, poate chiar ale continentului, poate chiar ale lumii. Acest parc, operă a arhitectului peisagist E. Redont, distinsă cu Medalia de Aur la Expoziția universală din 1900 de la Paris, oferă, pe 600 000 de metri pătrați, un univers vegetal de o mică bogăție și de o maximă expresivitate, ilustrând magistral una dintre etapele importante (parcul de „stil romantic”) ale evoluției artei peisajere pe plan mondial”, *Viața Românească*, LXXVII, 1, January 1982: 109.

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Lucian releases the bolts of the door and Buru comes out. His mere appearance makes Trifu lose his mind. Soon after, a soldier by the name of Leopold Glaser, a kind and round-headed man, takes care of feeding the beast. Glaser was, in fact, the maiden name of Sîrbu's own mother, Katherine Glaser (Sîrbu, 2020: 276; Sîrbu, 1998: 124; Sîrbu, 1982: 14). The soldier also mentions his family roots in Serbia close to Sichevița, Gîrnic and Roventța where the locals are known as "Pemi" (1988: 227); Sîrbu's mother had actually come from this area (Sîrbu, 2020: 285). Leopold Glaser is a hard-working and creative artisan, able to give life to an automaton, a nymph of a spring. He calls her Kacena, which is a diminutive form of Sîrbu's mother's given name. Glaser proudly declares: "I have named her so since my wife and younger daughter have this name. Kacena is not the name of a nymph or rusalka or Ondina" (Sîrbu, 1988: 223). The craftsman goes on to recall the refrain of an old Czech song popular in old Prague: "Ne pudeme domu, aj rano, aj rano, aj rano" (Sîrbu, 1988: 233)⁶. This could reflect Sîrbu's memories as recounted by his mother or close relatives, since the same line comes up in the story "Cinste" [Honesty] published in 1955 (3). In the novel, Irene Redont, the mother of young Roland, both refugees from France, gets news from Jean Louis Courriol; Courriol was in reality a professor from Lyon who taught French in both Iași and Craiova from 1975 to 1977 and from 1978 to 1980⁷ and whom the writer had

⁶ In the *Catalogue of folk songs*, the original version runs as follows: "Nepudeme domů, až ráno, / až bude ustláno, / nepudeme domů, až ráno, / až bude den; / až bude svítání, / pudeme k snídani, / nepudeme domů, až ráno, / až bude den // Nepudeme domů, až ráno, / až bude dohráno, / nepudeme domů, až ráno, / až bude den; / když vyjde dennice, 1) je konec muzice, / nepudeme domů, až ráno, / až bude den. / 1) až vyjde dennice, / necháme sklenice." [Erben 2/696 We won't go home until morning: "We won't start home until the morning, when it's laid out, we won't start home until the morning, when it's day; when it's dawn, we'll go to breakfast, we won't go home until morning, when it's day. We won't go home until the morning, when it's over, we won't go home until the morning, when it's day; when the diary comes out, 1) the music is over, we don't go home until morning, when it's daylight. 1) when the diary comes out, we leave the glasses" <http://folksong.eu/cs/song/22372>, accessed 2 February 2023.

⁷ Ion Jianu, Cu prof. Jean-Louis Courriol despre limba română la Universitatea Lyon III [With Prof Jean-Louis Courriol about Romanian at University Lyon III], *România literară*, XIX, 22, 29 May 1986, p.22.

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known personally (Mareș, 2011: 245, 263, 280, 287, 302, 303, 317, 321). Enoiu, a persistent Securitate captain who failed to recruit the writer as an informer, emerges in the novel as a military prosecutor (Șirbu, 1988: 210).⁸ Such references, more or less explicit, show that various persons and incidents had left an indelible mark on the author to the point that he felt the need to retrieve them in his narrative. The incident in which the poet Mihai Beniuc turned against philosopher and poet Lucian Blaga is indirectly alluded to. Blaga plainly informs Beniuc that a poet, like a bear, has to leave a lasting mark on his culture; aware of himself, Blaga delivers the metaphor of a poet able to positively utilise his own heritage:

“I am a bear, have stretched myself as much as possible and pushed my claw into the fir tree of the Romanian Language at maximum height. Now, your turn comes: if you succeed, I will leave on my own and disappear. But if you do not succeed, then please go and study the life of the bears” (1988: 177-178)⁹.

In the *Dance of the bear*, the narrator does not expose Beniuc’s real identity. It was only revealed in the uncensored version of the original interview published in *Solstițiu* [*Solstice*] in 1990, later included in *Ultimele* [*The last ones*] (Șirbu, 2020: 124). In the case of „Ursu”, the appellative also refers to Neculai Ursu, the head of the 1784 Transylvanian uprising (1988: 188). The narrator alludes to folkloric productions in which the bear turned into a silent reminder of the uprising’s motto: “Nobles should be no more, nor serfs” (Șirbu, 1988: 188).¹⁰ Names are in such cases either strongly connected with a certain family member or a cultural/historical figure; “the Bear” thus acquires a symbolic function meant to support protagonists in their reconnection with folklore and history.

Youngsters Lucian Rogoz, Silvia Decuseară and Roland

⁸ In her study about the Șirbu’s surveillance 1957-1989, Clara Mareș reveals that he was among the officers monitoring the novelist (2011: 176).

⁹ Romanian: „eu sunt urs, m-am întins cât am putut și mi-am înfipt gheara în bradul Limbii Române la înălțimea maximă. Acum e rândul tău: dacă vei reuși, eu plec singur și dispar. Dar dacă nu vei reuși, atunci te rog să te duci să studiezi viața urșilor”.

¹⁰ Romanian: „Boieri să nu mai fie, și nici iobagi”.

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Redont stay at the Cosmas', whose house is at the edge of the old Bibescu estate. Asked to ride four purebred horses, the three meet the domestic fauna of the estate: the dog, Burcuș, the Swiss cows, Dumana and Joiana, a wild and rebellious goat and an old, rather bizarre and capricious donkey, Gary. From the onset, Gary appears to be a highly reflective entity. His thoughts, often indirectly shared with the readership by the author, indicate a curious, humorous and open mind: "[he] had an excellent memory, was a silent, meek and very wise donkey" (Șîrbu, 1988: 54). His relationship with other beasts is completely subjective: he holds an old grudge against horses, which are, in his opinion, thoughtless animals that allow humans to control them. Auntie Verona describes Gary briefly before meeting Lucian and Livia: "[h]e holds the name of a Babylonian king. And knows six modern languages and six other dead languages" (Șîrbu, 1988: 56)¹¹. Gary is thus, in fact, an alter ego of Șîrbu. As the novelist had confessed in an interview, this was the nickname the poet and philosopher Lucian Blaga had provided to his disciple, the novelist himself, when the post-war repression of the intellectuals initiated by Stalinist supporters had started in Romania (Șîrbu, 1990: 12, Șîrbu 2009: 155). Moreover, the writer would literally sign his correspondence with teacher Victor Moldovan as "Gary the Donkey" (Șîrbu, 1996: 32); this also emerges in his letters included in *Traversarea cortinei. Corespondență cu Ion Negoïtescu, Virgil Nemoianu, Mariana Șora* [*Crossing the curtain. Correspondence with Ion Negoïtescu, Virgil Nemoianu, Mariana Șora*], *Editura de Vest* (1994: 481). In a contemplative and jocular manner, Gary often breaks the flow of events with his opinions, the narrator following his thoughts closely and connecting his personality to other familiar cultural personalities via a warm and humorously-outlined profile: "the spirit of Nastratin Hogeia, Anton Pann had been reincarnated in him, both being related to the greatest donkeys in history: those of Confucius, Buddha, Christ and Mohammed. While horses served heavy works and wars, donkeys have endured and philosophised" (Șîrbu, 1988: 69). However, such an elevated

¹¹ Romanian: „Are nume de rege babilonian. Știe șase limbi vii și tot șase limbi moarte”.

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spirit is not spared from difficult moments. This happens once the Turk Cadîr, a former sailor near Măgurele or Corabia joins the local community and helps the Cosmas in their work. As a couple of actors spot the gentle donkey in the centre of the town, they urge Cadîr to allow the donkey to appear in a play. The donkey himself is excited by the idea and accepts it willingly, so he rehearses a few times. Acting instructions work fine to the point that the director exults that the four-legged animal is far more disciplined and cultivated than those in charge of culture and literature. Such a sarcastic comment connects the experience of the narrator himself with those he had worked with at the Craiova National Theatre for several years. Sîrbu recounts in *The Diary of a diarist without a diary* his unsuccessful attempts to publish his novella, *Șoarecele B [Mouse B]*: local editors dismiss one version after another claiming that the plot is unfortunately connected with an inadequate political message (Sîrbu, 2009: 62-63).

Though the appearance of Gary the donkey delights the audience, an apparently slight hesitation stirs wild applause and the donkey brays frantically. The repeated appellative “Gary, Gary” (Sîrbu, 1988: 69) makes fireman Olanciuc, barely waking up, think about the Slavic “garii” meaning “fire”¹² so that his question “Where is the fire?” (Sîrbu, 1988: 69) causes the audience to run in panic. The way the donkey looks indecisively at the audience could be interpreted as an attempt by the novelist to identify peers able to share his own views even if his access to culture was denied at that time. The incident opens up a wider debate about the role of an agent in a show, as the novelist had often presented characters acting as fools in his works. In his article, “A fable of the man: circus” (Sîrbu, 1969: 15), Sîrbu scrutinises the contribution of clowns in performances. The clown looks for humour in an adverse environment and this turns him into “an ongoing victim of universal bad luck” (Sîrbu, 1969: 15)¹³. For Sîrbu, the mission of

¹² In fact, this is a slightly corrupted form of the Russian “горит, горит” [pronounced “ga-rît”], the imperative plural of “гореть”, suggesting that something is on fire, see <https://en.openrussian.org/>, accessed 21 January 2023. I wish to thank Irina Sedakova for her prompt support in identifying the term. As Sîrbu had been on the Russian front, he was fluent in Russian (Sîrbu, 2009: 106).

¹³ Romanian: „e o victimă permanentă a unui universal ghinion”.

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the clown's act extends beyond mere simplicity: “[h]e is a man. He is an actor. He is a symbol. He holds the Olympian secret of humour, a secret that neither Bergson, nor others could theoretically translate” (Sîrbu, 1969: 15)¹⁴.

While anthropomorphism often appears in children's literature, connecting the readers and supporting heuristic learning (Kellog Markowski 1975: 460-462), it has also been discussed from a philosophical standpoint (Buzzoni, 2014: 375-395). Chengcheng You examines ethical aspects as well as the way anthropomorphic representations relate to an “autobiographical animal” (2021: 190). In *The Dance of the Bear*, such an imaginary union of the narrator and the animal embodying his life experience comes up as a confession at the end of this chapter:

“One knows that any donkey has, in his subconscious, the indistinct wish to turn (or re-turn) into a human. And, as a human, to start talking to people. About humanism and humanity, of course. About kindness and love. About exploitation and cruelty... Maybe there, under the lime light, for a few minutes, he had thought about himself as a MAN, finally reaching the place where he could voice his anger. Who knows?” (1988: 91)¹⁵.

In his interior monologue, Gary the donkey thus acknowledges his own hybrid status: a lot closer to humans than most locals might have thought. Cadîr is, from this point of view, an exception: in terms of history and identity, he talks to Gary and feels personally related to him (Sîrbu, 1988: 76). While young Lucian, Silvia and Roland learn to ride well, General Benone Popescu gambles and loses the three horses, even if they were not his property. Oberst von Klause, a Prussian landlord, wins them. Cadîr immediately identifies the

¹⁴ Romanian: „E om. E actor. E simbol. El deține secretul olimpic al comicului, secret pe care nici Bergson și nici alții nu l-au putut descifra teoretic.”

¹⁵ Romanian: „Se știe, orice măgar are, în subconștientul său, dorința nebunească ca într-o bună zi să devină (sau să re-devină) om. Și, ca om, să înceapă a le vorbi oamenilor. Despre umanism și omenie, bine-nțeleș. Despre bunătate și dragoste. Despre exploatare și cruzime... Poate că acolo, în lumina rampei, pentru câteva minute, se crezuse a fi OM, ajuns în sfârșit în locul de unde se va putea să-și reverse năduful inimii. Cine știe?”

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strategy to recover them: this can only happen through more gambling. Judge Osman from Ada Kaleh agrees to play poker with the German owner. After five hours, following dramatic twists and turns, Osman finally wins. According to the unwritten chivalric code, the judge offers the loser the opportunity to play a second game. The Germans arrive in Ada Kaleh the next evening only to lose this too, their final chance. In a pensive and humorous manner, Cadîr later looks upon victory, leaving room for what remains unknown:

“We [the Turks] have known, for one thousand years now, what good luck and bad luck are; they [the Germans] only taste now from the bitter glass of defeat. Maybe Osman played honestly and won. Maybe he was a villain and won. We are not allowed to ask: the man played his gold, the cards were brought by the German, he rolled up the sleeves of his gown” (Sîrbu, 1988: 119).¹⁶

The mastermind behind this plan was in fact Gary, who – in an intimate conversation with the Turk – had reminded the latter that gambling was the only solution to recovering the horses. Though alertly presented, this whole episode is but an intermezzo. The second part of the volume concerns a beast as unfamiliar as the park’s most recent resident. Shepherd Cosma recounts the story of two dead soldiers he had found, an event that was quite surreal. The forest ceases to be the welcoming territory for little creatures and wild beasts that had inspired Silvia in her fantasy stories. The youth and the adults then learn the news about a large concrete bunker and an unusual hostage: “[a] bear in a park, less than one hundred metres away from swans and boats? A genuine bear – who could be looked upon from above, in humiliating and unfair safety? As in a cinema, circus or zoo?” (Sîrbu, 1988: 140).¹⁷ Their encounter is both unexpected and profound: such an animal is outstanding,

¹⁶ Romanian: „Noi, de o mie de ani, știm norocul și nenorocul, ei abia acum gustă din paharul amar al înfrângerilor. Poate că Osman a jucat cinstit și a câștigat. Poate că a fost pezevenghi și a câștigat. Nu avem voie să-l întrebăm: omul a jucat cu aurul său, cu cărțile aduse de neamț, cu mânecile la halat suflecate.”.

¹⁷ Romanian: „Un urs într-un parc, la nici o sută de metri de lebede și bărci?! Un urs autentic – ce putea fi privit de sus, dintr-o umiltoare și nedreaptă siguranță? Ca la cinema, circ sau menajerie?”.

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requiring, when talked about, a capital letter: the Bear¹⁸. He had been confined because the German general had decided to find him a sow and take cubs back to his country, where bear numbers were low. This unethical plan sets off a swift resolution on behalf of Cosma and the youngsters: to adopt the bear and work for his release. The bear thus stands as an ancient embodiment of freedom for all of the locals. He resembles man in many ways, yet he lives in the forest; however, when deprived of freedom, he might swiftly learn what slavery is. From this point of view, You's observation about anthropomorphism and zoomorphism (2021: 185) as perspectives employed in fairy tales applies equally to *The dance of the bear*.

3. Learning, memory and nostalgia

In a discussion with his teacher, Lupaș, Lucian finds out that bears are different from other wild beasts. When domesticated, these omnivores are as different from one another as humans are:

“there is a great difference between the bear allowing himself to be led by a Gypsy, a bear-leader and one being an acrobat at the circus. This is the genuine intellectual: he had learned his lesson, he earns bread in art and being rewarded by applause” (Sîrbu, 1988: 176).¹⁹

Such a portrait matches the novelist himself, validating the hypothesis of a double alter-ego. Gary is thus a voice of the author, being flexible, humorous, sociable and wise. The bear displays other qualities and skills, equally plausible to the personality of the writer: temporarily solitary, physically resilient and curious to learn the tricks of the wise, be they donkeys or humans. The writer himself plainly validates this hypothesis: “[t]he novel is some sort of a *symbolic fable* (from half onwards) where the Bear is me as a youth and the donkey is

¹⁸ In *The diary of a diarist without a diary*, the novelist refers to consistent documentation regarding the bear (2009: 156).

¹⁹ Romanian: „e o mare diferență între un urs ce joacă dus de nas de un țigan, ursar de meserie, și un urs ajuns acrobat în circ. Acesta e un adevărat intelectual: și-a învățat lecția, își câștigă pâinea făcând artă și primind aplauze”.

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me at the end of my life” (Șirbu, 1998: 111)²⁰. The bear as an emblematic entity for the writer himself coincides with the Securitate’s onomastic choice as they unexpectedly reopen his file in April 1973 (Mareș, 2011: 142). This is a rare case in which both an intellectual and the secret services use an identical appellative for the individual in question. While Buru may embody a Transylvanian, an individual feeling at home in the natural environment and alienated in a closed space, Gary represents a complementary entity, anthropomorphically featured by the narrator. Lucian Rogoz declares: “let us leave the bears in their world” (Șirbu, 1988: 38). Such a statement could suggest that the impetuous nature embodied by Buru might not always be read by other residents of Craiova. This explains then why an intellectual may take temporary refuge in writing, which is the case of the novelist himself. In her study, You pointed out that anthropomorphism may serve anthropocentrism (2020: 187), yet such an observation does not apply to Șirbu’s novel. Though animal protagonists are a means for the novelist to recurrently reflect on the need of a high moral stance in anyone’s life, these characters require careful consideration. The way they appear and act in the narrative suggests that the narrator is constantly preoccupied with finding a balance between all creatures populating the earth. Auntie Verona encourages Lucian to be selective and reflective with the appellatives most commonly used by people for various animals: “I kindly ask you never to call the donkey ‘donkey!’. Because you commit an error. I don’t even call the pig ‘pig!’, as I have seen many people in my life who were dirtier and more disgusting than the wildest pigs” (Șirbu, 1988: 115)²¹.

The tragic and unexpected death of Cadîr does not deter the youngsters from pursuing their resolution. In order to stimulate Buru, they plan to use a mirror and observe the bear. Their intention is far from purely experimental, even if the result is dramatic: Buru starts dancing in front of the mirror.

²⁰ Romanian: „[r]omanul este un fel de *fabulă simbolică* (de la jumătate spre final) în care Ursul sunt eu, la tinerețe, iar măgarul sunt eu, acum, la sfârșitul vieții”.

²¹ Romanian: „eu te rog să nu-i mai spui niciodată măgarului nostru «măgarule». Fiindcă greșești. Eu nici porcului nu-i spun «porcule», fiindcă am văzut în viața mea mulți oameni care erau mai murdari și mai scârboși decât sunt porcii cei mai sălbatici”.

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The humans are not sure about his reactions, they understand that the bear sees himself, but it is not clear whether he perceives ‘the other’ in the looking glass as a love interest or a dangerous potential rival. As they observe him, the children realise that the bear’s reaction explains a deep need: “[h]e would not dance to entertain himself, it was for the image in front of him, either hearing an instinctive order or being driven by an obscure memory” (Sîrbu, 1998: 215)²².

According to Gary, the plan to free Buru cannot end well. For the sensible donkey, learning to live freely and learning to submit to slavery is part of one’s existence and such an experience cannot be reversible. He thinks that the return from slavery equals an “impossible return” (Sîrbu, 1988: 235). The modest and knowledgeable Equus expresses it plainly: “[w]hoever has fallen cannot stand up, whoever has turned to the claws of human cruelty and stupidity is lost once and for ever!” (Sîrbu, 1988: 235)²³. Even if Silvia and Lucian combat his depressive mood, Gary thinks that time does not progress linearly, but works in cycles whereby the past is revisited; he thus shares an eastern vision of it. As regards Buru, Gary plays a unique role: that of both an actor and a witness. To support his friend’s liberation, Gary independently develops his own communication: he visits Buru’s concrete cave each night, yet their silent conversations remain a mystery to the others. When the youngsters finally take Buru out of his confinement, the bear and the donkey gently rub foreheads; this is symbolic for the writer’s personal reconciliation with his past. The herbivore understands that the liberation of the omnivore represents a reversal of the act of hunting: while adults hunt and kill bears, the children have developed a strong affection for Buru. When the group loses its sense of direction, it is Gary who takes on the role of the leader and shows them the way. Their journey is obviously one of initiation in which humans and beasts join forces to achieve a common goal. The emotional and intellectual abilities of the main and secondary characters are visible only in terms of positive

²² Romanian: „nu dansa pentru plăcerea lui, el juca pentru imaginea din fața sa, fie ascultând un ordin instinctiv, fie mânat de o obscură amintire”.

²³ Romanian: „Cine a căzut (...) nu se mai poate ridica, cine a fost prins nu se mai poate elibera, cine a încăput în ghearele cruzimii și prostiei omenești e pierdut odată pentru totdeauna!”.

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versus negative skills and personalities. The narrator portrays Trifu, the Cosmas' helper, as a narrow-minded individual fully insensitive to the changes undergone by the bear. Like the trials traditionally encountered in fairy tales, the group has to overcome potential obstacles: a pack of dogs, two monks, the neighbourhood of local gypsies and three drunken brothers.

The brief encounter between Buru and a small bear tamed by the gypsies reveals huge differences in terms of communication and experience: while the small bear lacks the ability to communicate loudly or take any type of initiative towards freedom, he obviously enjoys the occasion to meet his kin. Buru is, in his turn, surprised by the younger bear, who cannot understand why Buru encourages him to set himself free. Young Roland dispels a tense moment by spreading garlic on the chained beast, which immediately disgusts the older bear. Buru redirects himself towards Silvia who smells of tzuica, a scent that he enjoys.

As he finally reaches the forest, Buru comes across a forgotten experience: odours and sounds that he had left behind a long while before. The bear sits down and relishes the raspberries he has found and this simple gesture embodies a mission accomplished for the three humans. Their satisfaction is truly short-lived: a few days later they learn that Buru has found his way back to the cave in the park. The adolescents finally understand the way that physical versus interior freedom works. Their love has actually become the invisible chain preventing the bear from leaving the human settlement, albeit only a concrete cave. Affection can thus operate not only as a stimulus but also as an obstacle to preserving one's independence. Soon afterwards, Gary prepares himself for his final departure into the unknown. Reflecting on his entire experience, he detaches from his philosophical stance and looks at what could be beyond matter:

“Not all that is real is rational; not all that is rational is true; not all that is true is good; not all that is good is right; not all that is right is universally valid; not all that is universal is eternal...” (Sirbu, 1988: 280).

Convinced that youth is the only hope of salvation for mankind, he plunges into his last trip, attempting to leave behind both facts and regrets. This is but a stage, parallel and

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similar to that undertaken by Lucian Rogoz, the engineer who takes a moment to look back at his own life: he is not only the head of the forestry unit but a proud father and grandfather. Having recently received a letter informing him about the death of his close friend, Roland, a hydraulic and mining engineer in Savoy, he plunges into the deep memories of his own youth being fully aware that: “[m]emories are not good or evil, pleasing or displeasing: memories are paths and springs in the woods of life: they are as they are and surface whenever you look forward or back” (Sîrbu, 1988: 6)²⁴.

The bright personality of teacher Enea Giurchescu (Mareș, 2011: 368, Sîrbu, 1974: 4), director of the Boy’s High School in Petroșani informs the profile of the pedagogue Enea Giurcă presented in the novel, a specialist in history and geography (Sîrbu, 1988: 61). Giurcă is the mentor of young Lucian, Silvia and Roland in humanities. In the volume *Ultimele* [*The last ones*], the novelist writes an extensive letter to Lucian Giurchescu, the son of his former teacher. It took him seven months to complete the novel; as with Gary’s immersion in the past, the novelist highlights multiple connections that he has reworked:

“[t]he first chapter is an anaesthetic chapter, which serves as an *ignoration elenchi*, a deviation from the essential. But it is also an undisclosed thought of the writer (who sees, in the fate of the bear, a kind of a parable for the fate of our people). I think that I have written to you: ‘Bears leave and die – others die... and leave.’ So, the two bears, defectors, perish... because of the competition – and the Bear in the cave gets out of the prison and then – out of stupidity, love, fate – he goes back to it. For good. Here, we call our good sense, which enables us to read through and beyond lines, *la double lecture*.”

For the name of Enea Giurcă, I need to tell you that it is a mere name but a dear one: I have truly enjoyed to see before my eyes the severe look of your father, the one to whom I owe my leave from [Petroșani Central] Workshops and re-registration to high school (boarding

²⁴ Romanian: „Amintirile nu sunt bune sau rele, frumoase sau urâte: amintirile sunt cărări și izvoare în pădurea vieții: ele sunt așa cum sunt și revin de câte ori te uiți înapoi sau înainte”.

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and scholarship). I did not take into consideration the real data of the family, I was writing fast, I was glad to be able to let him voice some of the wisdom I think it is greatly needed here. Trust me, I believe in the spirit of the dead, I felt him close, I thought he knew, reading and understanding me correctly, I felt his strict hand on my shoulders” (Șirbu, 2020: 155).

It is the novelist who clarifies the necessary parallel reading of his volume: under the guise of Buru, Șirbu did not abandon his country because he could only see himself living in Romania. In *Iarna bolnavă de cancer* [*The cancer-ridden winter*], he reiterates his second identity under the guise of the donkey: “[y]ou must know that if that animal was not a donkey, the [thoughts] passing through his head wouldn’t have escaped censorship” (Șirbu, 1998: 108).²⁵ Moreover, the posture of a donkey allows his ego to challenge any type of authoritarian inflexibility. In his letter to Lucian Giurchescu, the writer admits that associating Gary with an ass may indicate his lack of reverence towards the fools in the classical theatre, which is exactly what he had cherished (Șirbu, 2020: 156). Șirbu thinks that even in prison an individual can experience a particular type of freedom. The visit of the youngsters Lucian, Delia and Roland to Fort 13 reflects the tragic conditions for political prisoners during the Stalinist period. Called “consciences”, the one hundred fifty “thin, bent bodies” (Șirbu, 1988: 230)²⁶ are contrasted with the well-being of the guards and German shepherds.

Conclusion

Various paired characters such as Gary the donkey and Buru the bear, or head shepherd Cosma and his helper Trifu, present considerably contrasting if not opposed personalities. Binary sets of characters convey, in the form of a children’s narrative, better differentiation: reflective versus impetuous or the individual naturally connected to the earth versus a person in the city, lacking the ability to care about the natural environment. While the purpose is to urge readers to reconsider their own

²⁵ Romanian: „Să știi că dacă «animalul» acela nu era măgar, nu putea trece de cenzură cele ce treceau prin capul său”.

²⁶ Romanian: „trupuri slabe, încovoiate”.

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abilities and inclinations, the narrator understands all sides of human nature. Even the weak or the less gifted have chances to develop during the course of their existence if they make efforts to do so. Such polarised qualities and weaknesses might suggest a classical narrative; however, given Lucian Rogoz' introduction, the main character, as well as Gary's final internal monologue, the narrative turns out to be a cyclical one. The ending focuses on Gary's passage to the other world as a continuation of the first significant stage in one's existence: childhood. If the latter is but a transitory phase on the way towards adulthood, Gary's final disappearance into the dense forest represents one's progress towards a non-material universe. Both stages are part of a personal journey in which the individual can progress when they become able to learn from personal experience. Protagonists learn to think about obstacles in a rather unusual way: surprising the rival is a particular tactic. When they are in doubt, they examine their chances rationally and accept risk. If they lose, they have at least exhausted possible alternatives. Learning obviously extends beyond adolescence, gender and ethnicity. This is, according to the novelist, the main point in overcoming hardships. The narrative opens to further analysis in relation to Sîrbu's private correspondence, as well as other allegorically-built narratives, either by Sîrbu or other Romanian authors.

Romanian traditions, folklore and humour coming up in the narrative could also be examined at length.

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