

MORAL INTEGRITY AND FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE OF THE WRITER'S CONDITION. THE CASE OF PAUL GOMA

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Abstract: The ethical status of the writer, of the artsman, is a topic that has given rise to countless debates in the world of writing. Can artsmen be faithful only to pure art, to the „autonomy of aesthetics”, or do they have to take into account the recourse to ethical truth—through writing? Only a few writers thought that ethics, moral integrity, mattered in their literary endeavour. „The ideology of literary purism” (Mircea Cărtărescu), of modernism origins, tended to isolate literature from life, from everyday life. Paul Goma might be the only contemporary Romanian writer who brought into the spotlight the ethical component, arguing that the writers’ duty is to put themselves at the service of the truth. Through hardships, Paul Goma did not survive due to culture, but due to the truth.

Keywords: *truth, novels on concentration camps, exile, Communism, dignity, freedom of conscience*

Romanian literature is rich in brilliant writers. Some of them—very few—are geniuses. It, nevertheless, lacks characters, the synchrony of the writers with their own work. Writers brimming with virtues remain average in writing, while many writers capable of gifting the world with valuable works are real-life wretches. The history of Romanian and universal literature offers conclusive examples of highly talented writers who have proved to be worthless in their everyday life. This gap between the human being and the artistic one tends to disturb the reception of the work and to have repercussions on the author’s creative biography. Louis-Ferdinand Céline is a revealing example. His novels are impressive both in terms of literary value and in terms of their value as human documents. Nevertheless, the author displayed a controversial moral conduct at

the time, which also obliterated his literary success. The typical such examples in Romanian literature are those of Petru Dumitriu or Eugen Barbu who were also very good writers, but worthless humans. Their works last, their novels hold an unquestionable artistic value, although the authors cannot live up to their own works.

One of the very few Romanian writers who stayed true to the truth of their own work is Paul Goma. As Flori Bălănescu, the best connoisseur of the writer's work and biography, remarks, "Paul Goma is the most consistent and consonant in and with himself, and with his work as a writer whose works I had the chance to read, and whom I had the chance to know"¹. For the Paris exile, writing meant telling the truth—saying it out loud, without hesitation. True writers put their talent to work for the truth. Writers are the living conscience of their people; they are megaphones of national ideals. This is their only way to freedom! This is the only way for them to step with dignity into the great world of literary history. "I am not a dissident. I am a writer. Full stop"—is the belief used by the Bessarabian writer to define his condition as a man of writing. A writer cannot deviate from the standards of truth and justice—these are Paul Goma's creative principles.

Known mainly as a politician, as an opponent to dictatorship, as a political writer, Paul Goma is a troublesome and rebellious descendant of Constantin Stere and Bogdan Petriceicu-Hașdeu, great national consciences, personalities who influenced the course of history. He is the one who made the traumas of Romanian history known to the Western world, he told the whole world about the communist horrors, about communist prisons, about the torturers of *Securitate* [the Romanian communist secret police]. The history of hardships and ideals of freedom of his *rainic* [heavenly] Bessarabia, as he called it in his *ficții* [works of fiction], were made known to the Western world through his speeches, articles and books published in France, Germany, Italy, the Great Britain, Sweden, Norway, and Netherlands. His novels, especially those on concentration camps such as *Ostinato*, *Gherla*, *Patimile după Pitești* [The Pitești Passion], *Ușa* [The Door], etc. made him known abroad and

¹ Translator's note: there is no official translation of the quoted books; all quotations have been translated into English for this specific article; Paul Goma și exilul extern. Volume published with the support of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile. Foreword by Matei Cazacu, afterword by Liliana Corobca. Oradea, Editura Ratio et Revelatio, 2016, p. 221.

were translated into French, German, Swedish, Italian, and English. Disowned back home in Ceaușescu's Romania, the writer's work is published by prestigious publishing houses abroad such as Suhrkamp, Seuil, Gallimard, Julliard, Rizzoli, Edition de Syrtis, Eagle Publishing House. When the novel *Ostinato* was published, the leaflet of Suhrkamp, the German publishing house, read that the author, Paul Goma, was „a Romanian Soljeničin”. The Romanian socialist writers protested by boycotting the Frankfurt Book Fair, where Paul Goma's book was launched with no one in the audience. The Frankfurt Book Fair also hosted the launch of the novel *Ușa noastră cea de toate zilele* [Our Daily Door] in 1972, first published in German after the publishing house *Cartea Românească* refused to publish it, as well as that of *Patimile după Pitești*, translated into German by Lucian Grigoriowitsch.

Paul Goma was the first Romanian writer who told the world the drama of Bessarabia and Bessarabians. The writer confronts history by not forgetting and by not staying silent. When he was beaten in the Pitești and Jilava prisons, Paul Goma was threatening his torturers that he would use the writer's most convincing “weapon”, *the word*, and that he would tell the whole world the truth: „O să vă neuit! O să vă netac” [“I shall unforget you! I shall unquiet you”]. The novels *Gherla*, *Patimile după Pitești* are documenting the injustice of the totalitarian system; they are testimonies of human suffering. All his books represent an accusation brought against totalitarianism, a stigmatisation of *Securitate*, an exposé of the wrongs committed by the communist regime. “Neither in custody, nor in the big communist prison does Goma experience a transcendent emotion like Nicolae Steinhardt or the philosophical resignation of Noica. He is the eternal rebel, the restless maximalist, the man who is irreconcilable and fierce against the totalitarian regime, against its people and against any manifestation of weakness while facing its coercive power.”²

Paul Goma was consistent with his work throughout his life. The writer fought openly with *Securitate*, he denounced Communism. For him, there were no half measures when speaking about the torturers of history, naming them, shouting their abominable deeds right in front of them. The refuge in Romania of the Bessarabian persecuted by the Soviets, the confrontation with the fiercest *Securitate* officers, the time

² Andrei Țurcanu, Critice. *Arheul Marginii și alte narațiuni*, Chișinău, Cartier, 2020, p. 108.

spent in the political prisons of Gherla, Pitești, and Jilava, the house arrest, the attempts on his honour, as well as on his life are the great themes encountered in his novels which told the Western world about the terror spread by Communism in the Romanian society. Bared in the heyday of the totalitarian regime, these themes show Paul Goma's almost inhuman courage, rightly called by Miron Radu Paraschivescu and later by Eugen Ionescu, "A Romanian Soljenitân". For the courage of a life and a writing career grounded on truth, in the sharp light of justice, "justicer Goma" paid by always being faced with extreme situations. The man suffered exile, beatings in communist prisons, death threats, etc. The writer atoned for it by being lonely, by being banned from the Romanian cultural circle, by being rejected by the confreres, by witnessing his books being melted or taken out of the literary circuit, by being unfairly labelled as a writer who lacked talent, anti-Semite, grumpy, etc. Goma himself says: "So, I am an evil, disagreeable, unlikable, and, why not, a detestable person. Why? Why am I the way I am?—or, to be completely fair, why am I perceived as one? I have said it before, and I iterate it, because I do not comply with the *social norms*—the ones which generally say that truth is always relative, that truth is to be told out loud only to a certain degree (under 30% of it), and only when the time is right. Those social norms which also embrace "favours": if, at some point, X did you a favour, it equals your complete (and eternal) temperance: no matter what X does or says, you are forced—by virtue of the favour he has done you—not to criticise him, not to put him 'in an embarrassing situation', that is, favour against favour" (Paul Goma, the 16th of February 1994. Excerpt from the back cover of Paul Goma's book *Unde am greșit* [What I did wrong], edited by Mariana Sipoș and published by Eikon publishing house in 2019.

Before being recommended by any contemporaries who met him, Paul Goma is recommended by his books. Reality, more often than not, imitates fiction—it is one of Paul Goma's creative principles, as he emphasizes the authenticity of literature. For this reason, his books reflect his life and work, as well as his human and artistic creed. His childhood in Mana, his adolescence in refuge, the confrontation with *Securitate*, the anti-communist resistance, the prisons, and the exile are all presented at length and unequivocally (not forgetting and saying the truth out loud being his existential and artistic landmark) in novels, in articles, and in his diary. Beyond their value as *Bildungsromane*, these writings, or *scrisuri*, as the

author calls them, establish themselves by their value of collective destiny, by that of representing the drama of the mutilated and degraded human in the name of a murderous ideology. The volumes *Ostinato*, *În cerc* [In the circle], *Garda inversă* [Reverse guard], *Patimile după Pitești*, *Bonifacia*, *Arta refugii* [The art of running away], *Astra*, *Sabina*, *Roman-intim* [Intimate novel], *Din calidor* [the English translation, *My childhood at the Gate of Unrest*, was published in 1990, by Readers International], *Jurnale* [Diaries], etc. describe an experience both personal and collective, a persecuted Bessarabian destiny which is the very destiny of a Bessarabia where “the times are” always “at the helm”, without being able to decide for itself.

Born in Mana, in the Orhei county, Moldova, throughout his Parisian refuge and exile, the writer never forgot his love for his Bessarabians and the nostalgia for the native lands. His books are a testimony of his attachment to Bessarabia, especially *My childhood at the Gate of Unrest*, a brilliant novel about his “Bessarabian childhood”, which critics view as one of the most important Romanian novels.

Goma’s work confirms an authentic talent, it highlights a great prose writer, and it illustrated an unusual artistic consciousness. Paul Goma is not a prose writer pertaining only to history, to politics, and to human condition, but also pertaining to childhood, to women, to love. He is a true artist of language, an ingenious character creator. He is credible in terms of content—content of great historical significance—as well as modern in exploring the most radical literary experiments. In his novels, the author uses the authenticity of historic acts, as well as the inconceivable resources of imagination, through which he purifies and structures the poetry of reality. In this sense, the novel *My childhood at the Gate of Unrest* remains Paul Goma’s masterpiece, a masterpiece in which history and poetry go hand in hand.

Now, when only posterity is left for Paul Goma, we hope that resentments will die down, that the old idiosyncrasies of his *unfriends* will be alleviated, and that the writer will be evaluated objectively, unbiased, making it possible to fully recover his writings. What is certain is that Paul Goma was not only a writer on topics of great national and human interest, but an authentic writer of the Romanian language, an innovator within the linguistic and literary system. He was a messenger

of human dignity³ and of freedom of conscience⁴ who wrote the way he lived, totally, with no half measures, without compromising.

“Between the eternal return and the incessant alienation from Bessarabia, Goma, the man “with no land”, the alien, remains an incorruptible witness, and example of not forgetting, a troublesome conscience, but also a convict”⁵

His courage in telling his truth, the perseverance in facing the hardships of history, the dignity and rectitude which characterised his life and his work identify Paul Goma as a great moral conscience, a high intellectual and literary landmark from whom we will always have something to learn.

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3 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, “Plea for Human Dignity”, *Scientia Moralitas. Human Dignity - A Contemporary Perspectives*, The Scientia Moralitas Research Institute, Beltsville, MD, United States of America, Vol. 1, No.1., (2016), pp. 29-43.

4 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, “Key aspects of the Freedom of Conscience”, în *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință - Supliment (Journal for Freedom of Conscience)*, Editions IARSIC, Les Arsc, France, 2016, pp.30-37.

5 Andrei Țurcanu, *Critice. Arheul Marginii și alte narațiuni*, Chișinău, Cartier, 2020, 125.