

# Paul Goma. The Novel Sabina: The Phenomenology of Eros and the Autonomous Game of Writing in Romantic Arts

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## Abstract

*By making complex associations through the whole paper, the study aimed to reconstruct the elements of Paul Goma's poetics, through a careful analysis of the novel "Sabina". Writing his story from a now that relates to a then, on the path of the Communist System, the narrator mixed Eros with history, starting from a predetermined route, which he did not follow exactly. However, the macro-narrative structure took shape, denoting a deep essence through the visible connection with many related spheres: psychological, ontological, philosophical, social, topological, historical, linguistic, concentrating religious allusions dissipated throughout the book and staging the irresistible fascination of women.*

*Material at first, Sabina emerged from the carnal content and, since she was cut from Adam's rib, merged with the narrator, becoming an immaterial and weightless part of him. Putting a history in the background of the writing, longing for the perpetual nostalgia of a new inventive, ironic, playful phrase, inclined to self-analysis, the narrator set out to reveal the whole charm of the voluptuousness and the erotic nudity. Thus, the relationship with the Other is established through a third party that he finds in his inner self. By drawing his strength from the realm of authenticity and literality as from a cosmos of expanding rest, he ended up merging with the world, with the life, embracing images and ideas, contemplations and experiences, in the service of beauty and coveted perfection.*

**Keywords:** Paul Goma, Sabina, literality, authenticity, poetics, Eros, history

## Introduction

Being able to get out from the fluidity of "the daily life" by attacking violently the linearity and uniformity, eager to perfect the art of writing, Paul Goma defies the rules, and structures his novel according to a sui-generis law of selection and order. Without writing in accordance with generally accepted rules

of literature, in a language and style expressing “the deviation”, “the deformation”, “the distance” as a sign of literary customization,<sup>1</sup> in a writing set under the pressure of history, the writer initiates a game where playfulness, fairy tale and fiction, as main actors, will complete and light up the other half located “in the shade of Sabina in bloom”. Proving that he masters the *technique of quiproquo* and using the olfactory memory, the narrator builds images, feelings and atmospheres, linking the biography of the work to his own autobiography. Figuring out Sabina’s taste, he makes us feel the taste of art, exploring the personal identity of the subject, in an aesthetic contemplation, in which “the verb is conceived in the flesh, leaving its virginity untouched”.<sup>2</sup>

Starting from an initial reading which seems to favor the romance, the writing slips easily into a meta-textual dimension: it identifies the elements of a poetry that began in his novel *The Calidor*, which is truly legitimated only in the last text of the autobiographical booklet, *Intimate-Novel*. However, we can already reconstruct the novelist's conception about writing: the more he manages to infect the entire textual journey, the clearer it becomes. He creates a world with a unique identity, different from the writings of that time.

Since he is a storyteller and not a writer, for he lives together with his characters or follows them up, for eventually expressing “what he understood from what he had seen, heard, smelled”, what had happened or, “and not quite happened,” Paul Goma builds his plot on the bases of recorded historical events, to which he gives, through fiction, unexpected proportions in a combination of poeticism, irony, playfulness, fairy tale and humor. This construction, mixing the Eros with history, with a rich instrumentation in both spheres, draws the mechanism of writing in a lexical delight in contravention of all norms, illustrating the deviation and serving it. To understand, however, how this system operates, we should have an exhaustive view, without neglecting the first level of the novel that became a perception footing for the textual poetics. In this regard, we can analyze the writing style, by using – as a support in order to explain and demonstrate the above-mentioned issue – authors like Emmanuel Lévinas,<sup>3</sup> Martin Buber,<sup>4</sup> but also Michel Serres<sup>5</sup> or Ion Caraion,<sup>6</sup> and other names that we will quote in this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Marino, *Hermeneutica ideii de literatură* (Hermeneutics of literature's idea) (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1987), 267.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Serres, *Cele cinci simțuri. Filosofia corpurilor amestecate I* (The five senses. Philosophy of mixed bodies), trans. Marie-Jeanne Vasiloiu (Târgoviște: Pandora –M, 2003), 201.

<sup>3</sup> *Totalitate și infinit. Eseu despre exterioritate* (Totality and infinity. Essay on exteriority), trans. Marius Lazurca, afterword by Virgil Ciomoș (Iași: Polirom, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> *Eu și Tu* (Me and You), trans. Ștefan Aug. Doinaș (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Serres, *Cele cinci simțuri*.

*Reconstruction of the Textual Poetics*

As a matter of fact, we can see that after introducing the reader to the subject of the novel, the narrator emphasizes, through moments of separation, masterfully described at the beginning of the story, the three different sides of Sabina, with which he achieves a reverse manner of reconstruction. According to these trajectories, the initial separation of the upper Justice emphasizes the narrator's power of decision, amid the insertion of a true picture of snow in which the purity of the immaculate white reflects the feminine innocence of "the first" Sabina. Managing to update, through smell, personal experiences and biographical episodes, *the smells recording memories in the subject's memory*,<sup>7</sup> the narrator reveals the textual stake, from which we learn that he does not necessarily want to comply with the patterns of a romance novel, but to *re-make* this moment, to build it within its own original and authentic characteristics:

*and it's not at all true that the new, the unknown is absolutely love, or salt and pepper. The gesture for repetition of a gesture for repetition, finally, a re-creation, a blunt, a walk, a so near far away seem to me more discovery like, newer... And if you don't discover through it something dazzling new, gnashing fresh, then you find something else more valuable, deeper, beyond the edge of the bridge: the ascertainment that this girl is yours [...]*<sup>8</sup>

Paying attention to details, having the ability to investigate Sabina's transformation through the series of events of an experienced observer, the writer considers her retrospectively and duplicates her in the state of *the other*, "in a luminosity converted into longing and darkness"<sup>9</sup>: "Whenever, ever, it was. In addition, it was cut. In two - not as a whole in halves, but like a pair of legs; like divided Siamese. Because one was Sabina that I left at the corner of Justice the next day in the evening, for wood and coal; and another one, the third day from the recovery."<sup>10</sup>

Recalling, on this background, the time during, and after saving, "the Blaga Fund", by inserting narrative "jewellery", able to "resuscitate" the character exposed to cold, suffering from hunger and exhaustion, the narrator situates himself, having the pleasure to protect the woman, under the symbol of the

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<sup>6</sup> *Tristețe și cărți. Eseuri* (Sadness and books. Essays) (Bucharest: Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Mădălina Diaconu, *Despre miresme și duhori. O interpretare fenomenologică a olfacției* (About scents and smells. A phenomenological interpretation of olfaction) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2007), 94.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Goma, *Sabina* (Bucharest: Universal Dalsi, 2005), 120-122.

<sup>9</sup> Lévinas, *Totalitate și infinit*, 235.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Goma, *Sabina* (Cluj: Biblioteca Apostrof, 1991), 147.

protective womb, which suggests the existence of several types of love. At the same time, he enhances the fictional nature of the work and proposes a reading which favors the processes of text production and reception, in a game with the reader's expectations, making use of transposition and deconstructing the constructive codes of the language:

*The grammatical incorrectness and the lexical indulgence didn't matter, what mattered was the warmth this girl needed, the one we could produce, spread, deliver by many means and ways [...]. For the second time in one lifetime we see how terribly easy she is [...]: even if Sabina didn't have substance, she had, in return... also substance, but how to say: immaterial, rather imponderable (s.n.) [...] The words did not matter any more – what mattered was their sonority and I also understood: their endlessness mattered, so it could be kept under spell, stopped somehow on the edge of the gap in which it should have bent, straight, vertical like a tree – into death.<sup>11</sup>*

Similarly to this structure, starting with the reflections on art and acting in relation to the realistic nature that he reveals, Paul Goma restores the original route according to *the real truth*, in order to modify it later, at the level of the logical perception. Thus, he breaks the linearity and makes the textual map difficult to understand. Choosing an explicit poetics, the narrator reveals the power of the Logos, of the written or spoken word, as a direct link with God. He presents the writing, if we take into account Nicoleta Sălcudeanu's opinion,<sup>12</sup> like a therapy and a self-reconstruction.

If at the beginning the first writer describes in detail the narrator's return to the boarding school at a late hour, seriously ill and at risk of being expelled from school, directed by the principal Iorgu and his wife – “father and mother”, throughout the epic he contradicts this “truth”, true in the meaning of performing the narrative scenario and inserts fictional dialogues in the text, which allow him to shape the reality according to his own will. Stuck in an imaginary world as an impossibility to accept the tragedy referred to, the narrator gives up the initial version and reduces its intensity through negation. However, a careful reading makes the epic reconstruction easier to understand and facilitates not only the perception of the central message, but also of the entire textual structure, built on it: “I had lost the battle, I had lost the war. I thought then: if I had not been so sick, I would have killed myself. But I had no hint of life in my body, once so sporty ...; as I was getting crazy when I was unlacing my boots... “I recover, I come to power – and after that I kill myself! I put an end to my vain life. I interrupt my

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 177-179.

<sup>12</sup> Nicoleta Sălcudeanu, “Sabina-Albertina-libertina,” in *Graffiti* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1999), 44.

destiny – let her find out, the beast with human face, what she has done! Let her be sorry, but it will be too late!”<sup>13</sup>

Although it offers the possibility of anticipation and the capacity of fragmenting the harsh reality, Paul Goma’s novel does not bear the opposite sign of life, “but the same one – slightly out of place; slightly offset”.<sup>14</sup> Being unable to change his destiny, having a mature and serious attitude to life, the writer discovers through writing, how to *master* and *anticipate* it, considering that only by “telling them (the failures, s.n.), they are bearable, because telling them you make them *tell-able*”.<sup>15</sup> Therefore emerges the wish to become a narrator and to live, together with the characters, in a peaceful, far away from the obsessive presence of authorial instances:

I also said: if I become a writer, then I’ll be a storyteller, not a writer – it means not a teacher, principal of boarding school, with the characters; *the writer imagines that he came into the world to know, at every moment, what the pupils from the novel do, and if they don’t what the rules say, and not exactly, and not there, in space, his unhappy mission of writer-educator is to call to order; to put them back in front. While the storyteller... He lets the people do what they want, do what is human, undisturbed, unconstrained; he comes after the student-characters: he watches, listens, smells (especially) - and tells what he has understood from what he had seen, heard, smelled (s.n.)*<sup>16</sup>

Even if it starts from a recorded historical event, perceived as “a mortar between bricks” which “makes or des-makes a novel, makes a novel be, or not be and not according to the true-truth, but according to the truth-that-would-be-true – somehow like this,”<sup>17</sup> tragic par excellence, the generating point is attenuated by playful insertions that improve the textual comprehension and turn the eventful “failure”, as a plot, into a source of reflections creating special effects, identified throughout the novel. In this respect, Schiller's statement on the relationship between art and game is significant: “Schiller said somewhere that the human would not be entirely human unless he plays. When he reasons delighting and delights reasoning, the individual fulfils his mission. [...] When he delights reasoning, the individual perceives the artwork.”<sup>18</sup>

In an Ion Creanga kind of world, focusing on the meaning of words, Paul

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, 249-250.

<sup>14</sup> Goma, *Sabina* (2005), 245-246.

<sup>15</sup> Goma, *Sabina* (1991), 162.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, 103.

<sup>18</sup> Schiller, *apud* Silvana Simona Grando and Adriana Gaiță, *De la simțuri la rafinament* (From senses to refinement) (Timișoara: Brumar, 2008), 65.

Goma projects his imaginary structures in a mixture of phrases which, free of any danger, are meant to keep the game alive, balancing the perception and transposing the reader in a world of all possibilities.

After having tasted the tree of knowledge by acquiring material things with the money she earned by selling books, Sabina turns into a woman, with her body becoming flesh, when in contact with silk: “if the clothes make the man, then the silk underwear makes the woman, overnight: it flourishes her, it bursts her, it fructifies her, making her from a child a woman...”<sup>19</sup>

In a *fearful reality*, the epiphany of worldliness is consumed – with the loss of innocence – at the sensory level of the touching,<sup>20</sup> “because that is what you feel when you touch the silk: the thrill!, then on the leg, [... ] but they are not necessarily perceived, felt with the legs, but with the inside, with the guts, with the heart, with the soul, with the depths of her body that has not known the silk but knows it as her mother, and her mother’s mother and the whole nation of women knew it, as on their own skin.”<sup>21</sup> And also at the level of the skin – continues Nicoleta Sălcudeanu – we perceive the cruelty of times, the sharp cold, arrived from the east, the source of all evil.<sup>22</sup>

Without invoking randomly the sense of touch, as long as the touching always provokes a reaction and completes the picture of the world insufficiently represented by the vision, by taking possession of surrounding objects as an active sense,<sup>23</sup> the writer illustrates the force of the touching as a means of *making* the creation, touching it: “with the fingertips of the right hand, I touched, I touched it, the canvas made a décolletage sufficiently low-cut to arouse the desire to enter the thicket of the flower of flowers in bloom.”<sup>24</sup>

In this regard, it is relevant to mention Michel Serres’s statement that reflects the relationship between Creator and Creation:

*Before any form, before the colour and the tone, the support must necessarily be achieved. [...] the writer sacrifices or marks the paper, presses on it, presses it, and prints it, the moment when the sight is lost... Nobody has ever moulded, ever fought, if he refused the touch, nobody has ever loved nor known. The eye, remotely, is passively loafing. There is no impressionism without a printed force, without the pressure of the touch.*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Goma, *Sabina* (1991), 238.

<sup>20</sup> Sălcudeanu, “Sabina-Albertina-libertina,” 44.

<sup>21</sup> Goma, *Sabina* (1991), 234.

<sup>22</sup> Sălcudeanu, “Sabina-Albertina-libertina,” 44.

<sup>23</sup> Grando and Gaiță, *De la simțuri la rafinament*, 35-37.

<sup>24</sup> Goma, *Sabina* (1991), 184.

<sup>25</sup> Serres, *Cele cinci simțuri*, 25.

### Conclusions

Transposing *only fragments of smell, splinters of sound, views of views*,<sup>26</sup> Paul Goma finds shelter in the sanctuary of the perfect shape, revealing the mechanism of Genesis. While the eyes know (from) the outside, the smell penetrates the inside, as a direct link with God, the ear perceives the pulse of the place, the touching takes possession of it, and the taste retains and appreciates, however, the most powerful weapon remains the word. As he is figuring out the meaning of life, it is expected to be perfect due to its divine origin, received at the very beginning, waiting to be born and ruling through its lyrical, epical or dramatic vibration, as Ion Caraion evokes it:

*The Word? It doesn't hinder, I heard it shouting. I want to be born! Cut my ropes! Cut the ropes that bound me! I need space! [...] I need space, open sea, floating! I'm not a boat ashore! I must be stroke by the waves of the boundlessness, of the vastness! To float! To fight! To risk! I need my identity!*

*And it was born. And... in the beginning was the word.*<sup>27</sup>

Responding to this call and severely sanctioning those who “prostitute their art” with the writer's material, the word, a friend of poetry, philosophy and fiction, through the trio represented by Octavian (poetry), Septimius (philosophy), and *the over-storyteller* (novel), in an inseparable unity with a trinity symbol – (“It was hot, sheltering – and unifying, being convinced at that time that no one, nothing, no way shall separate us, we will remain forever as the fingers, three to make the sign of the cross, named after the shepherds from “Miorita”: “the thumb: the Transylvanian - Octavian, the middle one: the inhabitant of the kingdom - Septimius, the forefinger: the Bessarabian – me...”),<sup>28</sup> the narrator, in “the impossibility to accurately copy the prose”, in order to “recue” books from the fire of cleansing, creates it under the sign of an *occupied consciousness* that remains at the worktable until the last breath.<sup>29</sup>

Hardly deciphered on the background of the narrative structure, although it gives the impression of willing to build a romance novel, the creative self emerges in the second part of the writing, letting us understand that Sabina is only a gateway to reconstitute the elements of a poetics. Having turned from a girl to a woman, from material into imponderable, she surpasses the function of character, by identifying herself with the narrator, under the circular shape of perfection,

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<sup>26</sup> Goma, *Sabina* (2005), 222.

<sup>27</sup> Caraion, *Tristețe și cărți*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Goma, *Sabina* (2005), 286.

<sup>29</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Poetica reveriei* (The poetics of reverie), trans. Luminița Brăileanu (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2005), 62.

becoming a part of him, while still remaining authentic and original. Freed from the function of reality and sheltered, as a result of transposition, within the creative identity, she represents the very act of creating “in two”, under the immutable sign of the Genesis.

Thus, seeking “how infinite the future is, what should be born, [...] pleasure and selfishness in two” as shown by Emmanuel Lévinas,<sup>30</sup> the love is situated, for Paul Goma too, under the binomial sign, favouring the opening of the novelist’s work towards innovation and lyricism, under the indelible sign of literariness: “I don’t love fully only if the other one loves me, not because I need the recognition of the Other, but because his lust feeds mine and because in this situation [...], in this *trans-substantiation*, the Same and the Other are not the same, but – beyond any possible project – beyond any power with meaning and intelligence – I give birth to a child”<sup>31</sup>: “and (I remembered!): if we had been together, it would have been easier for us to pull the sled, to load-unload bags, it would have been easier for us to sweat – not to mention the labours of birth: arithmetic shows us that they fall in equal portions. If I had received my share of creation, not just from obligation but with pleasure: finally, I will learn how: maybe I will even manage to transpose myself: not into a horse’s head, but into the belly of a woman – into the body, as they says, or; into the groin. Or even more poetically: into the womb. Or, as the Bible indirectly says: into the breast. The woman has breast, the man thigh – the baby appears from their collision.”<sup>32</sup>

In the musical rhythm of vowels and consonants, the narrator meets the emotional and visual memory, and, without hiding behind the mask of others, he transposes himself into the other and perceives him “through the collaboration of the deliberate act of the will with the grace.”<sup>33</sup> It follows, therefore, a unique phenomenon in which “The other is present in front of I, as a You that addresses it specifically, not as a creation of its imagination, neither as a simple sense of its appearance, the less as an object of knowledge; but as a term of a state of grace in which, at the same time with the outpouring of the itself of I, at the same time with its essential mystery, the person learns the full mystery of You that greets him.”<sup>34</sup> Managing to conceive the body in a state of language, the protagonist shapes it until he discovers it “up to the bone” and places it in the circular symbol of all beginnings:

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<sup>30</sup> Lévinas, *Totalitate și infinit*, 238.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>32</sup> Goma, *Sabina* (2005), 286.

<sup>33</sup> Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, “Prefață” (Foreword), in *Eu și Tu*, 19.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, 21.

*I stretch my hands, I grab her glasses, and I take them off. I uncovered her eyes, I discover her up to the bone. Today she has big eyes. Today she has blue eyes, not green, like last winter, like the last winters – is the change proposed by silk? [...] However, I feel her womb with my belly; her legs with my thighs. I feel my belly becoming concave and at the same time, increasing in parts, up, down, welcoming, wrapping her evening womb and more convex, more belly like: and my thighs becoming concave and long, like gutters, like women where the man enters and stays there, between her legs...*<sup>35</sup>

After revealing Sabina's eyes and destroying her masks, "the unfinished erotic act sublimates in word, this one inconsistency taking the hot shortness and the self-forgetfulness, the sweet abandon transferred to the shake of syllables"<sup>36</sup>: "Sabina, the recipe, and after she was dissolved, after I always invariably made her well, and I dropped her, and almost at the same time my mother, the mother made sabina sabina sabi after the recipe I wanted, I never wanted my love on my peeled forehead in flames; she didn't want, she screamed that no no no and then I wanted to bow the horn and then Sabina turned away and then yelled at me: why do you, why do you; I despised Sabina because she is much weaker than herself; however she denied..."<sup>37</sup>

*Turning the words all around the calidor*, co-working with *Eros* by rejecting the possession, "an ordinary man and maker of men", the writer carves the image of the *Feminine Eternity*, according to Victor Hugo's principle: "fall right into my eyes so that I remember you". Uniting all the present and past egos into an *ego extenso*<sup>38</sup> that has a woman shape, touching her with the fingers and studying her "sensitive map,"<sup>39</sup> he depicts the world using a hot verbal "live steam," in a symphony of sounds gracefully plunged into the foamy chaos of the unknown:

*Sabina said and I also said and she didn't say any more and I honestly admit that I wanted to see how she is made from the inside, made by me with my right hand, but she denied and then I found that I couldn't control her any more and divorced... the autonomy of the character... If I had great friends, they would tell me what is the situation with Proust, the one who collected all the fragrances in the world into a cake called woman, and what woman Mary Magdalene; I manipulate more modestly the fragrances around Sabina, the one, the most true, more true than the truth which where Sabina is*

*she comes with a recipe, but she doesn't make a hole as in the life that runs steaming  
alive and*

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<sup>35</sup> Goma, *Sabina* (2005), 270.

<sup>36</sup> Sălcudeanu, "Sabina-Albertina-libertina," 52.

<sup>37</sup> Goma, *Sabina* (2005), 305

<sup>38</sup> Mădălina Diaconu, *Despre miresme și duhori*, 97.

<sup>39</sup> Phrase taken from Serres, *Cele cinci simțuri*, 24.

*Sabina was on a Tuesday and I was reading the novel with  
Sabina was on a next Tuesday and I was reading the novel made with  
Sabina and then we would have made children of paper and would have lived  
even today if*

*Sabina – I am waiting for her  
Sabina – I am reading  
but first I am writing it.<sup>40</sup>*

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<sup>40</sup> Goma, *Sabina* (2005), 305-306.