

# SERGIU GROSSU'S DETENTION POETRY SUFFERING AND CATHARSIS

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**ABSTRACT.** Sergiu Grossu is a poet who expresses himself creatively in the most existential conditions in the communist prison, imprisoned for the blame of being a Christian and not for sharing the propaganda of building the profile of a “new man with a higher conscience”. Animated by the desire to promote Christian principles, he lives with the conviction that any sacrifice must be accepted and passed without retentions and regrets when it is done for the sake of Christ. During the years of detention, suffering was not unknown to him. He was subjected to forced labor, psychological and physical pressure, in a cruel climate. In this context, poetry will represent, for him, a “weapon of struggle”, a sacred instrument through which the inner struggles, the desire for deliverance and faith reach voice. Even if, from an aesthetic point of view, the creative formula is characterized by simplicity, it includes in itself the profoundness of religious feeling and the authentic experience with divinity. Therefore, the poet, fascinated by the mystery of the poetic act, captures, through body elements, the mystical and inexplicable touch of power and will. The heart is wanted to be saved and nourished with “eternal spirit”, while the body is subjected to suffering stressed by the weight of the chains that avidly wreath its legs, and the handcuffed hands seek in vain the release, obtained only in spirit. The lips “hideously turned up” fought in the impossibility of articulating a song of the spirit, all the flesh writhing in bruises and fears. For Sergiu Grossu, poetry represents an opportunity to escape from suffering and a pretext of encouragement, a cathartic experience, suggesting the idea that in the harsh conditions of persecution, anchoring in the lyrical expression is, in fact, anchoring in God and in the perspectives offered by faith in Him.

**KEY WORDS:** detention, experience, divinity, corporality, catharsis, faith

## **Introduction**

The literature of Communist detention is situated in a shadowy, even neglected side of literary history, being often an interest strictly for its documentary character. Exceeding this limit, however, we note the literary value and, as critic Nicolae Balotă notices, this literature of detention is “not just a collection of documents, testimonies, memories; its value in preserving memory is also legitimated by its literature” (Balotă 1998: 6).

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Following the same direction, Adrian Marino sets out two essential ways of approaching the literature of detention: “one through literalization, stylization, the whole set of typical literary procedures”, and the other “through direct testimony, documentary, as objective as possible” (Marino 1993: 68). The beginning of these writings does not necessarily require an aesthetic intention, but in reevaluating the terrible experiences of an existence deprived of liberty, which bears the imprint of subjectivity, “it outlines a coherent literary profile, standing alone, finalizing through a literary statute, sustained by new, original creations” (Marino 1993: 68).

The gallery of writers – martyrs or martyred, includes several names in the lyrical segment – Radu Gyr, Nichifor Crainic, Eugenia Adams Mureșanu, Nicolae Moldoveanu, Dumitru Bacu, Ionel Zeană, Zahu Pană etc. Their lyrical approach is a result of the experiences lived in communist prisons. An honorable place in this gallery is reserved for the philosopher, theologian, poet and journalist Sergiu Grossu.

### **Sergiu Grossu, the Man and the Poet**

Sergiu Grossu is not only a poet beyond the bars, but also a fighter who uses a sacred, true and honest instrument, that is, the word. He has repeatedly demonstrated that he is the man who lives by faith, leading the prisoners sights to the possibility of deliverance, assured, in the given circumstances, only by divinity. For him, all what is called Christian values are principles and experiences that can not be disputed and situated in a place of honor, being ready to accept suffering and sacrifice in the name of God. He believes that any sacrifice deserves to be worn for the sake of Christ, who first suffered and sacrificed himself for the noble purpose of deliverance and salvation to any sinful believer.

Sergiu Grossu was born on November 14th, 1920, in the village of Cubolta, Bălți County, Bessarabia. Primary and high school studies were followed in the same city, proving literary talent and appetite for reading and culture, even during the life of a student. In 1938 he published the quarterly magazine “Flower of the steppe” and later he wrote for publications such as *Bessarabia*, *Transnistria*, *Convorbiri literare*, *Gândirea*, *The Royal Foundation Magazine*, and he even was a member of the Society of Romanian Writers of Bessarabia.

On the day of the cession of Bessarabia on June 29, 1940, he and his whole family fled to Romania, first in a village in Făgăraș, and from there on October 6 to Bucharest. This is where he will start his work in publishing and journalism, and continue to collaborate with various publications. During the war, he corresponded with the daily “Basarabia” and was published in the weekly newspaper “Transnistria”. With the last number of “Gândirea” magazine, coordinated by Nichifor Crainic (issue 6, June-July

1944), where he was present with his *Ballad of the solitary man*, the poet Sergiu Grossu ceased to publish, considering the solution of the withdrawal fortuitous given his decision to remain silent.

After completing the high school, he enrolled with the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy in Bucharest (Grossu 2002: 5), where by 1948 he would complete his university training. Although licensed in Philosophy and Modern Philology, he declined the position offered in the educational system, as he did not agree with the Communist doctrine which, had he embraced it by becoming a party member, would have forced him to start promoting the Marxist-Leninist theories. He preferred to gain his existence in areas where his conscience was not enslaved and freedom of expression still existed. He showed, according to its own testimony, “a holy... out of ordinary stubbornness” (Grossu 2002: 5) put into the service of ideals and truth, struggling against the ideology that destroyed millions of human lives.

Moreover, in 1948 he had the opportunity of getting in touch with several members of the *Lord's Army (Oastea Domnului)*, a religious movement that encountered famous members like the poet Traian Dorz as well. From this moment on, the poetry Grossu wrote became an art with a tendency for Christ and the salvation of souls (see <http://www.procesulcomunismului.com/marturii/fonduri/grosu/basarabia/docs/cap5.htm>).

Being often approached by the communist authorities, he refuses to collaborate, which is why he will become a safe victim. Considering the refusal to collaborate, as well as the existence of satirical poems launched against Communist “party”, who had a great deal of echo in those times of terror, we report two good reasons for monitoring and sanctioning the young “rebel”. So, his position became inconvenient and on the night of March 7, 1959, after several aggressive interventions and police harassment, he was arrested by the Security, and on 2 June 1959 he was sentenced to 12 years of “criminal detention”, three years of “corrective interdiction” and “cessation” of personal property. The detention in the colonies of work at Salcia, Strâmba, Stoenești will be the occasion for the meeting with other members of the *Lord's Army (Oastea Domnului)*.

He was released by pardon, in 1962, after only three years, “from a smaller prison enters a larger one called Romania” and will eventually cross the itinerary of all former intellectual detainees who have not accepted regrouping, occupying inadequate administrative posts to his university studies, at various factories and institutions, the Communists hoping that poorly paid work and insured conditions will lead him to adhere to the “party trajectory” by offering him openly to become an informant of security, filing in the *Lord's Army (Oastea Domnului)* movement, after being condemned for religious activity in this movement. The result, however,

was not the one expected, because the intransigence of the man of culture, consistent with his own principles, led him to flee to France in 1969, together with his wife, Nicoleta Valeria Bruteanu, the granddaughter of Iuliu Maniu, ex Prime-Minister of Romania.

Established in France, the struggle for a purely evangelical Christian culture began, in order to form a Christian consciousness, actively participating in the exposing of communism. He makes known to the world the sufferings of those who were in the communist regime, triggering the offensive for the defense of religious and political freedom (Grossu 2002: 5). Ways of fighting were diverse: journalism, editions, conferences and radio lectures. For twenty Grossu edited the newspaper "Catacombes", through which he managed to spread the truth about the persecution of his religion and its servants in the communist countries. For one year, in 1976, he edited the religious book *Jesus the Overlord*, in order to draw more Romanians from exile to the ideals of the *Lord's Army (Oastea Domnului)* movement.

Sergiu Grossu's poetic creation is not extensive, but is representative and has received favorable appreciation from the point of view of artistic achievement. In a *Curriculum vitae* the writer classifies his creation in the following stages:

**I. The war period** (1940-1944), during which the volume of epigrams *Mustard* (1940) appeared, containing the poems contained in various publications.

**II. The period of satirical poetry** (1946), which sums up satirical poetry written between June 22, 1946 and August 17, 1946 and published in the newspaper "Justice" under the pseudonym Zadig. As the writer confesses, "the readers regarded them as an extremely effective fighting weapon against communist domination".

**III. The period of mystical, religious creation** (1950-1968), a stage in which the volume *Stones of Remembrance* appears, under the pseudonym Simion Cubolta. The stated purpose of publishing the volume was that "the lyrics written with the ink of the heart and dug up with the cause of thought to awaken in conscience the longing for the freedom of the knowledge and living of Jesus Christ; to mobilize world public opinion to achieve not only political freedom, freedom of speech, but also the real existence rights of those who believe in God and want to save their soul" (Grossu 2002: 5). The title is symbolic, as are the sequences that structure the whole volume: *I. In the Lord's school; II. The Singing of victories; III. Abel; IV. On the knees.*

**IV. The period of detention** was named by the author himself as "creation in detention: in oral poems". Lying behind the bars, with the

ban on writing, the poet implanted his lyrics in memory, the only space he could not be searched for. The convicts were subjected to forced labor, psychological and physical pressures, and his poems were meant to encourage, being sent from prisoner to prisoner, even if they risked being caught. The lyrics that were qualified as “true symphonies of suffering” were spreading and “flowing from mouth to mouth and heart to heart” (see *Lord's Army – Oastea Domnului*: 12), along with the jewels written by Traian Dorz and Nichifor Crainic.

Grossu's volume *Symphonic Universe* from 1994, the fruit of his imprisonment experience in the Danube Delta camp, appeared as a harmonious “portrayal of his inner suffering” (Vrabie 2012), and it is indeed a shocking “artistic image of human suffering” (Grossu 2002: 5). In 1994, the volume *Inscription on a clay vessel* was also published. In the autobiographical volume *I fought the good fight* the poet will confess: “At Strâmba, spared to do the hard work on the field, I stood in a top bed of the shack near the stove. There I began composing the poems that make up the *Symphonic Universe* and that I composed without pencil and paper, but in the head. Mentally, as not to be forgotten. Even when I resumed my agricultural work by going to the place of hoeing, I repeated my symphonic poems in my mind, so that I would not forget them; or I recited them to other two of my convict friends” (Grossu 2007: 146).

Saving himself in writing by the terror of the concentrating universe, Sergiu Grossu defines his substance in the lyrical register of detention, in which we observe the coexistence of two elements: the exacerbated sensitivity of the theologian poet and the darkness of a space of “tortures, investigations, chains and curses”. In the Danube Delta camp, the poet of “written *verses* – without a pencil and paper – at Jilava and Strâmba camp”... simply had the revelation of a poem of an entirely new account in Romanian poetry, but related to all that was happening in the local gulag” (Vrabie 2012: 15).

Rebelling in the rhythms, often whispered in the agonizing and endless nights of detention, passionately gathering on the stove of inner suffering, which kept his memory awake, the poet, through a re-gesture of time consumed between hostile bars, will offer oral poems the written shape only in 1995, placing them between the covers of the volume *Symphonic Universe*, which appeared in Bucharest.

From a sacred feeling to the inferno of the experiences of that period, the poet, as he confessed in the volume's preface, did not allow the poems to be modified, leaving them in the incipient form: “Finally back home, I did not make any changes, leaving them in the original form of oral poems. I was somewhat afraid not to profane the vibrations of the experience of

that time, that holy experience of the mysteries and wonders of God in a universe enclosed by the lattice” (Grossu 2002: 5).

The foundation on which the poet builds a whole “symphonic universe” is the lived, felt, sinful and projected faith “in his verses, making not mere declarations of love to the divine spirit, but building from his metaphors an own temple, just as a priest, who sacrifices everything to build the most beautiful temple of faith” (Colesnic 2010: 3).

### **Elements of Corporality in Grossu’s Lyrics**

The human being refers to the surrounding reality through the senses, and the external elements always emit information captured at the sensorial level: the touch, the smell, the taste, the hearing, the sight. All this produces a certain impression on man, an impression translated by pleasure or displeasure, joy or sadness, fulfillment or failure, happiness or unhappiness, etc. Beyond the common perception of external factors, the subject is invested with a great capacity to realize the meaning, the role and the purpose of existence in general as well as the living experiences. Therefore, contextualizing, we can capture the two components that define the human being: the body and the soul. The soul content visibly influences the bodily manifestations, the corporal ones, obvious in the elements that compose it, such as: legs, hands, fingers, eyes, cheeks, lips, etc.

In the poetry of Sergiu Grossu we can see the manifestations of the corporal elements, whose origin is in the soul of the poet, consumed in suffering, humiliation and often frustration, but his assumed Christianity will constitute a “lifeline”, an out of ordinary sense of perception, beyond the boundaries of common and commonplace. According to Rudolf Steiner’s opinion, soul content or inner life, “the human soul entity is distinct from its corporality. When we turn our attention to the most simple sensory impression, we immediately meet what is its own. No one can know if others experience a simple awareness of the senses in exactly the same way he/she does” (Steiner 2003: 93).

Therefore, in an imprisoned environment, in an atmosphere known only by him and lived with great intensity in the inner life, in an almost impossible and incredible way, Sergiu Grossu will offer some of the most noble manifestations of soul, surprised not only in his physical, fleshly image, but also in his art, in the symphonies of his soul, composed note by note, under the influence of divinity, the only solution to escape at times when normality, in countless cases, records falls, revenges, insults and compromises. We believe that the Christian poet censures every act of revolt, reflecting on body perceptions as well as on determined actions, resulting in a harmonious and divine context, in spite of the determinations and imprisoned offerings.

The body becomes a symbol, evoking the meanings of soul experiences, becoming a mirror of the soul, with the role of maintaining the correlation between the two entities: body and soul. A careful analysis of the lyrics of Sergiu Grossu favors the inventory of several elements of corporality, defining the experiences and the spiritual assumption.

**The handcuffed body** is subjected to persecution and suffering, now caught in antithesis with the spirit: "Only my body encounters barriers", while the spirit overcomes this agony, being put in the situation of forgetting what walking means, experiencing the sweet freedom of ascension to an unruffled flight of matter and suffering. His ardor "passes rapidly through the universe/ and is free... to fly" (*Only the body*). We intercept a flight beyond matter, a safe flight to God, a release from sickness, anguish, and suffering, all generated by a system of hatred and intense desire for revenge and ending to all who opposes communist ideology and to all those who declare themselves opponents to the new religion – communism. The body subjected to torture feels in vibration, the pain, the sensation transposed into verses who betrays the Christlike character, eager to process all that is disgraceful and, according to the Baudelairian aesthetics of ugliness, to transform into a beautiful dream, into light, into a silent symphony and calm: "I would like to take the ugly from the leaves,/ to drown, in song, Lord, any torment/ in my unnecessary verses/ to be the echo of the coming times. **My pains** would like to overcome/ and over all to lay down sparks,/ for not to wear the darkness in my soul/ and to remain in my eternal dream..." (*Final*). We capture the idea of a soul content affected by pain, misery, hatred and humiliation brought by the hostile environment, a soul in which the darkness nests, but eager for light, for sparks and for the better.

**The legs**, with an essential role in ensuring balance and walking, will suffer in the misery of the hostile environment. The poet becomes motionless, confronting with the impossibility of walking, of advancing, because of heavy chains that dig into the flesh and produce deep wounds and pain "The body... stands with chains on its feet." In the absence of dynamics, isolated in the tight, damp and dirty space, the poet finds relief, however, in the freedom of the soul to ascend and to unite with heaven in a song of the heart.

**The hands** are also immobilized under the burden of the handcuffs, caught in a static phase, again the focus falling on the spirit, the only one free, involved in the struggle, presented from a metaphorical perspective, representing the light in a world of darkness, in a world in which the poet can not manifest, according to his own desires and talents. Starvation and severe life regime will weaken the body with "sunken hands" carrying "broken lances": "Only the hands in the handcuffs, sunken,/ wearing the

broken lances,/ for the spirit, the enemy of the clay,/ wearing the guns of the light,/ and let the spirit fight.” We again identify the body-soul antithesis, the latter caught in the hypostasis of “enemy of the clay”, incompatible with the material element, with all that belongs to the earth.

**The lips** comprise the obvious symbol of communication. They also bear the imprint of suffering, unspoken or stubborn words, without being heard, hidden by those who might overturn them, giving them an accusing connotation. They bear the impression of blurred thoughts, without being able to articulate a song, at least a verse, but the recovery and the hope are found in the spirit, again free to sing and rise beyond the suffering of the prison: “Only the hideous reflected **lips**/ cannot sing to knead,/ for the spirit is a melody and a thrill, and a belief, and a joy/ and let the spirit sing.” By the word “hideous” with its adverbial stance a grotesque image of the lips is created, suggesting physical defacement under the burden of suffering, yet concealing a spiritual content through the ugliness of the impossibility of articulating the words that make up the lyrics of a song. In contrast, the spirit becomes a metaphor by terms like melody and thrill, and belief, and joy”, defined by the freedom to exalt the song of soul joy and the untold belief it obeys with holiness and fear.

**The flesh** is the “clay”, the concrete matter of the body, the reference point for suffering, deliberately provoked by the bruises caused by cuts with a rod. This is deprived of all touch, of any comfort motivated by love, but the spirit will once again supplement this deficiency by the sensations experienced at the spiritual level. It is an expression of love, it works in and through this “mobile” of divine origin: “Only **the flesh** in the bruises of the rod/ does not feel the love’s ribbon,/ for the spirit, the master of the nature,/ subjected to the laws of love,/ and the spirit is free to burn...” (*Apprenticeship*).

**The cheeks** have the role of shaping the image of the face, as a symbol of vitality and strength, or disease and lack of energy. In Sergiu Grossu’s poems, the image of the “wax” cheeks once again betrays suffering, sleeplessness, lack of food, longing and sickness, but this is not a context to alienate him from heaven, but rather to draw him closer to Jesus and the blessing of His presence: “With wax **cheeks**,/ all looking upward,/ I went at dusk /to be Jesus’ disciple” (*You made me*). The gaze towards the sky will eventually favor “at dusk” the fellowship with Jesus through the posture of the “disciple” after the apprenticeship during the period of detention.

**The being**, the ensemble of the body, the matter, is the image and expression of the creative act, defined by the seemingly insignificant “created from dust” component, becoming flesh with worms and sins”. It is underlined the truth that sin degrades the human being, that clay is subjected to “deformation”, therefore the power of God to rehabilitate is

invoked, as well as the recognition of the need for reformation, for shaping, according to the divine will: "I am the leak, the steam, the moment,/ I am only the clay, and You are the potter./ Protect me, Lord, with the wing,/ carve my being with Grace!" (*Song*). The ephemeral nature of the human being is enunciated by terms like "leakage, steam, moment" and even "clay", highlighting the perishable nature of matter and body. The poet's statement about the fragility of the being is followed by an invocation that underlines the idea of divine protection and intervention for shaping through Grace.

**The eyes**, recognized as the mirror of the soul, receive spiritual nuances. How else can the poet's eyes be in the atmosphere of the cell if not bathed in tears, springing out of the most hidden and unspoken pains? The spiritual ascension from the inferno of the prison is followed by "eyes in tears and flames" (*Song*), bathed "in the tear of love" (*Holiday*). The feeling of joy accompanies the risen and the living of the wonderful moment, in which Jesus, presented antithetically, looks at him in "serene and warm" eyes (*I built my house*), ready to wipe away every tear: "Next to us, Jesus the teacher/ the Tear will wipe us out and show us/ All the beauties that the yearning/ dreamt to meet once." On the holy night of the Savior's birth, the poet feels overwhelmed by the greatness of the moment and the miracle of incarnation, so that the adopted attitude requires all humility and excitement, lived and expressed "with serene and damp eyes" as a sign of joy blessed in tears. The intensity of the desire to meet the sky, the divine will give birth to verses invoking the will of the too Good and Unique God, asking for the possibility of "cleaning" the eyes, probably of the wounds and of the burden of tears: "The Too Good,/ The Almighty, The Unique God/ help me, help me/ in the earthly/ confuse/ of life,/ to remove the burden of sadness,/ to clean my eyes and the eyebrow,/ to heal my soul, my wound..." (*Dew drop*). Now, he recognizes the burden of an exhausted, sick, and sad soul who needs healing, revival, regaining its strength and unique, spiritual value. Also in this context, the "ice" heart will melt in the presence of the Savior, singing a glorious hymn "full of joy" (*On the Holy Night*).

### Conclusions

By the specificity of his creation, in the proximity of Nichifor Crainic and Radu Gyr, "in a literal third, giving strength" (Zamfirescu 1994: 9), as mentioned by the critic Dan Zamfirescu, Sergiu Grossu discovers the revelation of the spirit's victory over matter, giving beautiful lessons of "noble humanitarian pursuit" (Vrabie 2012). His poetry is an instrument by which he chooses to confess Christ, using metaphors and analogies to express profound religious truths. The aesthetics of his poems is defined by simplicity and, at the same time, by deepening the religious truth contained

in the word, which “embraces the garments of heaven of simplicity and kneels in prayer” (Grossu 2002: 116). As a constant of Sergiu Grossu’s poems, we grasp the need of the human soul to be in relationship with God “to rediscover in our hearts the sky with the valences of the mild light of the word, the divine fragrances of the metaphor, the comfort and the saving initiation of tears, of the reconciliation of death” (Grossu 2002: 116). The poet recognizes this need and, at the same time, leads the souls of the imprisoned on the way of Christ, on his way of birth again, his rites fitting “bitter tears and clanking of chains in humble kneeling, in the high will, in reaching light and inner freedom of renouncing the world” (Grossu 2002: 116).

Sergiu Grossu is a poet who does not despise his fate, but tries to prove that there is a positive side of life in the midst of evil, there is a better fate that any man who believes in Christ can have. He does not focus on himself and on suffering, but wants to create a deeper relationship with the One who is Sovereign over all by suffering. He is an uplifter of the thought of Christ. This explains the idea of catharsis, purification and salvation in the midst of suffering, finding a way through which to escape in times of bitter and difficult. In the end, through his position in suffering and through his verses, he explains the Christian ideal of involvement in the struggle: “If you want to be like/ saints,/ ardents, fighters,/ triumphant,/ suffering/ and loving,/ seek/ gather:/ in the eyes, all defeats,/ in the ears, all complaints,/ in the chest, all wounds...” (*Letter*).

The lyrics written with the responsibility of the Christian who is aware that God knows all the hidings of the heart find their justification in the poet’s testimony: “I have no merit in the creation of the present *Symphonic Universe*. My lyrics as if been mysteriously dictated by someone, I consider them to be a poetic revelation, inexplicable to the agnostic man of our day. I have done nothing but embedding them with a punch of power on the slate of heart” (Grossu 2002: 7).

Romanian poetry will know the culminations of light through Sergiu Grossu’s poetry, lighted in darkness, obscurity and pain, through the triumph of the faith and consciousness of a man saved by divine grace. Beside the literary value of its creation, we should pay heed to the documentary value of his texts, his longing for freedom and his accent on the right to a God Creator-dependent existence.

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