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Szidonia Haragos

## Escape Words: From Solitary Confinement to Female Solidarity in Lena Constante's Post-Communist Prison Memoirs

**Abstract:** This article argues that the representative post-Communist autobiographical texts by Romanian writer Lena Constante, based on the author's personal experience of twelve years of incarceration in Communist Romania's notorious political prisons, trace a gradual transformation from solitary confinement to female solidarity. While the first of the two memoirs, *The Silent Escape*, invokes the power of the literary and creative imagination in surviving eight years of solitary confinement, the second part, *The Impossible Escape*, reveals the growing sense of community among the imprisoned women, their shared sense of suffering that was often induced by torture and frequently endured as a hardship marked by gender (for instance, the misery menstruating women undergo in the absence of the most basic sanitary equipment, with one of them barely surviving a haemorrhage). Recalling her memories years afterwards, Constante composes an autobiography that testifies to the difficulty of writing about the enormity of the atrocities she experienced. Often recording sheer rows of numbers on the page and struggling with silence because words seem to betray reality, her two-part memoir bears witness to a repressed collective past and thus offers a powerful counter-memory and alternative history of Romanian totalitarianism.

**Keywords:** memoirs, post-Communist autobiography, women writers

The two-part memoir by Lena Constante, *The Silent Escape: 3000 Days in Romania's Prisons* and *The Impossible Escape: The Political Prison for Women, Miercurea-Ciuc, 1957–1961*, stands out amongst post-Communist autobiographical texts partly due to its sheer shock factor: it is the recording of a radical “indeterminacy” (Agamben 2005, 3), the span of twelve years lived within the political prisons of Communist Romania, out of which eight years were spent in solitary confinement. Through the recording of her personal recollections of imprisonment as “counter-memory” (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007, 28), Constante's prison memoirs produce an alternative history of Communism, a counter-history. As such, what sets her writings apart is an active desire for the articulation both of a “relational identity” of the autobiographical self (Miller 2002, 24) and of “remembering oneself in connection” (Hemmings 2015, 155) with women of vastly different backgrounds in terms of social class, educational level, political awareness, or ethnic belong-

ing. Through the recording of imprisonment as a gendered experience, Constante effectively captures a transition from singularity towards female solidarity and the affirmation of gender as collective resistance.

The presence of other women becomes the ultimate catalyst behind the change in Constante's perception of and writing about the prison experience: the silent escape through her imagination, which effectively facilitated her survival through the eight years of solitary confinement described in the first part of her memoir, *The Silent Escape*, gives way to the *esprit de corps* shared with other women in the second part, *The Impossible Escape*. It is a companionship of "a handful of women," thrown together haphazardly, most often having nothing in common except the experience of imprisonment, forced physical proximity, and suffering (Constante 2013a, 111).<sup>6</sup> The pity Constante feels for many, and their pity, in turn, for her, their mutual ability to empathize with each other through shared physical misery, lead many of the women towards "a mutual recognition and an affective solidarity" (Hemmings 2015, 153) which, for Constante, transforms both the act of remembering and the act of writing.

*The Silent Escape* is a transcription of a *longue durée* spent within the punitive universe of Romania's prisons, describing their "specific geographies, both real and imagined" (Appadurai 1996, 17), the various spaces of incarceration (Constante is moved between some of the most daunting Romanian political prisons) along with the inner topography of the mind. The larger geopolitical context for Constante's symptomatic representations is Romania in the 1950s and early 1960s, decades defined by the so-called high Stalinism of the Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej regime, superseded in 1954 by the nationalist Communist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu. Constante was convicted during one of the most infamously spectacular show-trials of the Stalinist period in Romania: the case of Lucretiu Patrascanu, former Minister of Justice and founding member of the Romanian Communist Party. The published English translation of the memoir's subtitle fails to reveal what the French original and the subsequent Romanian version both spell out, namely the emphasis on enforced solitude. The Romanian version, *3000 de zile singura in inchisorile din Romania* [3000 Days Alone in Romanian Prisons], places an emphasis on the singularity of the experience, on the sheer horror of spending eight years alone in a prison cell.

In *The Silent Escape*, Constante's writing is profoundly marked by the utter impossibility of the act of writing about the raw experience of solitary confinement, of recording and remembering the daily minutiae of life in prison – minor events endowed with an immense power of signification. The self-imposed task

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<sup>6</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

of expressing the inconceivable weighs upon her, and the text is full of reticence and frequent silence. It follows the format of a retrospective diary, or post-facto diary, starting with her very first day in prison on 19 January 1950. By the time she records day number eight of her detention, she has already run out of words, words that would come close enough to the reality she is attempting to record and the terror infiltrating that reality:

How to convey this fear? I would need a unique word. A word of synthesis. A lightning-word. A word of blood. A shriek emitted by a throat contracted by fear. The waiting in the pit of the stomach. The heart smashed by terror. The fear that contracts your chest up there, on the left, in a space where – usually – there is nothing. The heart. A word of flesh. A word of blood. Such a word does not exist. (Constante 2013b, 47)

Later on, half-pages or entire pages follow covered with rows of sheer numbers, tracking the long sequence of days spent in numbing sameness. The gradually increasing numbers look daunting on the page, and all language disappears as if stripped of the power of signification in the face of despair at the notion of time in prison stretched ad infinitum:

Days 2067, 2068, 2069, 2070, 2071, 2072, 2073, 2074, 2075, 2076, 2077, 2078, 2079, 2080, 2081, 2082, 2083, 2084, 2085, 2086, 2087, 2088, 2089, 2090, 2091, 2092, 2093, 2094, 2095, 2096, 2097, 2098, 2099, 2100, 2101, 2102, 2103, 2104, 2105, 2106, 2107, 2108, 2109, 2110, 2111, 2112, 2113, 2114, 2115, 2116, 2117, 2118, 2119, 2120, 2121, 2122, 2123, 2124, 2125, 2126, 2127, 2128, 2129, 2130, 2131, 2132, 2133, 2134, 2135, 2136 of detention – 20 May 1955. (Constante 2013b, 294)

To counteract time, Constante composes increasingly ambitious projects of poetry and drama. She spends entire days writing and rewriting, perfecting three to four verses. She would make sure that her pieces were filled with numerous characters so that she could dwell in her mind upon their features, work on details relating to their appearance, and imagine entire series of events they would go through. In the course of the composition, at times she is barely able to stand due to the physical exhaustion and hunger. Yet, throughout the day, she is searching for “words, alliterations, rhythms” (Constante 2013b, 150).

Her autobiographical account is darkened by episodes of torture as part of the questioning to which she is subjected. At one point, her interrogators decided to use sleep deprivation, and Constante describes how they woke her up every two hours then took her to interrogation with the strong light of three projectors turned fully on her face and into her eyes. “I still feel my eyes blinded,” Constante writes years after the experience: “The burning of my eyelids. My body has more memory than I do” (Constante 2013b, 119). The incorporated pain triggers bodily memory of the agony she finds hard to conceptualize at the moment of writing about it years after the experience: “Twelve days. This torture lasted for twelve

days. Out of those 288 hours, I slept for 24. It is difficult to believe it now ... How is it possible to survive such a complete sense of despair?” And throughout it all, there is the intensity of suffering in solitude: “... everything hurts again ... and I’m alone, I’m so alone and nobody has pity on me” (Constante 2013b, 120). Another form of torture is being forced to stand on one leg for hours, repeating a phrase from the testimony the investigator has extracted from her. She stands like that for two hours, frightened into submission by the shouting guard standing next to her armed with a stick. Next day she is forced to kneel for hours. It is “very painful to kneel for long,” Constante writes. “Your back hurts, your shoulder hurts, the back of your neck hurts” (Constante 2013b, 111–112).

Composing poetry, drama, or fiction without pen or paper (conditions in Romanian political prisons were notoriously harsh and anti-intellectual; prisoners would most often have no access to pen, pencil, or paper, a fact that echoes Auschwitz to some extent) becomes Constante’s primary means of survival.<sup>7</sup> It is her creative outlet and her “silent escape” from the overwhelming reality of torture, the endless questioning in preparation for the show trial, the utter solitude they force upon her for eight years: “Compose verses and nothing else, all day long. I had nothing else to do. In the evenings, I would repeat the completed poems. In order to learn them thoroughly and in order to prevent myself from thinking about the present. I managed thus to destroy time” (Constante 2013b, 131). On one occasion, she is punished for a ridiculously minor misconduct with a two-day detention in “the cellar,” a dungeon completely devoid of any light and reserved for those suspected of some major infraction. In the absolute darkness and profound silence of “the cellar,” she tries to escape terror by invoking words again, by “calling for words” to assist her. And the words do come: “New words ... Sonorous words. Luminous words. They live. They fly. They come together to form a rhyme.” She loses track of time and manages to produce two lines before she starts feeling the chill of “the cellar” again (Constante 2013b, 271).

A moment of immense significance in the course of her solitary confinement occurs when she starts communicating with other female prisoners through the wall of her cell, learning Morse code and the special coded language of the prison, the “wall language”:

The dots were light taps on the wall with the fingernail or the knuckle of the index or middle finger, or with some object. For example, the handle of a toothbrush, if one had one – which was not the case for many. The dashes, a scratch of about three inches on the wall, lightly so

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<sup>7</sup> Jean Améry talks in *At the Mind’s Limit* (2009) about the difference between Auschwitz, where intellectual activity was impossible, and other concentration camps, like Bergen-Belsen, where inmates had access to books.

as not to leave a mark on the lime ... Once the reflex for Morse is acquired, when the sounds unconsciously become words, the language is really very rapid. (Constante 2013b, 210)

Interspersed with moments of wall-to-wall conversations, her intense creative work benefits, in fact, from solitude, and it is this unhindered private space of the imagination that Constante will come to miss when, at the end of her eight years of solitary confinement, she is transferred to the Women's Prison in Miercurea-Ciuc, in the central region of Romania. Here, for the first time after eight years, she meets other female prisoners face-to-face. It is a profound shock for her to re-enter the realm of relatively normal interactions with others. She opens the first chapter of *The Impossible Escape* by recalling the feeling of her vocal chords readjusting to being used again:

I could no longer speak properly. I did not know how to articulate, how to render my voice. I was speaking the way deaf people speak, perhaps, when they are being trained to speak. A few days later the women told me that on that day of our first meeting, they asked me all kinds of questions, but my answers were incomprehensible. I sounded too confused. I was speaking too hurriedly ... (Constante 2013a, 23)

The forced cohabitation of political prisoners and those sentenced by common law for other types of crime is a fact often remarked upon in other memoirs as well, and is characteristic of totalitarian disciplinary methods, including the concentration and labour camps of the Holocaust and of the Gulag. What Constante discovers in her own case is the very arbitrariness of a system that would throw into jail for years simple peasant women, often lacking any formal education, for an apparent crime that they would have committed entirely unaware of the fact that their behaviour could be considered criminal. The party apparatus would reach out to draconically punish the Romanian peasantry for putting up opposition of any kind to collectivization, the expropriation of the land and elimination of private property en masse. People whose entire lifestyle and self-conceptualization depended upon the land and its cultivation were deprived overnight of the very foundations of their existence. Most of the peasant women in Constante's cell were in no way conscious of the various acts of sabotage they were accused of. They simply could not conceptualize a gesture of protest and rebellion, let alone execute it. Helping a refugee partisan by hiding him for a night, or offering a meal to a stranger passing by who turned out to be wanted by the authorities, were actions they could neither avoid performing nor rationalize in any other way than as acts of good will.

Cohabitation was not easy for the incarcerated women: although they had to bear the same daily brutality of the system, there were strong demarcation lines separating one woman from another. Many of them were very young, and

Constante felt enormous pity for those who were barely twenty and had sentences of ten or fifteen years hanging over their heads. Some, like Boji, a young Hungarian countess, came from the former aristocracy, the hated class enemy; her family had lost everything they had owned. The women would keep in touch after their liberation as well, and Constante went to meet Boji again after they both got out of prison. She met Boji's family living in a dark basement apartment: the exhausted, aged parents, former aristocrats. They lived close to their former castle, stripped of all belongings and housing and by then a home for children with disabilities, "perhaps Ceausescu's future bodyguards," Constante concludes bitterly (2013b, 91).<sup>8</sup>

Gradually, in the course of the second memoir, the sense of solidarity and connectedness comes to define the purpose of writing as well: writing this memoir becomes even more important because it can disseminate knowledge, specific information to those outside the prison, not only about life inside but also about the death of a loved one and the companionship shared by a prisoner they might have thought to have died in complete solitude. When old Mrs Liciu is dying, the entire overcrowded cell is witness to her final struggle. Constante writes about this difficult scene specifically for any family member of the poor Mrs Liciu: "Maybe a member of her family will read these lines. I wrote them for them. To let them know that the women in Cell 6 of the Miercurea-Ciuc Prison whispered for [Mrs Liciu] all the prayers they knew" (2013a, 106). Solidarity emerges gradually amongst the women through experiences born out of a shared sense of "vulnerability" and the willingness to "encounter" each other (Tolczyk 2005, 64), along with small gestures of attempted rebellion against the pervasive surveillance system of the Communist prison. When they conspire to send a kind of prison missive to the women in another cell and circulate some news about the outside world, everybody gets involved: "Each one of them, according to her abilities, was involved in all the events in the cell ... It was a passionate affair and, thanks to our solidarity, we never got caught" (Constante 2013a, 127).

An episode illuminating Constante's own capacity for empathic understanding of the other's suffering occurs when she and a young girl called Nuti are both punished for a minor act of disobedience. Because Nuti refuses to tell on her, they are handcuffed back-to-back and left standing for two hours in the middle of

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<sup>8</sup> Ceausescu's notorious abortion policies would force many pregnant women to give birth then leave their children in state-owned orphanages. The conditions in these institutions were appalling; one of the biggest post-Communist scandals was caused by Western documentaries that exposed them to both national and international audiences for the first time.

the room, with the rest of the women forbidden to approach them. Constante falls back again upon her literary imagination to survive the ordeal, but, this time, while doing so, and recounting to Nuti from memory the story of *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, the focus of her attention is no longer herself but the younger and more vulnerable woman tied to her. Their shared pain initiates a sense of togetherness and an enhanced understanding of the other precisely through mutual suffering to the point where the “I” and the “You” merge through a seamless transfer of the one’s pain into and onto the other’s body: “I thought then that it hurts Nuti just as much. That she hurts because of me. That she is so young. That I need to do something, to find something to say to ease *my pain in her shoulders*” (Constante 2013a, 131; my emphasis). Through heightened empathic understanding of the other, Constante’s memoir reveals in this episode a sense of being, “implicated” *ab ovo* in the lives of others, through a “common corporeal vulnerability” exposed even more by the cruelty of a totalitarian regime (Butler 2006, 28–42).

Later on, this time because Nuti is caught trying to retrieve another piece of prison correspondence, a piece of paper hidden within the makeshift latrine, the two of them are not only handcuffed but also tied together with a heavy iron chain for twenty-four hours. It is one of the heaviest punishments Constante records, one of the few moments when she remembers almost breaking down and giving up on life itself. It is also a moment when, yet again, language seems inadequate to convey her individual suffering and the pain she shares with Nuti. The ordeal becomes an “affective memory” or an “emotional experience,” the intensity of which “once affected – and still continues to affect – the autobiographical subject” (Struth 2015, 129). Everyday language can only try and fail to convey the emotional saturation of those hours and their suffering: “Endless moments. Hours of torture. Pain ... Pain. How can I find the words to convey the feeling of this pain? [...] How to convey the suffering? How to relay the outrage?” (Constante 2013a, 202). The second day, after being forced to sleep handcuffed, it seems a liminal point has been reached and then surpassed:

After waking up, and having been tied again, I felt as if every minute was my last, that I could not bear such a pain any more, yet, I did bear it, and the minutes were passing, and I wanted to faint, to drop dead so as to escape the Calvary of my life and it hurt more and more and I did not understand how we both were still standing, how we did not fall down, how we were still holding on to a crumb of life, if what we were living could still be called life at all ... (Constante 2013a, 203)

Another moment in the narrative highlights the emphatically gendered nature of the women’s suffering, the exposure of female bodies to shame. Those menstruating have no sanitary cloths they could use, and very few of them have some of

that special kind of cotton called *vata* that women used throughout Communism in Romania.<sup>9</sup> Those who did manage to get hold of some *vata* kept washing and reusing it, though practically, the material was unwashable because it was meant for single use:

In prisons, especially in those with closed communal cells, women are struck with an immense difficulty men are spared. The majority of the women are young. They have not reached the age of menopause. Daily, many women would menstruate at the same time. We did not have *vata*. Nor sanitary towels. Torn pieces of cloth? Very few. Anyway, how to wash them? How to get by? Poor women! At times, as they walked carefully towards the lavatory, the blood would flow, drop by drop, along their thighs, down the legs, and red droplets would fall on the floor. The younger they were, the more ashamed they were of their misery. (Constante 2013a, 163)

Often, the only relief the women experienced was when, due to prolonged malnutrition, their bodies stopped menstruating. This would happen to many of them within a few months or in a year. But in the meantime, “accidents” would occur, accidents, writes Constante, that were “hard to believe” (2013a, 163). For instance, there is a night when one of the women sleeping at the bottom of the vertically arranged beds wakes up to the steady dripping of blood onto her threadbare prison blanket. It turns out that a very young peasant woman in the bed above her had a heavy haemorrhage but felt so ashamed of her bleeding that she did not dare wake up her neighbours. Instead, she stuffed everything she could, including her blanket, between her legs to try to stop the heavy outpouring of blood. She barely survived that night. After much pleading, the guards come in and realize the situation, so that she is finally rushed, already unconscious, to the emergency room. She is then taken to the hospital and is lucky to be sent home from there, Constante and the other women find out later on.

Nonetheless, there are also moments of reprieve and calm, which further strengthened a sense of community. One night, before curfew, Dede, the exhausted cell supervisor, asks Constante to do something to calm down the women’s endless chatter. Tell them a story, Dede says. Constante, caught unawares, has to improvise; so she does, and tells the women sitting around her about her own youth and the years she spent conducting sociological and folkloric research in the Romanian countryside she loved. Gradually, the women fall silent under her spell, and Constante becomes their storyteller, able to gift her listeners an hour

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<sup>9</sup> We called it *vata*, and it was a kind of white sanitary cotton one could buy stuffed in a plastic bag. During the Communist years, when staple food items or other basic goods would periodically disappear, we used to hunt for this cotton and stock up on it. One never knew when there would be a shortage again.

“of forgetting, but also of remembering” (2013a, 77). There are also the emotional episodes of friends rediscovered after many years as the women get transferred from one prison to another. Shortly before her release, Constante is moved into a cell next to her “first prison girlfriend,” the one who taught her Morse code and “the wall language,” and who sent her, through the underground prison network, a pair of socks when Constante was left barefoot in the middle of a harsh Romanian winter. The socks were knitted, by the girlfriend and her cellmates, with “two pieces of wire” (Constante 2013a, 253). Those miserable socks made stealthily, with two pieces of wire saved within a prison economy marked by absolute scarcity, were meant to keep the other’s feet warm. Solidarity produced a material reality out of sacrifice and the deprivation of one’s body for the sake of protecting another woman’s corporal integrity.

The *modus operandi* of Communist totalitarianism as “the most radical denial of freedom” (Arendt 2005, 328) in Romania was that of “an exhaustive disciplinary apparatus” (Foucault 1995, 235). As the ultimate space of this disciplinary mechanism, the prison, specifically the political prison, functioned through the physical torture of the inmates, and often their extermination, along with the “extermination of their memory” and their total erasure (Cristea 2008, 26). The privileged, though tragically so, position of the “rememberer” (Levi 1988, 30) as survivor consists of the very impossibility of recovering the truth of Communist atrocities outside the realm of the prisoner’s own memories of imprisonment. Constante’s memoirs are representative narratives of the violence perpetrated during Romania’s Communist regimes. By recording both the solitary experience of incarceration and the solidarity of female prisoners, they mark a fundamental understanding of imprisonment as gendered experience within the tenets of post-Communist autobiography.

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