Anchoring in Alternative Worlds in the Feminine Detention Memoirs

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En évaluant les mémoires de la détention féminine, on se confronte avec diverses questions liées à l'ontologie du texte, à l'herméneutique et même à l'éthique. La taxonomie est problématique car on ne peut pas se référer à ce type d'écriture que de la littérature bien qu'elle soit un discours subjectif et présente la vie en prison dans une manière strictement personnalisée, sans qu'elle nuise la valeur de la vérité du texte, regardé aussi comme document. La théorie de la déconstruction cherche à démontrer que c'est impossible de rendre les événements traumatiques. Le langage semble incapable d'assimiler et de représenter ce que ne peut pas être représenté. D'ailleurs, la confession de Lena Constante est marquée par la constatation de l'insuffisance du langage pour décrire les 3000 jours qu'elle a passé seule. Elle recourt à l'alternative des chiffres pour dépasser les limites du langage. Une fois que les événements sont narrés, ils acquièrent la structure et la cohérence imposées par l'acte de la narration même, d'ici résultant justement la nécessité impérieuse de raconter l'histoire. La technique de la narration et de la remémoration diffèrent pour ces trois auteurs selon le but final qu'elles se proposent. Les modalités de discours narratif seront exposées dans la présente étude. Cette étude insiste aussi sur l'investigation du rapport des victimes aux bourreaux, au Dieu et à la souffrance. De l'avalanche de témoins de la détention, j'ai choisi d'analyser celui d'Adriana Georgescu, Au début c'était la fin, les deux livres de Lena Constante, Evasion silencieuse et Evasion impossible et Bénie sois-tu, prison! écrit par Nicole Valery Grossu. La réponse à la douleur est différente, mais elle est absolument nécessaire à survivre. Si pour certaines détenues, Dieu est témoin de leur souffrance, pour d'autres, la divinité semble développer un jeu cruel et dur. La souffrance est surmontée par l'encrage dans des univers alternatifs, soit celui de l'amour de Dieu et de pairs soit par les ressources d'un esprit lucide et cultivé, ou par l'action même contre la limitation de la liberté. La problématique du pardon se trouve dans les mémoires de la détention féminine et cette étude présente certaines de ses facettes.

Mots clef: mémoires, détention communiste, souffrance, pardon, Dieu, discours narratif

> I am twenty-four/ Led to slaughter/ I survived./ These labels are empty and synonymous/ Man and beast/ Love and hate/ Friend and foe/ Light and dark./ Man can be killed but not the beast/ I've seen:/ Cartloads of hacked-up bodies/ Who will never be saved./ Concepts are but words:/ Virtue and crime/ Truth and falsehood/ Beauty and ugliness/ Courage and cowardice./ Virtue and vice have equal weight/ I've seen:/ A man who was vicious and virtuous./ I seek a teacher

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and a master/ Let him restore to me sight, hearing, speech/ Let him alone again name things and concepts/ Let him separate light from dark./ I am twenty-four/ Led to slaughter I survived[1].

The testimony of the moral chaos the Holocaust produced, holds true for the memoirs of Communist detention which are to be explored in the present paper. Considering the undermining of the preexisting set of norms, values and principles, Adriana Georgescu, Nicole Valery Grossu and Lena Constante each give proof of a different response to the destabilizing atrocities that have transformed their tranquil existence into nightmare. *In the Beginning It Was the End*, *Blessed Be, Prison!*, *Silent Escape* and *Impossible Escape* are the memoirs[2] that are under scrutiny here, in an attempt to discover the way the writer's self had been recreated and to indentify the anchors they hurled into alternative worlds.

The place these writings hold in the field of literature is yet uncertain. We must admit from the very beginning that these memoirs are not to be labelled as literature in the sense that they are not fiction, but it is already widely acknowledged that any discourse is already a story, albeit involuntarily. These journals are testimonies of a catastrophic epoch and by their content they validate and prove their authenticity, becoming historical documents, rendering a vivid image of the absurdity of communist trials and detention procedures. Nevertheless, through these memoirs vibrates a singular, unique voice with a personalized imprint of trauma. Eugen Simion[3] shows their specificity amongst other journals. In the case of testimonies, which he calls *confessions,* he explains that *the journal does not aim to save the insignificance of days passing by*, *the journal is triggered by something else and it becomes something else: it is a cry of despondency, an attempt of redemption, an alarm of the self, a summons from le dehors. Any poetics is dismissed. In the centre of this turbulent stream there lies the sheer experience, the inhuman proof.*

In *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Currie[4] enumerates a few consequences that the process of narrating has on human beings. One of these is that we do not really believe something to be real unless it is archived as narration. In this context he also mentions Deleuze and Guatari and the connection they have drawn between this tendency in the individual to narrate and self-narrate and schizophrenia. To be considered normal one has to perceive time in its linearity not only because this is the basis of moral action but also because the narratives of personal identity and selfhood is at stake. Thus Lena Constante[5]'s *Silent Escape* and *Impossible Escape*[6]

[1] Tadeusz Rosewicz, apud Dennis Diamnond, *Elie Wiesel: Reconciling the Irreconcilable* "World Literature Today" 57, no. 2 (spring 1983), p. 230.

[2] Note: All translations of titles, quotes have been performed by the author of the present study.

[3] Eugen Simion, *Ficţiunea jurnalului intim. Există o poetică a jurnalului?*, vol. 1, Univers Enciclopedic, Bucureşti, 2001, p. 68.

[4] Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, MacMillan Press, London, 1998, p. 97.

[5] Lena Constante, *Evadarea tăcută. 3000 de zile singură în închisorile din România.* În versiunea românească a autoarei, Humanitas, Bucureşti, 1992.

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are ordered scrupulously under the form of a journal, with the data mentioned as if she had written the journal there and then. In fact the time elapsed between the experience and its recording was 40 years. She writes when she is 80 years old but her technique of registering events and personal ruminations under a specific day marks an attempt to make her writing more vivid and authentic to the reader.

In *The Discourse of History* Barthes[7] sees historical discourse *as in its essence a form of ideological elaboration or to put it more precisely an imaginary elaboration*. Barthes believes that the historian is not so much a collector of facts as a collector and relater of signifiers; that is to say he organizes them with the purpose of establishing positive meaning and filling the vacuum of pure, meaningless series. Once the events are narrated, they gain the mantle of coherence imposed by the act of narrating itself, thus the trauma of non assimilation is surpassed. Although the events are organized and rendered under the conventions of the language (tropes, descriptions etc.), the structural poetics of narration does not necessarily imply a cathartic effect as well. The past is re-visited freeing it thus from the trap of silence. The narration of the trauma constitutes itself in an attempt to break the silence, to negate the negation of those annihilated. This outcry does not mean just the mentioning of past events making thus the past to become more real, but an act that testifies for the sheer existence of survivors despite the forces deployed to forever silence them. Silence is first of all a direct consequence of terror which aims at the dissolution of the self because as we know silence governs death. There are fewer and fewer people with the ability to tell a story properly and few who wish to hear a story. Walter Benjamin[8] deplores the end of the art of storytelling as *it is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.*

If we are to speak of narrative strategies deployed by these three women writers we notice the fragmentary nature of Lena Constante's discourse which pretends to respect a strict chronological order in the form of a journal which has been recorded mentally and faithfully transcribed 40 years after the events. The problematic nature of memory and remembering should be further analysed in a different study. Although her whole testimony in *Silent Escape* bears the imperative of muffled and whispered noise, her confession is a transformed, artistically domesticated howl of pain. The silences of the Nicole Valery's text profess her desire to forgive and forget. The enormity of the tortures she only alludes to in her own case are detailed when she talks about her colleagues of suffering. Adriana Georgescu's style is marked by her ambition to summon the world to witness the atrocities and act accordingly. She becomes a metaphor of her own tortured and raped country.

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[6] Lena Constante, *Evadarea imposibilă. Penitenciarul politic de femei Miercurea Ciuc. 1957-1961*, Editura Fundaţiei Culturale Române, Bucureşti, 1993.

[7] R. Barthes, apud Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism.* New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 165.

[8] Walter Benjamin, apud Jim Reilly *Shadowtime*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 33.

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Suffering and the Other

The richness of these memoirs is enhanced by their ability to tell the story of the pain, the suffering they have endured. In the *Myth of Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade[9] sheds light on the way primitive men coped with suffering. He observes that although they considered pain as a deviation from the norm, *pain and suffering are never, anywhere for the archaic society, considered as blind and meaningless, they are not hazardous but they represent the influence of magical or demonical forces against which the priest or the magician deploy their weapons.* In the communist prisons there are different responses to the atrocities the victims experience. There is a certain group of prisoners who profess a strong conviction that suffering is neither gratuitous nor blind. Women lacking a thorough religious education understand their confinement as a fatality, as the doom or fate, therefore questions and queries are useless and meaningless. In their case there is a clear distinction between the sacred and the profane, God seems a distant figure who has justice on His side but who is never involved in the petty life of a simple mortal. Lena Constante brings the testimony of Craciuna, a peasant with a brutal fate, who, after performing what she considered her duties as a Christian (lighting a candle, making the sign of the cross, going through confession), she chooses to pour her sorrows not in front of God but in the middle of the nature hugging a tree trunk. Lena Constante[10] bitterly says: *Crăciuna told me her story with resignation, without anger. How could she stand against the fate, or as she put it, against the will of God? […]To him, the oak trunk would she confess everything that her pride wanted to hide from the rest of the world.*

On the other hand there is a group of prisoners with a vivid religious life, who consider suffering as a means of purification, of catharsis, a trial through which true faith will prevail in the end. Thus these women evade the carceral environment through a life of prayer and devotion, meditation on The Scripture and practical acts of love for their neighbour. Sabina Wurmbrandt with her *Nobility of Suffering* and Nicole Valery Grossu with *Blessed Be, Prison!* bring forth such examples. In these confessions and in many others the divine presence is felt as sharing in their pain and this rich inner life provides the strength to lift oneself beyond the suffocating prison walls. For Nicole Valery-Grossu[11] pain does not represent but a gate that opens to an enriching experience, thus she accepts it as God's way of purifying her. She elaborates on a personal guide book, deeply encrusted in her heart that will help her prevail. Thus a first step would be not to admit to surrender forbidding herself to victimize and cry over her misfortune. *So I must never say I can't or God save me!* Her suffering is enhanced and assumed *I*

[9] Mircea Eliade, *Mitul eternei reîntoarceri*, Univers Enciclopedic, Bucureşti, 1999, p. 98.

[10] Lena Constante, *Evadare Imposibilă*, Editura Fundaţiei Culturale Române, Bucureşti, 1993, p. 48.

[11] Nicole Valery Grossu, *Binecuvântată fii, închisoare!*, trad. de Mioara Izverna [1976], Univers, Bucureşti, 2002, p. 52.

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must take advantage of the time spent behind the bars to change spiritually, to be useful to the others, to learn the meaning of patience, and what is the sacrifice for the neighbour worth, and so that I won't feel the slightest hatred towards those who torture me. The whole confession is but a long plea for love and sacrifice as a token of the divine seal on her soul.

Lena Constante[12], manifests understanding tainted with contempt towards those who, through ritualistic prayers slid beyond time and space. Prayer, likened to a drug, is not but a facile means of escape: *to drug oneself, means to me, to admit your failure and weakness.* In this context she ironically analyses and differentiates inside this group of women with a professed faith, between those who lead an individualistic but ascetic life building a fortress around them, leaving no room for relationships and communication and those who prove their love of God by loving others. *The Catholics and the nuns competed with the legionnaires in a different corner. Not only that they did not attract the orthodox ones in their midst but they treated us with slight hidden contempt. The youngest one lived reclusively in her meditations […]. I would have preffered if she left us to the Lord, without her intervening for us, and if she had rather washed an old lady's shirt or if she'd replaced another one to the chores*[13].

Tzvetan Todorov[14] theorises on this aspect in his book, *Confronting the extreme,* where he opposes the vital values to the moral ones. The vital values he explains, are individualistic. What is of utmost importance in this case is the individual's welfare. The moral values express love for the neighbour, and those who practice them, testify that *there is something more precious that life itself: to stay human is more important than to stay alive*. Thus the ultimate proof of communion with the divine is the power to overcome oneself contributing to the welfare of the others.

There is, especially in the case of cultivated women, numerous examples of survival outside an overt religious life, although this does not necessarily imply a shortage of altruistic actions. The cases of Adriana Georgescu and Lena Constante, are relevant for extreme violence, rare even amongst the memoirs of detention through the aggressiveness and fierceness of their damnation. Lena Costante spends three thousand days in complete isolation. Out of the twelve years of imprisonment, eight of them she spends alone, the first five being years of investigation and incessant, varied torture, and the last four of them spent at Miercurea Ciuc in a special prison for dangerous women. Lena Constante survives by teaching herself to escape in her rich knowledge of the outside world. She mentally translates in and from the French language difficult and laborious literary passages; she travels to western metropolis, museums and theatres, in Romanian

[12] Lena Constante, *Evadare Imposibilă*, Editura Fundaţiei Culturale Române, Bucureşti, 1993, p. 139.

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 141.

[14] Tzvetan Todorov, *Confruntarea cu extrema. Victime şi torţionari în secolul XX*, Humanitas, Bucureşti, 1996, p. 41.

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traditional villages bearers of beautiful ancestral culture. Furthermore she would create new worlds and mentally traces the smallest, most insignificant details of exotic settings and adventures of her heroes. Alongside she imposed on herself a drastic programme of physical education so that she keeps a minimum of health necessary for survival. She opened thus a way to the world of the spirit where the body is educated to relinquish its claims and give priority to imagination and mental toil. If Nicole Valery imposes harsh rules on herself based on her faith in a loving God, Lena Constante resists by protecting her dignity and by freeing herself from the bounds of the body.

Suffering and God

The representation of God as delineated by the feminine memoirs of communist detention is antonymic. For Adriana Georgescu, He is remote and uninvolved in the effervescent political scene of the moment. The fate of the country is at stake and it is not God who will save us from the communist abhorrent play with power but courageous individuals like her supported by external help from the democratic countries. Lena Constante's God is cruel, ruthless and totally indifferent to the human pain. Lena considers that it is impossible that a righteous God if He existed would allow such unleash of evil power. Moreover she sees in those who cling to God a proof of cowardice and of an unrefined and uncultivated spirit. She is not the only one who sees in the unjust pain a clear confirmation that the God of the Bible cannot stand for a real entity. The communists use the same weapon against believers, deriding their faith and naivety. Pointing to their present state they ridicule their illusions and claim their own absolute power over the victims. *It's over with Him and with all the silliness of those who believe in Him. I am God. Here I do what I want, not what God wants*[15].

On the other hand to Nicole Valery, God is an irrefutable reality in the cells where many claim that He remained locked on the outside. Where other see just implacable destiny or merciless fate Nicole Valery[16] testifies *But what I recall from the twenty months I spent at Mislea, staying only in this bedroom is that God loves all those that He created and He wants to draw them near.* Nicole seems to have accepted the pain inflicted on her but not in the same way as the aforementioned Craciuna but in a kierkegaardian way, giving up this world and its lure, knowing that happiness means the incapacity to leave in the world (in conformity with its ideology) and the ability to live by faith (in non-conformity with the current ideology).

Suffering and forgiveness

The majority of communist detention memoirs approach the issue of forgiveness. Innocent victims of a terror that has imprinted their whole lives ponder whether they should forgive, if they have forgiven. Some answers are equivocal,

[15] Nicole Valery Grossu, *Binecuvântată fii, închisoare!*, Univers, Bucureşti, 2002, p. 53.
[16] *Ibidem*, p. 14.

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some are more definite, but as Jaques Derrida[17] advises, we can only acknowledge their decision, without the arrogance of casting judgement: *Be it I forgive or I don't forgive, in both situations I am not sure I understand, in fact I am sure I don't understand. And anyway, there is nothing I have to say. This area of experience remains inaccessible, and I should only respect its secret* (p.121). Without attempting to fathom the mechanisms of forgiveness we can look at the different aspects of this ethical matter. Nicole Valery[18] declares in *Blessed be, prison!* Her decision to forgive. *I could never tell them, that I did not feel any hatred towards them, that I tried to love them and I prayed for them compassionately, even when they threw over me buckets of water to wake me up from fainting or when they threatened with beatings when I could no longer walk.* She forgives although there is no repentance of the one who perpetrates evil, without even the promise that there will ne an end to evil following forgiveness. Nicole Valery forgives unconditionally being aware of the fact that evilness will be recurrent despite her forgiveness, without any guarantee of improvement, without any alteration in the deeds and the person of the forgiven one. Thus it becomes a unilateral attitude, a decision that does not involve the other and a proof of a noble and powerful spirit, of a moral supremacy of the one who grants forgiveness. Soren Kirkegaard[19], alluding to the text in Isaiah 38: 17 shows that by the act of forgiving the guilt is placed behind the guilty one, thus when the one who grants forgiveness looks upon the person who performed evil, he cannot see what is behind him, being aware though of the existence of something there. Even if historically speaking, the deed cannot be erased, it is no longer visible in the eyes of that who grant forgiveness. Nevertheless, they remain aware of it. In other words forgiveness does not have the power not the mission to deny what has taken place. Umberto Eco[20], quoting Thomas d'Aquino, explains that not even God Himself would violate the logical principle by which "p has happened" and "p did not happen" would appear as contradictory, because such violation is in direct opposition with His nature.

Forging the unforgivable, hyperbolic forgiveness as Derrida names it, is to Derrida, the only type of forgiving worthy of such name. Hannah Arendt and Jankelevitch[21], on the other hand, consider that forgiveness cannot be granted without the act of repentance, without a transformation of executioner in a different person incapable of performing evil. Moreover Jankelevitch, claims that for the things where atonement is impossible or as long as it is impossible to punish a deed according to its enormity we cannot speak of forgiveness. On the contrary, Derrida opinionated that if we forgive only that which is forgivable, forgiveness loses its meaning.

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[17] Jacques Derrida, *Credinţă şi cunoaştere: veacul şi iertarea*, Paralela 45, Piteşti, 2004, p. 121.
[18] Nicole Valery Grossu, *Binecuvântată fii, închisoare!*, Univers, Bucureşti, 2002, p. 48.
[19] Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1962, p 274-275.
[20] Umberto Eco, *Limitele interpretării*, Pontica, Constanţa, 1996, p. 46.
[21] Hannah Arendt and Jankelevitch, apud Jaques Derrida, *Credinţă şi cunoaştere: veacul şi iertarea*, Paralela 45, Piteşti, 2004, p. 103-105.

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In the context of the inferno of detention there are three major approaches to the problematic of forgiveness. Either the victims choose to forgive there and then as previously shown in Nicole Valery's case, or they choose hatred, a revenge seething with hatred, or the victims try to stay aloof of such ethical dilemmas, despising their torturers with such intensity that they became dehumanized. Consequently, such ethical issues become irrelevant. Lena Costante, for example, ceased to refer to the repression agents as human beings. On the other hand there are nuances in the victims' outlook. Elisabeta Rizea, for example, finds that she can forgive the opressors who practice abuse that she can justify, but sheer cruelty she finds unforgivable. Graţian Cormoş[22] explains the torturers objectifying and demonizing as a means of survival. *To be able to block their mind when confronted with the daily hell, with the trivialities and abuse performed by the inferno wardens, the imprisoned ones deployed imaginary strategies of de personalization and demonizing their oppressors.*

Hatred implies fighting the enemy with their own weapons, offering them thus an underground victory, that of becoming alike. Nicole Valery tells the story of the prisoner who, once freed, seethes with anger at the thought of granting forgiveness to such abhorrent creatures. Yet, Etty Hillesum[23] notes about a former prisoner from the Westerbork concentration camp. *He bears such hatred towards our enemies, a hatred that I find justified. But he himself is a torturer. He is so full of hatred towards those we call our torturers, but he could become a perfect torturer and a remarkable persecution agent.* In fact, Adriana Georgescu[24]'s friends urge her to encourage herself with the prospect of the day when they will pay a visit to her torturer Nikolski. *Adriana, you are very brave. But it is not over yet. You will need courage from now on, too. First you have to eat. Do you understand? You need to be on your feet when we'll go and pay a visit to Nicolski, Bulz and Stroescu. Promise?*

Since Nicole Valery sees in her imprisonment a sign of Providence, she decides she should forgive as she has been forgiven. As long as we cannot admit the potential for evil in all of us, we cannot accept divine forgiveness as we deem it unnecessary at this point. Thus we cannot forgive the neighbour either. Tzvetan Todorov[25] militates in his aforementioned book, *Confronting the Extreme* just for the acknowledgment of the inherent evil in the human being: *only if we accept that totalitarianism is part of our possibilities, that Auschwitz and Kolîma happened to beings like us, and that we as well might find ourselves in their position* only by demystifying the torturers, reducing demons at the level of humanity, only by

[22] Graţian Cormoş, *Femei în infernul concentraţionar din România*, Casa Cărţii de Ştiinţă, Cluj-Napoca, 2006, p. 58.

[23] Etty Hillesum, apud. Tzvetan Todorov, *Confruntarea cu extrema. Victime şi torţionari în secolul XX*, Humanitas, Bucureşti, 1996, p. 209.

[24] Adriana Georgescu, *La început a fost sfârşitul*. *Dictatura roşie la Bucureşti*, Humanitas, Bucureşti, p. 129. [1951].

[25] Tzvetan Todorov, *Confruntarea cu extrema. Victime şi torţionari în secolul XX*, Humanitas, Bucureşti, 1996, p. 243.

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considering these our neighbours who are, contextually, on the evil side, can there be forgiveness. If these are demonized, seen as mentally deviated persons, abnormal and inhuman there cannot be talk about forgiveness. Hegel, the great apologist of forgiveness, claims that everything can be forgiven but the crime against the spirit that is against the reconciliatory power of forgiveness. To what degree had the spirit of each victim been assassinated it is not for us to answer, but each victim for themselves.

In all these testimonies there is a painful cry of victory, of the dignity of having prevailed, of eluding the annihilation plan, of fighting with the whole being to survive, but not only in the physical sense of staying alive, but in that of keeping their principles untainted, be they religious, political or cultural values.

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