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HERTA MÜLLER AND THE EMPIRE OF METAPHOR

The fact that, for nearly a decade, none of her works have been translated into Romanian reflects not only a lack of public success but also the absence of editorial interest aligned with the author's specific demands. Equally revealing is the near-anonymity surrounding the celebration of her seventieth birthday within the Romanian literary community. Uncompromising, incisive, and unapologetically principled, Herta Müller rejects any editorial, translational, or human compromise as a testament to her unwavering ethical stance toward a country she loves conditionally. This study examines the early memoir volumes of Herta Müller, focusing on the narratological and poetic dimensions of a labyrinthine body of work that remains largely unexplored, particularly following the Nobel laureate's gradual descent into obscurity among contemporary audiences, especially in Romania.
Key-words: *Herta Müller, biography, Romanian and German literature, trauma, exile literature*

A Love-Hate Relationship: Romania

Biographical texts and hybrid essays – fusing biography with poetics – occupy a significant space in the analysis of Herta Müller's oeuvre. With an extraordinary ability to assume the personas of other writers, her work embodies what might be termed a traumatic narrative style. Continuously adapting, experimenting, and evolving, Müller often begins with one idea and concludes with entirely different ones. The only constants are the identity markers to which she returns unfailingly, forming the bedrock of her literary universe. These identity touchstones will be explored in the pages that follow.

The fact that none of her books have been translated into Romanian for nearly a decade signals more than a lack of popular success; it underscores a dissonance between editorial interest and the exacting demands of the author.

Equally telling is the near invisibility of her 70th birthday within the Romanian literary landscape. Provocative, incisive, and irrepressible, Herta Müller rejects any compromise – whether editorial, translational, or human – as a testament to her unwavering ethical stance towards a country she loves only conditionally.

The King Bows and Kills stands as both a rewriting and a synthesis of crystallised memories, intricately interwoven with the hierarchy of inner trauma. Its hybrid nature is central to its appeal: an autobiographical essay and a catalogue of the essential motifs in her literature, it merges the journal, the memoir, and the creative workshop. Within its pages, the author lays bare the interplay of biography and fiction, dismantling the boundaries between the two. The book is both a celebration of writing and a testament to the transformative power of words to transcend conditions and realms.

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Rarely does Müller offer glimpses of spirituality or delve into transcendental themes. Yet her essays seem to hint at a belief in the "aura" of texts, echoing Walter Benjamin. She suggests that her words might one day be read even by those who have departed. This poetic utopia – of written words reaching beyond the confines of life – reflects a moral obligation so fervent that it embraces even the most improbable possibilities.

The structure of *The King Bows and Kills* mirrors the stages of the narrator's life: a childhood shadowed by Stalinism, adolescence and university years under the Communist 1970s, exile, and a perpetual present oscillating with force between past and future. The narrative sequences share a deeply metaphorical core. The narrator embodies anyone – or nothing: the Dictator, the Torturer, the shadow, or fear itself. All may assume the guise of "the King", a label that encapsulates demon and daimon alike – a nameless state or one so fearsome its name cannot be spoken.

For years, "the King" was symbolised by "the animal of the heart", a metaphor bridging the concrete and the abstract. The King reigns and defines the worlds within worlds – or, more precisely, the Kings, plural, as on the chessboard of life. Threats amplify dependence on life, while hunger for life itself attains the status of a King, as does the fear of death – yet another King. Why a King, and not a dictator? Because Kings can coexist, their plurality reflecting the complexity of existence. A King is a "lived word", whereas "the animal of the heart" better served the realm of the written word.

The narratives propose distinct structures of temporality and historicity. Words reconcile the images of memory, though they cannot bridge the ethical contradictions born of freedom. A subtle interdependence emerges between Herta Müller's ethno-cultural biography and her political one.

The spaces of catharsis in *The King Bows and Kills* traverse mnemonic territories where passive elegy intersects with active revolt, creating plastic regimes. A poetic manifesto is encapsulated in *In Every Language There Are Other Eyes*. This text reconstructs the relationship between vision and objects, even as it argues that "what man creates need not be doubled by words". The paradoxical progression of this assertion generates an existential tremor. When fear is constructed in the mind, it moves closer to the essence of human existence. Similarly, Müller works through the persistence of seeing or the act of glimpsing.

Fragmented vision offers no protection through prayer. In Herta Müller's childhood memories, the subversion of tradition intertwines with a deep complicity in solitude. Deprived of parental affection and haunted by rituals with morbid overtones, young Müller experiences reversibility as a therapeutic process. Reconstituted by language and nature, by objects and the dissociative potential of words, the rural world seeks a compensatory harmony between writer and nature. From an early age, she understands that essential truths cannot be spoken without error.

Objects mirror people and their character. Inseparable from the individual, they help the memoirist construct the outer edges of personhood. After the skin disappears, the object assumes the place of the deceased. This unique relationship with objects becomes an unconventional form of humanising emotional and communal deficits.

The writer cites António Lobo Antunes, Hanna Krall, and Alexandru Vona to support her vision. As early as her Romanian phase, Alexandru Vona spoke of the "insistent presence of objects", without humanity ever fully grasping their meaning.

Vona's observation and Bruno Ganz's insight on how poetry can suddenly open an "immense space beyond the meaning contained in words" – become cornerstones of Müller's poetic art.

The Aesthetics of the Trivial and Provoked Spatialisation

The methodological currents in Herta Müller's literature stem from the way objects and unexpected juxtapositions of words and images open true *imagistic portals*. Her work embodies the effect of provoked spatialisation, a method that, in prose, achieves its effect somewhat linearly; in poetry, however, requires *deliberate dislocation* to sustain *the progression of spatialisation*. Such an approach informs statements like: "For me, poetry exists in a vast space, enveloped in air."

To some extent, the author rejects the facile comparisons between her prose and poetry. Herta Müller asserts that writing excellent prose is what makes it akin to poetry. *The King Bows and Kills* refines the method through which she elucidates the central notions of her oeuvre.

The writer rejects the concept of "homeland". In Romania, the term had been appropriated by two kinds of "owners of the homeland": "the Swabian cocoon-dwellers, avid dancers of stolen polkas and rural virtuosity experts", and "the bureaucrats and lackeys of the dictatorship".

These coexisting homelands – "the rural homeland as a kind of teutonomy and the state homeland as unquestioning subservience and fear of repression" – are, for the author, xenophobic, parochial, and arrogant. Early on, she realises that in the face of brutality, beauty becomes obscene.

The aesthetics of the trivial are assimilated traumatically, without the mediation of theory. To discover the essential word, Müller invokes the method of Alexandru Vona, who observed that truth can only be found through identifying the words that "are not meant for you".

The monographs of life and words, along with that of the village in *The King Bows and Kills*, claim to function according to the principles of alterity and hermeneutic consciousness. The pathway to immanence is transmitted through Vona's method. Both in Müller's work and in Vona's, one can discern the pre-existence of the meteoric word. This word belongs neither to intimate space nor cultural identity, yet it creates the utopian objectuality of Müller's literature, shaping its intervals and continuity. United by moral consistency and a lucid trajectory toward authentic literature, the diaristic, essayistic, and prosaic notations form a subtle combinatorial system.

Viewed through the prisms of the "kings" and the "animal of the heart", *The King Bows and Kills* becomes a compendium of *conceptual wounds*. These notions possess incisiveness and oscillate between betrayal and love. Whether in peripheral or central cadences, the narrative of writing as solitude overshadows biography, though the two are interdependent. The beauty of Herta Müller's writing arises from the gap between her artistic biography and existential temptation, articulating the zones of neutrality and transfiguring reality through imagined lexical organs. A collection of biographical and artistic diagonals, *The King Bows and Kills* constructs an entire ontological taxonomy.

No one escapes the abandoned prison. This is the message of the texts in *Always the Same Snow and Always the Same Uncle*. They reaffirm the author's inability to look back without anger. In her unforgiving gaze, everyone was – and

remains – guilty. There is no middle ground. No innocence. No intellectual resistance. This absolutism resembles the stance of someone who has understood that only through exaggeration can normality be underscored.

In the memorial essays of *Always the Same Snow and Always the Same Uncle*, acquaintances, friends, and family are subjected to a sweeping indictment. Herta Müller behaves like authoritarian parents who, overwhelmed by emotion, are incapable of conveying their feelings effectively. Her elusive sensitivity has deep roots. When it comes to ironic flourishes and paradoxical vehemence, Müller has no equal. She synthesises a system of subterranean paths leading to an abyssal depth. Orality releases the anxieties and spectres of silence.

In all her books – and especially in her memorial essays – beyond history and biography, the central figure remains writing itself. *Always the Same Snow and Always the Same Uncle* must be read alongside the biographical essays of *The King Bows and Kills*. Here lies the magmatic core of her work. The volume contains essays on recurring themes: her father and his Nazi past, her mother's weaknesses, the rupture from rural life, the harassment by the Securitate, exile, and writing itself.

However often she revisits familiar episodes, Herta Müller remains unwaveringly true to herself. From this glacial disposition, she never employs caricature, comedy, or humour, as doing so would mean renouncing her essence and accepting a detachment from the past. "When you write, it's not about trust but about the honesty of deception", she notes in *Every Word Knows Something of the Devil's Circle*.

In Müller's work, the inability to reconcile is fundamental. Her mistrust extends even to language. Unsurprisingly, she warns us that language is not homeland but the substance of what is spoken. Between herself and the reader, Herta Müller places layers of substantiality that demand poetic engagement.

The Psychedelic Dimension

Under the shelter of metaphor, prose often conceals *a psychedelic dimension*, challenging to navigate for casual readers. Herta Müller ventures into hermetic realms, refusing to grant the reader full access to meaning. With her defences lowered, she engages in a duel with herself. On a social level, by dismissing the systematic order of emotions, Müller establishes herself as a professional in addressing discomforting truths. It is evident that for her, past persecutions extend into "interior domains" that transcend language. In her view, Romania remains a country of imposture and falsehood, where any form of affection is either categorised or rendered unbearable.

The writer's resistance to the forms of change in Romania is a way of rejecting happiness. Under communism, she observes, "there was a very personal, improvised happiness, found precisely in the gaps left by state control. This happiness had to be as fleet-footed as betrayal, either fleeing from it or outrunning it altogether. Such happiness was often a crooked, thieving kind of joy" (*Cristina and Her Puppet*). Müller condemns the twisted world that delays acknowledging its historical weaknesses, dressing itself in the guise of naïve democracy. The painful truth, however, is her lingering nostalgia for the totalitarian era – an unacceptable anomaly, a "cheap happiness", a "patchwork construct". When writing about returning, the author sees informants everywhere – "some ensured that the Securitate became an abstract monster without successors" – she feels watched, unable to experience her

return as entry into a secure world. Perhaps this is because her father, too, remained imprisoned by an illusion until the end.

Romania is an infernal space, one that fiction cannot heal. Yet Müller acknowledges "this sensitive Romanian language that drives its words, with an imperative simplicity, straight into the heart of things". She speaks and writes as few others have about figures like Max Blecher, Maria Tănase, Oskar Pastior, Alexandru Vona, and Emil Cioran. There are passages where perplexities take the shape of love declarations: "I still don't understand how these songs manage to console you through their sorrow", she says of Maria Tănase's music, praising as well the "affective grammar" of the Romanian language. She considers *Adventures in Immediate Irreality* a masterpiece, marvelling at the blend of affective language and technical-mechanical expressions, at how "affective convulsions are framed in geometric structures", and how "words sink their claws into objects, lift them, and quite literally bring them into the sentence".

Herta Müller's models seem always to be those who have lived on the margins of existence. Reflecting on Cioran, she writes: "He cast aside his homeland like no one else, yet preserved the possibility of individual recourse, where things, reduced to their essence, become unrecognisable."

Müller's literature operates at a certain level where people take on the faces of the most discomforting truths in the world. From this emerges *the poetics of refuge* and *the architecture of death*. One of her major ideas might be termed *the pantomime of words*: "Where they catch lived experiences by surprise, they mirror them most faithfully", she confesses. The connection she forges between existence, object, and word represents, for Müller, an intimate map of survival through writing.

Sufficiently cohesive, the pantomime of the world reverberates an interiority she describes as "the zero point of existence". The expression is borrowed from Oskar Pastior, who, sent at the age of 17 to Ukrainian labour camps, became both witness and voice of conscience in the novel *The Hunger Angel*. The book, born from documentation of Pastior's experience, can be interpreted as a text written with two hands, *a dual internalisation* filtered through traumas and irretrievable fears. From Pastior, she also adopts familiarity with the "fractures" of language and the pursuit of authenticity "on the border between wounded happiness and brazen fear". These become her internal milestones as well. From Jürgen Fuchs and the poetry of Theodor Kramer, she learns that fear ensures a state of inferiority, conveyed through images that strike "directly at the exposed nerve".

By veiling her extreme experiences in metaphor, Müller privileges dramatic nuclei that articulate survival through the simultaneous lenses of melancholy. In all her work, she transforms prose, memoir, and essay into a poetry of living silence, with a rightful claim to *a visceral intensity*. This is achieved through the juxtaposition of banal meanings, yielding durable essences. Without this, Müller feels she cannot write. Suspicious of literature, she feels indebted to lived experience.

Through this unique pantomime of realities, Müller exposes obsessions that lead, cathartically, to an elemental matrix. Regardless of the subject, her reader becomes a prisoner of a darkened world, where the lights are mere chiaroscuro effects. A poetic labyrinth, almost excessive in its linguistic games, Herta Müller's literature is an empire of metaphor.

Published two years after its German debut, *My Homeland Was an Apple Seed* reaffirms Müller's positions in a dialogue with Angelika Klammer. For Müller,

homeland is no apple seed; it is a grinder of apocalyptic chills. Like Edgar Allan Poe, she shuts the dim window, draws dark curtains over it, then laments the absence of light. How, then, to win the wager of light? Still, a mechanism of disintegration produces a paradoxical brilliance. Here resonate the undertones of Müller's literature.

Her concrete means aim for the intimacy at the heart of her obsessions: homeland hides within a rotten apple, its seed poisoned from the start. By whom? Family, society, the Securitate, the condition of being a woman, religion, or fate. The portrait of the writer, emerging through provoked confessions, reveals a contorted being dispersed through her own literature as a character.

In all of Herta Müller's work, one reads scenarios of *a state of mortification*. Social decay and ethnic legacy of torture intersect, compelling the Woman to survive on multiple planes simultaneously. The absence of firm projections is, inevitably, disconcerting. Allergic to ceremony and exuberance, Müller derives vitality solely from the alienating instinct of survival. She carries her past within a shell, but not metaphorically like Norman Manea. Instead, she amplifies the burden of her vulnerability. Angry, she drags the past behind her, clenching her teeth, mixing terror with layers of indirect guilt and the weight of suicides (from the "Banat Action Group").

In *My Homeland Was an Apple Seed,* one reads the biography of a being who lost innocence early and rediscovered it only late—somewhere on the border between sense and image, in spontaneous collages without artistic intent. Unlike Aglaja Veteranyi, Müller succeeds in balancing past and present, history and its process. Angelika Klammer does not provoke her conversational partner. The interviewer refrains from imposing the pleasure of uncomfortable questions. Instead, the dialogue belongs to the empathetic reader, attentive to the discretion of the interviewee, consuming delicacy in every formulation. A sense of admiration pervades the exchange, without the pretence of confronting the illusion of equality.

The Four Biographies

Four thematic coordinates emerge from Herta Müller's dialogue, reflecting much of her literary work: *the rural biography* (the trauma of her family in Romania's Banat region), *the urban biography* (the trauma of the Securitate), *the artistic biography* (her involvement in the "Banat Action Group" and the genesis of *The Hunger Angel*), and *mythologising aestheticism*. Each of these activates subterranean currents that communicate with one another, ultimately painting the portrait of a writer who has not tamed her radical melancholies but has harnessed them as a force for life.

In the first phase of her recollections, the dialogic memory revisits *vegetal imagery*. Terrified by nature yet deeply attached to plants, the young Herta Müller developed early a vocation for impermanence, which grew steadfast within an alienated being. Guilt and fear united in the child, who dreaded being trapped within her own body. The lack of affection in her family was part of an imposed "normality". Everything confirmed this: her grandmother suffered from dementia, her Nazi-affiliated father took refuge in alcohol and died relatively young, while her mother, hardened by her time in Soviet labour camps, lost all sensitivity.

Herta Müller experienced the blockage of *a fundamental inaffectivity*. Writing about her childhood, she often portrays it as harsher than it was. Oscillating between what is permitted and forbidden, the adolescent girl censored her access to social normality and spirituality. Sin, in her world, sought her out rather than the other way

around. The metaphor of the rotten apple core recurs throughout her work. In *Traveling on One Leg*, she shifts the metaphor's focus, radicalising the fear of ageing by using the body as compensatory currency. In her literature, dreams are not a form of escapism. Instead, "in sleep, you are confiscated from yourself".

This mysterious struggle with the self-constructs an autofictional narrative about dependence on the power of truth. Her childhood profile reads like a contract for future annihilation. A mix of cold affection and eclectic feelings, perpetually overshadowed by terror and fear, Müller's fate resembles *an allegory of the incorruptible soul*. What response can one have to a confession such as: "I think I would have been frightened if my mother had suddenly caressed me?" Müller denounces through forgiveness – ranging from her grandmother's wandering mind to her mother's inability to nurture, blinded as she was by political fear.

Müller's idea seems simple when she observes that the individual cannot understand how memory operates within them.

The supreme law in her work arises from *the conflict of femininities* in power relationships – those with her father, her husband, the system, ideology, ethnicity, education, and her relationship with her own body. These dramatised relationships inform the dominant judgments in her work. On the other hand, her divergence from her ultratraditional family lies in her decision to break psycho-cultural ties with the matrix. The relationship between youth and old age delineates the indicators of submission. Folklore dictates that to remain young, she must leave the village.

This embraced discontinuity opens the door to Herta Müller's urban biography. The city exerts control over language through metaphors that decisively transform German. Her fascination with the urban is paralleled by the linguistic miracle it offers. The poet embraces this new language under tragic circumstances. On her way to interrogations, she hums in her mind, *"My homeland was an apple seed, as I searched for my path between the sickle and the star."*

The Banat German dialect and literary Romanian, perfected during her school and university years, connect Müller's literature to *a compositional imagology*. Her traumatic organisation splits, Orwellian style, between two Ministries of Feelings: one dictated by the Romanian regime, the other by the Association of Swabians in Germany. Both sought to discredit her, following familiar patterns seen in the lives of Paul Goma, Monica Lovinescu, C.V. Gheorghiu, Vintilă Horia, and others. According to her Securitate files, the scenarios were identical, and the outcomes predictable: exiles accused one another, convinced the other was an informant. Müller believed the Securitate functioned as "a massive fear engine, staffed by psychological specialists in fear – a martial, arbitrary, philistine male association." Women, she notes, were regarded as weak, foolish, and sentimental. Yet she was also lucky: her friendship with Jenny, the daughter of a party official, went unnoticed for a long time, until Jenny herself succumbed to a tragic concession. Between threats like *"We'll throw you into the river"* and *"Those who dress clean cannot enter heaven filthy"* (as her interrogators warned), Müller's moral spine grew. The death of her father and the relentless harassment by the Securitate proved decisive.

Her urban biography is steeped in trauma but also reveals a profound linguistic transformation. It mirrors her rural past in its ability to graft new roots into an alien environment, with language serving as both refuge and weapon. The result is a literature where survival is intertwined with fear, where identity is shaped not by triumph but by the resilience to endure betrayal, exile, and alienation.

The Fortifications of Melancholy

Herta Müller transforms silence into a fortification of melancholy. For the author, melancholy is not the dreamlike state of selfishness that Cioran proclaims but rather "the vigour of all weaknesses". Indeed, in the more intimate spaces of her memorial writing, Herta Müller occasionally reveals glimpses of her feminine sensibility. She acknowledges, for example, her obsession with clothing and adornment. Beyond this, she remains discreet: she briefly mentions a divorce and how, when leaving the country, she was accompanied by Richard Wagner, whom she had married. She admits that, as it existed, eroticism under communism was tied to a kind of pleasure derived from obedience.

Each time, it ends in confusion, as relationships blend seduction with a calculated element. She often contemplates suicide with what she describes as "a barefoot face". Considered "a necessary madness", she rejects the possibility of happiness. The suicides of her friends (Roland Kirsch and Rolf Bossert) seep into her own depression. The "Banat Action Group" remains her family. Elaborating on the image of a group united by fears and anxieties but also by naivety, she expresses satisfaction, decades later, that none of them had betrayed the others. No one had become an informant.

Only the structuralist onirism achieved a similar feat in romanian culture during communism. To this day, Herta Müller shows no signs of unconditional love for Romania, believing that the Securitate agents were reactivated and that the files were systematically manipulated after 1990 to distort the truth. Moreover, neither society nor the governments have prosecuted the crimes of the Securitate. Upon expatriation, she discovered that even the Germans employed similar psychological tactics.

One positive fissure in her relationship with the Securitate stands out: the prestige she gained in Germany. Her interrogators were convinced of either a secret conspiracy or that the writer had become an agent. In reality, it was merely "the same unhappiness with a different face". It is no coincidence that Oskar Pastior, she observes, lived his life "on tiptoe". Herta Müller does not believe in chance or coincidence. Yet the Romanian language, with its folklore, subtle sonorities, and Blecher's literature, provides her with "a vital feeling that suits me better", finding beauty in the only way she accepts it – suddenly. She speaks Romanian rarely, forgets much, but admits how it is "always, unchangingly, interwoven with what I write".

For Herta Müller, writing is a necessity born out of an inner refusal. Her literature must be understood through the fertile alchemy of the reasoning of trauma and the labyrinth of silences. Her singular, definitive goal: to reclaim innocence. The dynamic relationships in Herta Müller's confessions and diaries reveal a being polarized between a commitment to the past and the temptation of renewal. The compositional imagology in her literature reflects the totalitarian era, the adventure of poetics, and the architecture of an interiority often resembling the mechanics of a Rubik's cube: its colours express meanings, techniques, and traumas in relationships of continuity.

The Poetics of the Inner Territory

Contrary to general perceptions, until her Nobel Prize recognition, little had been written about Herta Müller's literature. What did exist was predominantly sentimental and informational, with scarcely any applied critique.

Following the euphoria of her global distinction, a handful of monographs and synthetic studies emerged. Yet, lacking conceptual revisions and innovation, critical readings failed to transcend clichés. Both her name and her work were elevated instinctively rather than through professional reinterpretation. Difficult as it is – with its dialectical poeticism, conceptual intricacies, and a linguistic frenzy that seems to burn at the root of every word – Herta Müller's oeuvre attracts few disciples, and her readers belong to a rarefied caste. Often, the author speaks as though she had spent her entire exile waiting to confess.

Her global fame is not merely a form of revenge but a triumph for those who invest more in truth than in their own destiny. The primary technique propelling Müller's literature lies in the strained disjunction between the advancement of inner territories and the tactical dissonance of language.

To reconnect the maps of the human being, language establishes a pact with the reader, one in which Herta Müller dispenses the freshness of ellipsis and profiles allegory. Without access – even poetised – to intimacy, the reader enters a linguistic spectacle at the expense of the pleasures of realist reading.

The rule by which Müller constructs her volumes dictates that interiority must always outpace language. The traumatic excesses in her novels impregnate the extremes with paradoxical states. The settings and secondary destinies are no less revelatory. From her first book to her most recent, Herta Müller writes at the edges of paroxysm, creating existential reverberations.

A refined mannerist with a penchant for metaphor, Müller builds poetic imagery without the satisfaction of suspense – except for the kind specific to poetic decoding. Her perspective on reality, filtered through alliances and metaphorical analogies, imbues her prose with a rhythm closer to jazz or blues than to the orchestrated symphonies of realism.

This explains the disproportionate critical reactions relative to her fame. From her first stories published in the late 1970s to the present, Müller's work has evolved into *a progression of ideograms*. Intuitive and organic, the language of her earliest texts was a blend of German interspersed with Romanian words and expressions.

After fully assimilating the Romanian language, Müller discovered that the infusion of lyricism enriched her German style, vocabulary, and methods. At this stage, her attitude began to align with Thomas Bernhard's rebellion against the limits of language.

To her advantage, Müller found transformative analogies between her psychological structure and the Romanian language. The banality of Romanian created the unexpected in her literary situations.

This tightrope marriage, continuously developed by the author, allowed the spontaneity and vitality of Romanian to fertilise the symbolic flow of her imagination. Her entry into German literature was met with moderate enthusiasm, particularly in the context of the German communities behind the Iron Curtain.

Herta Müller's talent was praised, paving her way to integration upon returning to the Federal Republic of Germany. The path had been laid by Oskar Pastior, Franz Hodjak, and Werner Söllner, making the inclusion of writers like Ernest

Wichner, Klaus Hensel, Bernd Kolf, Georg Aescht, and others seem natural. The German dialect spoken by Romanian Swabians fascinated German readers.

Unlike her contemporaries, Herta Müller maintained an inner connection to Romanian. It was a muted game. For a long time, she struggled to grasp Romanian irony and absurdist humour, unable to understand their mechanisms or cognitive models. Once she did, her new challenge became disciplining the internalisation of her two languages – her maternal German and Romanian.

Though she began publishing in Romanian relatively late (*Este sau nu este Ion*, 2005), Herta Müller transferred its visual and stylistic elements into her writing through metaphors and paradoxical associations. Romanian's advantage lay in its flexibility across any syntax. By contrast, German's rigidity often disappointed her.

Her confessed fascination with Romanian stems from what she calls its "incestuous relationship" with German, a dynamic where two competing languages in one life intensify sensitivity. Romanian corresponds to her creative psyche, adding *a super-poetic layer* to its constraints. A recurring statement of hers is: "I found more resources in Romanian than in my mother tongue." She found German folk music "unbearable", while Romanian rhymes and metaphors she described as marvellous – her favourite example being the phrase "old age, heavy clothes". For Müller, only fiction can capture reality through words.

The choice of words that generate a text's formal cohesion determines the degree of artistic pleasure. Müller admits that her themes are dictated by life experiences. Viewed holistically, her oeuvre is a sophisticated process in which suspended existences poetically dialogue through the literarisation of resistance to trauma.

The everyday in her work is expansive, absurdity-dependent, with Banat itself becoming a character. Equally, her interest lies in the interplay between language and fiction, and the incorporation of biography to undermine dysfunctional family dynamics. Johann Lippet, a former workshop colleague, also explored the Swabian village of Romanian geography in his novel *Die Tür zur hinteren Küche* (*The Door to the Back Kitchen*, 2000). For a time, the militancy expressed in German gained limited popularity but remained dangerous for contact with Romanian intellectuals in Banat. Repressed militantism in Romania exploded in exile.

Herta Müller's work is the revenge of censored militantism. Her prose develops on what Gelu Ionescu calls "a poetics of metonymy". Once in Germany, she became, as Vasile Spiridon insightfully notes, "what she remembers herself to be while striving to become what she believes she could be. Euphoria cannot replace melancholy in the equation of her exile."[2]

The image deliberately promoted by Müller conveys her refusal to reconcile with anyone or anything. A restless conscience, she resonates with the fatigued spirits who celebrate the vitality of melancholy. She firmly believes that nothing disappears – not even through writing. She rejects the idea that literature can heal. Her utopia lies in perpetually seeing things from new perspectives.

Herta Müller is a damned soul who feeds on the abundance of her unhappiness. Among her tools of introspection, restlessness resides in places few dare to explore. In Germany, Müller feels Romanian; in Romania, she feels German. Her

[2] Vasile Spiridon, „Experiențele modelizante ale Hertei Müller", in *Ateneu*, 638, 2022, p. 20.

identity reference guards a style that manifests itself solely in tension, governed by the moral laws of an archaeologised memory and linguistic revisions. A defining trait of Herta Müller is her insistence on discomfort as a socio-existential urgency.

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