The Deportation of Germans from Romania in Herta Müller's Poetic Conception: On the Long-term Tragedy of History

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Abstract: This study is a narratological analysis of the manner in which a historical fact (the deportation of ethnic Germans from Romania) gains its equally epic and poetic value in Herta Müller's novel *Atemschaukel*, constituting a *unique geometric place* where the three genres, the lyric, epic and dramatic, converge. This intersection of genres, as well as the ability to maintain a stable balance between them, means for Herta Müller the real success in a poetic, artistic conversion of a dramatic event in the history of ethnic Germans in Romania. The paper describes the pattern of this specific type of writing, the meeting place of a lyric subject (the confession of the protagonist, Leo Auberg), an epic subject matter of the narration (deportation), and the tension of a metaphysical conflict, albeit desacralized, between destiny and freedom. This paper proposes a reading of Herta Müller's text starting from historical contextualization, it analyzes the nature and function of history in a community and in individual destiny, in order to finally arrive at a poetic decontextualization.

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On 6 January 1945, when the Allied Control Commission forwarded Order 031 to the Romanian Government requesting the mobilization of Romania's ethnic Germans for forced labour in the Soviet Union (men between 17 and 45, and women between 18 and 30 years of age),[1] Herta Müller had not been born yet. The ethnic German writer from Romania, Herta Müller, was born in the village of Nițchidorf on 17 August 1953, right after the survivors of the deportations returned home. The writer's mother was deported as well, and returned to the village after five years of forced labour in the Soviet Union. Herta Müller is therefore member of the first generation of German children whose parents returned after their deportation, most of them at a young age, and who, on their return to Romania, a country completely changed since they left, had to take on their lives and adapt to the new life conditions.

In the *Nachwort* of the novel *Atemschaukel*, published in 2009, the writer admits that the subject of deportation was a taboo among Germans in communist Romania, they only talked about deportation allusively, in the family or with other people who were deported and understood their equivocal language without much

[1] Lavinia Betea, Cristina Diac, Florin-Răzvan Mihai and Ilarion Țiu, *Lungul drum spre nicăieri. Germanii din România deportați în URSS*, (The long road to nowhere. The Germans from Romania deported to USSR) (Târgoviște: Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2012), 12.

further explanation: "Weil es an die faschistische Vergangenheit Rumäniens erinnerte, war das Thema Deportaion tabu. Nur in der Familie und mit engen Vertrauten, die selbst deportiert waren, wurde über die Lagerjahre gesprochen. Und auch dann nur in Andeutungen. Diese verstohlenen Gespräche haben meine KIndheit begleitet. Ihre Inhalte habe ich nicht verstanden, die Angst aber gespürt".[2] As she explains in the *Nachwort*, the idea to write a book about the deportation of Germans to the Soviet Union came in 2001, when she began jotting down her discussions with former deportees of Nițchidorf village, her birthplace. She shared this intention with Oskar Pastior (1927–2006), a poet who, turning 17 at the time of the Order, was himself deported, and agreed to share his memories of the Soviet labour camp with Herta Müller. The two writers met on a regular basis and worked together on this project until 2006, Oskar Pastior's death. By that year, Herta Müller had already gathered *four notebooks full of hand notes and wrote drafts for some chapters* : "Als Oskar Pastior 2006 so plötzlich starb, hatte ich vier Hefte voller handschritlicher Notizen, dazu Textentwürfe für einige Kapitel".[3] The shock of the poet's death halted for a year her work on the novel, originally conceived as a piece for four hands. She took up her work some months later, and published it after one year (in 2009) as we know it today. At the end of that year, the Swedish Academy awarded her the Nobel Prize for literature.

After Pastior's death, some indications were found in his apartment that he might have been an informer of the Romanian secret police, the *Securitate*, between 1961–1968, before he left Romania. He had been "convinced" to cooperate because of the *guilt* of having written seven "anti-Soviet" poems, which, so the *Securitate* claimed, described his experiences in the forced labour camp – reason more than enough, in those years, for someone to be arrested and sentenced. The secret police blackmailed Pastior through these poems, making him believe that a friend and colleague, to whom he entrusted these poems, was arrested because of them.[4]

In an interview in the 18 September 2010 issue of the daily newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, when she was asked about her first reaction to this news, Herta Müller, who had also been watched by the *Securitate* before leaving Romania,[5] answered without hesitation: "I judge the informer Oskar Pastior by the same criteria as the other informers in my file. Only that I reach to a different conclusion. If Pastior lived, any time I visited him, I'd insist that he read his file and write about it himself. But each time I'd do it while holding him in my arms."[6]

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[2] *Nachwort* in Herta Müller, *Atemschaukel* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2009), 299.

[3] Ibid., 300.

[4] On Oskar Pastior's *Securitate* files, see: Ernest Wichner, "Oskar Pastior și tribulațiile informatorului 'Otto Stein'" (Oskar Pastior and the informant "Otto Stein"'s tribulations), *Observator cultural* 285 (23-29 September 2010), 15.

[5] Cristina Petrescu, "Eine Zeugin gegen die Securitate. Herta Müller versus Akte 'Cristina'", in eds. Joachim von Puttkamer, Stefan Sienarth, Ulrich A. Wien, *Die Securitate in Siebenbürgen* (Cologne, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2014), 342–373.

[6] Herta Müller, "Sînt sigură că Pastior și-a dus absolut singur toată povara" ("I am sure that Pastior carried his burden alone"), translation by Alexandru Al. Șahighian, interview in the daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (18 September 2010), republished in *Observator cultural* 285 (23–29 September 2010), 7.

One of the most difficult problems that Herta Müller had to face when continuing her novel after Pastior's death was to find her own style of writing and implicitly the identity of a voice, a narrator who imprints the stories on deportation – a subject of historical reality – with literary, artistic coherence and poetic strength. Although Herta Müller never directly experienced deportation, her option for a narrator incorporated into the narration as opposed to an external narrator was partly imposed by the subject matter. It is not uncommon in literary history for an author to directly describe through a character in the text the experiences he or she has never had or witnessed. In case of traumatizing experiences of history, especially those of the totalitarian regimes (Nazism and communism), this narrator's role is usually assumed by a direct witness of the events. This increases the confessional, and implicitly dramatic value of the text. The equally famous case of another Nobel Prize-winner (2002) is that of Imre Kertész, in whose writings the experience of Nazi labour camps, directly witnessed by the author, is a dominant subject. In his novel, *Fatelessness*, the narrator-protagonist, of an age close to that of Herta Müller's character in *Atemschaukel*, describes with a teenager's innocence his deportation, together with other young Jews, and the traumatic experience of the forced labour camps until his release, at the end of the war.

Herta Müller has not had thus a direct experience of the camps, only through the stories of intermediaries. As she confesses herself, first she got in touch, as a child, with the feeling of *fear* she perceived when the adults around her *allusively* talked about the camp. Much later, after the fall of communism, in conversations with former deportees from her village she heard about their experiences and their life in the camp, gathering information and confronting the data. The meetings with Oskar Pastior made her detach from his memories precisely that poetic, subjective, authentic substance that, related to the others' life stories, gave coherence and stylistic unity to the ensemble.

And still, despite the narratological difficulties of this option, Herta Müller made the choice to speak in a first person singular voice, identifying with the protagonist, Leopold Auberg, the 17 years old teenager from Sibiu, who was taken by the patrol on the night of 15 January 1945 with other Germans from his town (aged as the Order stipulated) to a forced labour camp in the Soviet Union. Except for a short prelude of the preparation for deportation, and some episodes after the return home, the novel *Atemschaukel* narrates in the first person this teenager's experience of the labour camp, *accused* by the Soviet authorities of being *guilty* of the crimes of the Nazi regime together with other Germans deported from Romania. Those who are familiar with Herta Müller's prose know that her texts are not what literary theory calls, after French theoretician Gerard Genette, *hetero-diegetic narration*, where the narrator's unseen, yet omniscient presence is well defined in the text. Herta Müller's language, as one of her interpreters observed, is at the borderline of poetry and prose, as "it is not conventional, but objectual, in the sense of perfect concordance of connotation and denotation."[7] Her prose is closer to the poetic language and applies *homo-diegetic* narration, in which the narrator is a character in the text, who acts and talks. From this

[7] Cosmin Dragoste, *Herta Müller – metamorfozele terorii (Herta Müller – the Methamorphoses of terror)* (Craiova: Aius Print, 2007), 70.

point of view, the choice of the first person narrative, in accordance with the literature of the self which only speaks for itself, might seem natural and quite within reach for the author. The only difference is that the world Herta Müller describes in her other novels is a world seen with her own eyes, directly experienced, the world of Romania during the Ceaușescu regime, a concentration camp extended to the territory of an entire country. Even when Herta Müller changes the perspective, like in a kaleidoscope, and gives the impression of a life lived under the lens (characters living under the gaze of informers and secret police officers), the relation of the self with objects does not fall apart, only reverses the direction of the gaze. Therefore, although Herta Müller most often writes in the first person singular, the confession does not fall into the *sin* of subjectivity; on the contrary, the impression of objectification is even stronger because of the poetic force of suggestion and due to the reversed gaze from the object to the subject. As regards the narrative perspective, the choice of the first person singular in *Atemschaukel* receives a much more profound meaning and a wilfully symbolic nature.

Her identification as a narrator with Leopold Auberg is a choice that Herta Müller fully assumes. The first person singular justifies the narrative instance which intentionally creates an impression of authenticity starting from the real experience of the deportation, and grants the confession a kind of poetic objectivity, although deprived of its apparent witness-character. The nature of the subject itself (deportation) and Herta Müller's success in maintaining the tragic tone of the action all throughout the text, demonstrating how the drama of man in front of destiny is universal, invite the reader to a *poetic* reading of the text instead of a *confessional*, *historical* one. While not going into details regarding the hermeneutic problem of intention, discussed, among others, by Michel Foucault in his famed *What is an Author?*, where *intention* and *intentionality* play a major, distinctive role in interpretation,[8] I think that the more profitable question to ask about the analysis of Herta Müller's *Atemschaukel* (keeping the convened framework of interpretation) would not be what words she uses to express an intention, but what the *author* means by using those specific words.

The commitment to realism and *poesis* are harmoniously combined in Herta Müller's work, in such a way that the presentation of a historical fact (deportation), which conventionally can only be done with the help of the means of epic (counting on the effect of the subject), gets transferred into a different register, one situated not so much at the frontier between poetry and prose, but rather in a *unique geometric point*, the convergence area of the lyric, epic and dramatic genres. This intersection of genres, as well as the ability to maintain a stable balance between them, means for Herta Müller the real success in a poetic, artistic conversion of a dramatic event in the history of ethnic Germans in Romania. This privileged geometric spot is thus the meeting point of a lyric subject (the confession of the protagonist, Leo Auberg), an epic subject matter of the narration (the deportation), and the tension of a metaphysical conflict, albeit desacralized, between destiny and freedom. The intersection of these three classical genres in this *geometric point* is achieved by reversal, by the *partial abolition* of the poetic requirements of each of these genres. The requirements of the epic genre

[8] Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 101–120.

are fulfilled in that it presents a verisimilar subject in development, but some of its norms are abolished, and the epic means of expression are dissolved thus in a world predominated by the lyricism of Leo's voice. What remains of *the plot*, once its epic character has been suspended, fits perfectly to Aristotle's definition that the purpose of tragedy is to represent an action where an innocent hero falls into a great misfortune (XIII, 1453a 5),[9] an action that must trigger fear and produce the effect of *catharsis* in the audience. Taken *ad litteram*, Aristotle's definition would cover the plan and scope of action in *Atemschaukel* if the means to achieve the tragic were those of tragedy as such. Consistent with herself, Herta Müller mixes the trivial with the exceptional, life with poetry, as two oppositional and distinct tones of the text, but also follows a superior perspective in which this circumstantial opposition might find its unifying principle. Counting on the encounter between the poetic and the historical, when the history of a collective event (deportation) is projected onto a secondary, timeless, unchanging plan (that of the meditation on history), Herta Müller manages to temper the tragic subject with poetic expression, to bestow metaphysical value on the conflict and to ingrain the particular (the event) with a sense of universalism. History indubitably has the means to analyze the *collective tragedy of deportation* of the Germans from Transylvania. Literature can also undertake this role, but surely not by restricting it to borrowing the subject and measuring the effect by the cause, as long as a tragic subject, by definition, should also meet some strict, poetical requirements of composition. Consequently, one of the distinctive elements of history and poetry is that, in Aristotle's words, "Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular." (IX, 1451b 5).[10]

In addition to a personal view on history interpreted in a poetic note, *Atemschaukel*, like any great work of art, also proposes a universal view. However, the means of expression that lend epic substance to the subject (deportation) find themselves distanced from the epic because of how Herta Müller conceives *poesis*, as the transgression of reality to poetry and implicitly, the touch of the universal. The difficulty regarding the relation between history (historical event), memory (subject) and story (narration) lies in impregnating the plot (the story) with this universality, and, for the literary text, to convey the sense and character of *poesis* and implicitly universal tragedy to a collective tragic event recorded by history. With the instruments of epic alone this would be almost impossible. And still, Herta Müller brilliantly succeeds in doing that, using means other than those usually applied in epic literature, employing the force of poetic eloquence in order to keep alive the tragic suggestiveness of the text. This way the lyric force conveyed by poetry inserted in the text does not weaken the epic value of the narration; on the contrary, adding up elements of the dramatic, such as the metaphysical conflict and the collective guilt (of being German) increase the poetic resistance of the text and lend it exquisite suppleness. By this seemingly circumstantial junction of genres and the partial abolition of the poetic norms of each, Herta Müller creates a unique kind of writing, with a set of essential features (merging the poetic elements of epic, lyric and drama) that I shall illustrate in what follows.

[9] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Samuel Henry Butcher (London: Macmillan, 1922), 45.
[10] Ibid., 35.

In a perfect orchestration of the plot, the text contains three acts, unequal in length, but well balanced as to the events of the middle and longest section of the composition. The first chapter functioning as a prologue starts directly, without any previous introduction to the action, with Leo's packing and leaving home, and his eagerness to leave from home, far from the world that he perceives as limiting his ambitions, offering the image of a journey of infinite possibilities. The preparations of the 17 years old young boy, presented in the first chapter, suggest that Leo, at an insufficiently mature age, accepts his fate willingly and even quite serenely. But beyond the apparent calmness of the hero, Herta Müller succeeds in expressing with just a few stylistic means the more profound idea that in front of history's major changes, man is never ready enough, counting also on the informed reader's implicit cooperation, who, unlike Leo, *knows* what awaits him in his *journey* and later in the camp. This scene of preparing the luggage for the *journey*, which in an epic register could have gained a symbolic meaning, in reference to the *role of the journey* in mythological epic poetry, converts into a scene of tragic worth and tone. For Leo and the other deportees, taken by force by the authorities, the political order of deportation or the *law* (in its absolute sense) is similar, by its relentless nature, with the relation of *divine will* (blind, irrational) and *human will* in classical tragedy, a relation which always inclined towards the former. The poetic effect of this scene is even greater as the hero behaves in a way that is completely different from that of an epic hero or the superior hero of a tragedy. On the contrary, Leo accepts his *lack of exceptional qualities* with the same serenity as he accepts his fate. The lack of qualities as an established image in modern literature is also suggested by the hero's self-definition not by who he *is* (*to be*) but what he *has* (*to have*), by a sum of objects received as gifts from others, whose value and significance establish the role and determines the social presence of the community in front of the individual:

> "Alles, was ich habe, trage ich bei mir.
> Oder: Alles Meinige trage ich mit mir.
> Getragen habe ich alles, was ich hatte. Das Meinige war es nicht. Es war entweder zweckentfremdet oder von jemand anderem. Der Schweinslederkoffer war ein Grammophon-kistchen. Der Staubmantel war vom Vater. Der städtische Mantel mit dem Samtbündchen am Hals vom Großvater. Die Pumphose von meinem Onkel Edwin. Die ledernen Wickelgamaschen vom Nachbarn, dem Herrn Carp. Die grünen Wollhandschuhe von meiner Fini-Tante. Nur der weinrote Seidenschal und das Necessaire waren das Meinige, Geschenke von den letzten Weihnachten." [11]

This quotation is taken from the very beginning of the novel, and it constructs the identity of the narrator through accumulation, through collecting the goods of other people, as he receives certain objects from his family and a neighbour (Mr Carp), which he takes with himself in the labour camp. This way, through an affective but equally poetic transfer, Leo assimilates them to his own self, taking with himself in deportation *something* of the identity of the others excepted from the order, but who are equally *guilty* due to their community of language and culture. By this affective, cumulative transfer that first person singular personal pronoun *I*, meaning Leopold

[11] Herta Müller, *Atemschaukel* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2009), 7.

Auberg, changes into *we*, the father whose overcoat he wears, the grandfather who gave him his winter coat, uncle Edwin from whom he gets his breeches, the neighbour, Mr Carp (a Romanian man) with his leather gaiters, and aunt Fini who gives him the green woollen gloves. The gramophone box is offered by Leo's mother, and the words *I know you'll be back*, of an overwhelming suggestive power for the 17-year-old boy, are the farewell words of his grandmother, which he takes with himself as a talisman or a symbol of believing in his return. None of the people who contributed to Leo's few assets in the camp were deported, but Herta Müller's ability to blend a whole community's (ethnic Germans in Romania) life experience into one single character is one of the fundamental elements of her poetic vision, expressed in the contrast between the almost trivial tone of the epic level and the elevated, serious tone of man's tragic frailty in front of historical destiny, suggested by *silence*.

The text's lines of force, represented on the one hand by the metaphysical impulse that emphasizes the relationship between destiny and freedom, and on the other hand by the constraints of historical reality where the focus changes from the religious to the political, converge in a point as the centre around which the whole revolves. The words Leo's grandmother said when they parted (*I know you'll be back*) accompanied Leo during the whole time he spent in the camp, and cemented this wholeness, apparently fragmented in short chapters with veritable prose poems among them, with a symbolic, premonitory value, which is expressed in ancient tragedies by the choir, with the force of repetitive incantation formulas.

Paradoxically, Herta Müller's text emphasizes that, even in the 20th century, in front of the reversal of historical situations man proves to be just as helpless in case of a decision that comes from a level *superior* than his own status, resignedly accepting his destiny, just like the heroes of ancient tragedies. But while tragic heroes are examples because of their behaviour, proving to be exceptional heroes under all circumstances, in Herta Müller's modern text, despite the poetic conversion of the dreadful reality, spiritually speaking, survival is not a virtue of superiority but of inferiority, of the one who possesses a stronger self-preservation instinct. The camp produces no heroes with exceptional qualities acting in exceptional circumstances, so, because of the dominating will of survival, the only *heroes* standing out are those who manage to stay alive. The deviation from a superhero to an *anti-hero* concerned only about survival at all costs subdues the supremacy of the spirit over the elementary values of life, becoming also a reaction to the blind faith in militarism and raw force during the war. The assertion of the human being's freedom of action within a totalitarian society becomes thus the subject of sceptical and, implicitly, modernist meditations.

Furthermore, rightfully opposing the traditional manner of treating time (chronology) and space, the structure of Herta Müller's text has no respect for the norms or rigours of the epic genre, but suspends them. She manages to instil a vague feeling of temporal and spatial indeterminacy by the subtle avoidance of any determination and the art of emphasizing only the phenomena (of time and space) important for the action, leaving the rest unexpressed; instead, reversing the perspective, she plays down any reference to time and space, counting also on the reader's familiarity with the time and space of the action. Time seems to be abolished in the camp, temporal references are vague and mostly refer to the seasons because of

the possibility and need to procure edible food from the fields. Space seems to be no more fixed, not because Herta Müller did not know the place where Oskar Pastior was deported, but because, for the same poetic reasons, she preferred to count on the suspension and indeterminacy of space, maintaining a lengthy effect of the tragic atmosphere:

> "Der einzige Anhaltspunkt, den wir bei der Ankunft im Lager hatten, war NOWO-GORLOWKA. Das konnte ein Name für das Lager sein oder für eine Stadt, auch für die ganze Umgebung. Der Name der Fabrik konnte es nicht sein, denn die hieß KOKSOCHIM-SAWOD. Und im Lagerhof neben dem Wasserhahn lag ein gusseiserner Kanaldeckel mit kyrillischen Buchstaben. Mit meinem Schulgriechisch reimte ich mir DNJEPROPETROVSK zusammen, und das konnte eine nahe Stadt oder bloß eine Gießerei am anderen Ende Russland sein. Wenn man aus dem Lager herauskam, sah man statt Buchstaben die weite Steppe und bewohnte Orte in der Steppe".[12]

This way, even if Leo is in the foreground of the narration and can be observed by the reader in all of his actions, whether at work, stealing potatoes in the field, or bartering with the few objects he still possessed, Herta Müller's protagonist is profound and not completely absorbed by the present. On the contrary, the background of the story (the history of deportation), known both by the readers and Leo, who recounts his experience after almost 60 years, seems to tone down, although it plays a decisive role in the plot, supporting the dramatic conflict and tension of the entire work. The effect of overlapping spatial and temporal planes (chronology is random, and the space – referred to at the beginning as "on the edge of nowhere, at the Russians" – is vague, taking on at most a shapeless form of landscape, the steppe), and overlapping the conflicting strata of conscience conveys the poetic nature of the text and the objectification of the subject expressing itself in an almost lyrical way.

There are real poetry pages in *Atemschaukel*, chapters written as poems: *Weßier Hase*, *Vom Lagerglück*, etc. Thus, precisely because of this poetry-like, rather than epic nature, Herta Müller successfully maintains the active, lively, tragic thrill of the text, suspending the spatial and temporal determination by poetic means, a compulsory norm of every action. Due to this poetic power of suggestion, almost every chapter becomes the draft of a miniature tragedy, a drama with profound implications and consequences for human existence through epic depth and the suggestion of the latent conflict.

Over and above the formulation of a tragic subject such as the collective tragedy of deportations to the Soviet Union, as a condition for its rebirth, the tragedy as a poetic genre should rediscover the beliefs of the ancient Greeks, or, like the modern theatre, to turn towards the absurd with metaphysical implications, with irrationality pushed to the extremes. But, as George Steiner remarked in his famed book, *The Death of Tragedy*, not even the work of authors like Samuel Beckett or other playwrights like Claudel, Cocteau, Gide or Brecht can change the conclusion that tragic theatre as an artform is dead: "But tragedy is that form of art which requires the intolerable burden of God's presence. It is now dead because His shadow no longer falls upon us as it fell

[12] Ibid., 59.

on Agamemmnon or Macbeth or Athalie."[13] Although the definition of tragedy has not seen major changes in time, it has undergone some major variations in form compared to the ancient tradition, and has suffered some changes in adaptation to the audience's taste. Conclusive examples in this respect are Shakespeare's theatre or later, in French classicism, the theatre of Racine and Corneille. The use of the term *tragedy*, when speaking about the collective deportation to the Soviet Union, is perfectly legitimate and beyond any semantic doubt. Tragedy is part of life. Based on the available sources, historical literature has described in various ways the *tragedy* of the innocent victims of deportation, entire communities whose fate was sealed by totalitarian regimes in the name of absurd, inhuman ideologies.

The inhumanity of the tragedy is also emphasized by George Steiner in his definition of the genre, underlining the *irrational character* of the will of the gods, and also the inability to recover of the one who received the terrible blow of destiny:

> "Tragic drama tells us that the spheres of reason, order, and justice are terribly limited and that no progress in our science or technical resources will enlarge their relevance. Outside and within man is *l'autre*, the *otherness* of the world. Call it what you will: a hidden or malevolent God, blind fate, the solicitations of hell, or the brute fury of our animal blood. It waits for us in ambush at the crossroads. It mocks us and destroys us. In certain rare instances, it leads us after destruction to some incomprehensible response."[14]

The dramatic conflict implies thus a divine will, the change in the individual's destiny close to destruction. But, as Aram Frenkian claims, another important element in defining tragedy in a world of misery and suffering is the metaphysical balance of the relationship between heroes and gods, as well as between faith and reason (divine justice/human justice).[15]

Herta Müller's text does not abound in religious references. Words like *God*, *faith*, *prayer* or others in this semantic field are extremely rare, so rare even that their absence is more meaningful than their too explicit presence would have been. The feast of Christmas is mentioned, but mostly by reference to the symbol of the Christmas tree rather than the mystery of the Saviour's birth. Undoubtedly, the world of the camp is a godless world. The stronger survives. The lawyer Gaist survives because he eats the cabbage soup of his wife, Heidrun (with her consent), while she eventually starves to death. There is also an internal order or justice of the camp when certain limits or conduct codes are broken. Karli Halmen, for instance, staying alone in the barrack for a day, eats Albert Gion's bread. When the others return and see the theft, they all punish him, putting the thief in the sick ward for three days. This kind of justice acts on the spot, led by people, no one expects any divine justice, which comes either too late or never (like in Euripides's tragedies). Nevertheless, instead of the traditional, absent God, there are other, more concrete divinities, who seem to have replaced God and who, through their often terrifying presence, hold the place of destiny as well as gods.

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[13] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 353.
[14] Ibid., 9.
[15] Aram Frenkian, *Înţelesul suferinţei umane la Eschil, Sofocle şi Euripide* (The meaning of human suffering in Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides) (Bucharest: Editura pentru literatură universală, 1969), 251.

Such a god is Fenia (in the chapter *Der Kriminalfall mit dem Brot*) by whose ugliness Leo, as he himself confesses, feels almost subdued:

> "Fenjas Gerechtigkeit machte mich regelrecht hörig, diese Paarung von Schiefmäuligkeit und Präzision auf der Waage. Das Abstoßende an Fenja war eine Perfektion. Fenja war weder gut noch böse, sie war keine Person, sondern ein Gesetz in Häkeljacken. Es wäre mir nie in den Sinn gekommen, Fenja mit anderen Frauen zu vergleichen, weil keine andere so gequält diszipliniert und makellos hässlich war. Sie war wie das begehrte, schrecklich nasse, klebrige, schandbar nahrhafte, rationierte Kastenbrot"[16]

This goddess of bread of a *cold sanctity*, as Leo calls her, is an inverted divinity, impartial and ruthless, ugly and fair, cold and terrible, but sacred by the holy horror she causes, having a direct and sacrosanct connection with *the daily bread*, like the Father in Heaven in the Lord's prayer. Moreover, her presence is also reassuring, because the inmates know she would never be absent from the daily duty of dividing the bread, on which their survival depends. Still, despite her importance, Fenia is reduced to this single role of weighing and portioning the bread based on the physical effort and work done by each inmate, obeying an almost mathematical equation: *one shovel = one gram of bread*. This is the only territory where Fenia, the symbol of a just but blind justice lacking any understanding, is omnipotent.

Another god with an increasingly strengthening influence, especially as time flows, is the Hunger Angel, appearing throughout many pages. Again, one can appreciate Herta Müller's ability to render poetically some of the most degrading states of human existence, when the angel of hunger incites the one that it possesses to commit foul things that an individual would not normally commit. The angel of hunger dissolves almost all preconceived notions towards man and humanity, determining the people in the camp to behave differently from any other human being. These divinities are almost devoid of materiality or concreteness, they are almost abstract, and as such, they do not have a real power like the *nacealnic*, the commander of the camp, the real representative of power for the inmates. Still, the human representatives of power are left in the background, their albeit terrifying presence is overshadowed, gravely and almightily, by some almost abstract forces with concept value, but even more terrifying by their (inhumanly) cold actions. With this inversion of power relations on the conceptual, abstract levels and the concrete, real ones, Herta Müller obtains that dramatic effect that conveys the text its conflicting terrain between the human and metaphysical level without losing for a moment its suggestive power.

Moreover, the modern expressiveness of the text is also rendered by the relationship of *silence* and *word*. There is a pledge of *silence*, whether a tacit one, assumed by the entire community on their return from deportation, or a certain kind of inability of words to speak about things impossible to utter, which creeps into the text as a subsidiary, obvious reality. Referring to his experiences in Nazi Auschwitz, George Steiner talked about a shrinking world of words ("The world of words has shrunk")[17] in the post-war years. In contrast with the abundance of other accounts of the deportation, a vast corpus of texts (confessions, archival material, etc.) accessible

[16] Herta Müller, *Atemschaukel*, 110.
[17] George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 24.

today, the telling silence in Herta Müller's text gains an additional level of meaning due to its extra-textual implications regarding the knowledge and interpretation of the historical circumstances defining the deportation. As long as the heroic action or any kind of heroism converts to *silence*, the tragic is triggered precisely by the contrast between the frailty of life and the will of survival (with nothing heroic about it), as well as the grave tone, suggested by an in-depth level (that of history) inaccessible for the understanding of the protagonists but manifest and explicit from the reader's perspective.

The tragic is realized through Herta Müller's mastery in the *mise-en-scène* of identity translation from the first person singular to the plural, from *I* to *we*, conveying polysemy and an extra poetic value to the text. This affective dramatic transfer, counting on *role* inversion, stands out also in the disposition of the chapters so that it allows for a division of the text into the periods before the deportation, the deportation and after the deportation. In each of the three parts the identity of the *I* is defined/dissociated with respect to the others, the hero's apparent lack of traits, visible especially in the middle part of the text, is conceived as an element of contrast meant to attract attention to the tragic level of the plot.

In the first chapter, *Vom Kofferpacken*, the dramatic conflict acquires a double value, which makes the text open towards two perspectives with different meanings. The first is the perspective of the regard from inside the text, that collective *we* that Leo identifies with, his drama being the drama of his entire community; the second is the perspective of the regard from outside the text, the reader's privileged perspective. Only him, the reader, is offered supplementary information on the escapes of the 17-year-old young man who met with older men in the Park of alders or Neptun resort. The code names of the men he met in the park are interesting; despite their vaguely poetic character, they remind of the terrible semiotics of *Securitate* files, establishing thus a chronological relation with Oskar Pastior's later life, blackmailed by the *Securitate* and forced to become an informer before he left the country.

The middle part of the text, placed between the first and the last six chapters, describes in an almost undetermined chronology Leo Auberg's life in the camp. But as the image of the people at home fades away in a sort of collective, over-individual organism (surviving only in language), Leo discovers in the camp a new community through which and in whose name he speaks. Leo's almost singular voice is perceived even more intensely as the unison, the tuning fork that indicates the tone of the entire choir. However, under the unbearable circumstances in the camp, when hunger drives the inmates to situations of degradation and humiliation close to the limit of humanity, the respect for any kind of social or sexual limits or differences disappears, and any attempt to reinstate a normal order of things on the model of human society outside the camp ends in scenes dominated by a tragic, overemphasized absurdity. The normal/abnormal (human/inhuman) relation is inversed in the camp, the traditional view of the world is turned upside down by forces that instate a new order in which the struggle for survival, regardless of the means, is accepted as a necessary element of balance. There is nothing more in contrast with the natural order of things than the idea of raising hunger to the poetic rank of *angel*, even more so as starvation was one of the most frequent causes of death in the camp. Still, the only and last form of individual freedom that refuses to accept a certain order considered inferior to the order of the

spirit because it is only based on the struggle for survival, appears precisely in the poetic force of the *Hunger Angel*. The contemplation and poetic transfiguration of the smallest and most degrading activities in the camp creates thus a special world, the tragic is expressed both by the introduction of the desecrated sacred in the physical world (deformed as the *angel of hunger*), and the impossible wish to transcend the limits of humanity and abolish the laws of human biology or physiology by a poetic leap. Herta Müller's fine way of intensifying the tragic by absurd or comic elements offers extra grandness and tragic quality to the characters. However, unlike the heroes of classical tragedy, who are made to act in exceptional circumstances, the prisoners of a forced labour camp, fighting every day for their survival, rediscover humanity precisely by reaching its lowest limits.

Being freed from a Soviet camp does not mean in fact a real liberation, for those who survived the harsh conditions in the Soviet Union had to adapt to the circumstances of a country still under Soviet occupation. Thus the tragic thrill that permeates the text in the chapters on imprisonment does not fade but it intensifies, deepening into an even more overwhelming *silence*. Returning home in a world perceived as immovable, fix and mute, *Nichtrührer*, Leo realizes he has nothing in common with his family any more, painfully observing the separation of the two, almost irreconcilable worlds. He suddenly finds himself alone and lost even with his family. He perceived the signs of this rupture even in the camp, when he received a postal card from his mother with the photograph of his new brother (*Ersatzbruder*), born while he was away. This is the moment when the separation from the community of the not deported, of those who did not experience the camp begins. The symbol of this rupture is the birth of the new brother, perceived by Leo from a distance as his possible *replacement*. The rupture from the community of those who stayed home evolves as he returns from the camp by a *pledge of silence* and forgetting of the past. The second rupture, from the community of the deported, happens the moment when one day Leo avoids Trudi Pelikan, by their common tacit agreement, when he sees her around the Great Market Square in Sibiu: "Da kam mir die Trudi Pelikan entgegen, yum ersten Mal seit dem Lager. Wir sahen uns zu spät. Sie ging am Stock. Weil sie mir nicht mehr ausweichen konnte, legte sie den Gehstock aufs Pflaster und bückte sich zu ihrem Schuh. Der war aber gar nicht offen."[18] The same kind of *pledge of silence* and the same desire of forgetting through silence determines those who had not long before shared the same traumatizing experience to distance and separate themselves by cancelling the past through silence.

Analyzing the meanings of *silence* in 20th century literature, Ihab Hassan defines the forms by which *silence* as an alternative of language in creating worlds from modern to postmodern literature, identifying in postmodern texts two kinds of silence, echoes of language itself: "(a) the negative echo of language, autodistructive, demonic, nihilist; (b) its positive stillness, self-transcendent, sacramental, plenary."[19] The first one, defined by Ihab Hassan as negative, is present in Herta Müller's text with the emphasis on the self-destructive, demonic, nihilist character of silence. This has,

[18] Herta Müller, *Atemschaukel*, 278.
[19] Ihab Hassan, *The dismemberment of Orpheus. Toward a Postmodern Literature*, (New York, Oxford University press, 1971), 248.

within the world of concentration camps, a political dimension which has fatal consequences for the entire community in aggravating the impossibility to communicate. But at the same time, in relation with speech (in the degrading sense of submission through *information*), within the same universe of labour camps, silence can also have a positive, saviour-like character for the one who chooses not to speak and not to betray his kin. This second meaning of silence, more substantial in Herta Müller's other texts, is only vaguely suggested in *Vom Hungerengel*.

Demonstrating how precarious the human condition becomes in the most degrading of situations, Herta Müller's text does not engage in the direction of the nihilistic or alienation literature that proclaims the divine failure, the rupture between man and universe or human crisis. On the contrary, counting on the cathartic effect of the events, Herta Müller compels the attention of the reader (spectator) to focus on human subjectivity, embrittled by history's traumatic experiences, offering the godless world a new role in human tragedy, the role of a both objective and subjective, individual and collective witness *conscience*. The ultimate purpose is not assuming an individual guilt and refusing tragedy through repealing subjectivity for collectivity, but assuming an individual tragic guilt and accepting tragedy as a form of stating a subjectivity limited by the freedom of others. If for the Greek tragedians, conflict was generated by the nature and limits of individual freedom in relation with destiny and the will of the gods, for Herta Müller, tragic tension sustains itself, in the absence of individual conflict with divinity through the author's ability to create, at a linguistic level, an essentiality of the problematic relation between individuals and destiny, as a result of grand history, not as a result of chance. Therefore, in the absence of a god that inflicts conflict, in order to obtain catharsis, the individual is caught without the possibility of personal salvation, in a combination of causes and effects, impossible to control on a human level. Even so, there is a form of salvation, namely through *words*. Resisting silence in order to overcome fear and expressing a traumatic historical experience through words (art) appears, in Herta Müller's texts, in the spirit of both universality and telling the truth.

Translated from the Romanian by Emese Czintos