

Writing with the eyes. On the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Herta Müller*

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Resum. Amb Herta Müller, el Premi Nobel de Literatura 2009 va ser atorgat a una escriptora que prové de la minoria de llengua alemanya localitzada a la regió de Banat, a Romania. Müller va començar a escriure en clara oposició a la "identitat alemanya" de la minoria a Banat, que evocava, entre altres coses, el passat nazi del seu pare, però també en oposició a un estil oficial basat en una identitat romanesa monolítica i a un realisme social que no deixava espai per a l'expressió individual. Els enfrontaments amb la policia secreta es van desenvolupar gairebé immediatament. El 1987 se'n va anar a Alemanya, on ha viscut des de llavors. Ha publicat nombroses obres de ficció i d'assaig, i també ha rebut molts premis literaris. El Comitè del Premi Nobel va citar la sobrietat i l'objectivisme de la seva prosa, que representa els impressionants paisatges dels desposseïts, i va elogiar la intensitat del seu llenguatge poètic. Les obres de Herta Müller es basen sistemàticament en l'autobiografia i, per tant, en la memòria. La seva escriptura és plena de frases curtes que se succeeixen inexorablement i no tenen cap subordinació. La trama de la història es teixeix per mitjà d'imatges que a poc a poc s'omplen de significat a mesura que es desenvolupa la història. Al meu entendre, aquesta és la característica més espectacular de l'escriptura d'aquesta autora, en la qual es reconeix el poder del llenguatge per a desemmascarar una terrible realitat. Un llenguatge desolat, provocador, magnífic... i que és extraordinàriament difícil de traduir. Potser per això l'autora és tan poc coneguda a Catalunya.

Paraules clau: minoria alemanya a Romania · autobiografia · llenguatge visual · paisatge dels desposseïts

Abstract. With Herta Müller, the 2009 Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to a writer who comes from the German-speaking minority in the region of Banat, Romania. Müller began to write in clear opposition to the 'German identity' of the minority in Banat, which evoked among other things her father's Nazi past, but also in opposition to an official style based on a supposed monolithic Romanian identity and a social realism that left no room for individual expression. Confrontations with the secret police developed almost immediately. In 1987 she left for Germany, where she has lived ever since. She has published numerous works of fiction as well as essays, and is the recipient of many literary prizes. The Nobel Prize committee cited the sobriety and objectivism of her prose, which depicts impressive landscapes of the dispossessed, and praised the intensity of her poetic language. Herta Müller's works are systematically based on autobiography, and therefore on memory. Her writing is full of short sentences that succeed each other inexorably and lack any subordination. The plot of the story is woven through images that gradually fill with meaning as the story develops. In my opinion, this is the most spectacular characteristic of this author's writing, in which the power of language to unmask an appalling reality is acknowledged. A desolate, provocative, magnificent language... and one that is extraordinarily difficult to translate. Perhaps this is why the author is so little known in Catalonia.

Keywords: German-minority in Romania · autobiography · visual language · landscape of the disposed

"Do you have a handkerchief?" The speech that Herta Müller delivered at the Nobel Prize awards ceremony began with this

* Based on the lecture given by the author at the Institute for Catalan Studies, Barcelona, on 18 December 2009, and at the Octubre Centre of Contemporary Culture, Valencia, on 1 February 2010 for the Nobel Prize Cycle.

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question, which her mother asked her every morning before leaving home. The image of the handkerchief is the common thread in her speech; the handkerchief accompanies the author in a wide variety of life experiences, such as when she is dismissed from the factory office where she had worked as a translator. She continues working seated on the staircase on top of the handkerchief that her mother always made her carry. The poet Oskar Pastior, a friend of the author who was deported to Russia, receives a finely embroidered handkerchief from a Russian woman who has no word of her son and hopes that, wherever he might be, another woman will also provide him with a handkerchief and food. Throughout Müller's speech,

the handkerchief becomes a metaphor of solidarity between people.

The speech is a perfect example of how Herta Müller's [1] eminently poetic writing style is constructed. Her language is extremely visual; she constantly uses metaphors and fills them with meaning throughout the story, conferring upon them a logic of their own. Her language is also highly lyrical, precisely because of her predominant use of metaphors, of images constructed throughout the story. Herta Müller's literature is always based on her own biography; it is intensely biographical and personal. This is also the case in *Atemschaukel (Everything I Possess I Carry with Me)*, her latest novel, which recounts the lives of the German Romanians deported to forced labor camps in the Soviet Union based on the stories of poet Oskar Pastior and Müller's mother.

With Herta Müller, the Nobel Prize has been awarded to a writer from the German-speaking minority in Banat, Romania, a region that borders on Hungary and Serbia (Fig. 1). Banat is populated by German emigrants who moved there in the 18th century, when Empress Maria Theresa promoted colonization of the depopulated lands to the east of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Most of the early settlers were farmers, and they kept their own language, traditional dress, and customs. Herta Müller's grandfather owned land and a grocery store, both of which were later confiscated by the Communists. Her father, who participated in the war as a member of the Waffen SS, earned a living as a truck driver after he returned home. After the war, her mother was deported to a forced labor camp in the Ukraine, Soviet Union, as were the majority of men and women from the German minority—even those that were too young or too old to have participated in the war. The deportations were regarded as punishment and they were exploited in the reconstruction of the Soviet Union; however, since they started in January 1945, before the war had ended, the deportees were precisely those people who were not participants in the war.



Fig. 1. Herta Müller. © The Nobel Foundation. Photo: Ulla Montan.

Herta Müller was born in 1953 in Nitzkydorf, a German-speaking town where she was thus educated in German. She learned Romanian in secondary school at the age of 12 or 13. After finishing high school, she attended the University of Timisoara, the capital of the region of Banat, between 1972 and 1976 to study Germanic and Romanian philology. Following her graduation, she worked as a translator in an industrial machinery factory, but she lost her job when she refused to collaborate

with the Romanian secret service. She then earned a living teaching private German classes and occasional classes at schools and nursery schools. She was friends with the members of a small group of writers who opposed the Ceaucescu regime, the Aktionsgruppe Banat, which was dissolved in 1975.

Publications and prizes

Her first published work, a collection of stories entitled *Niederungen (Nadir)* appeared in heavily censored form in 1982, after having been held back for 4 years. In 1984, the collection was published in Germany to widespread acclaim. The stories are set in the village where the main character lived as a child, and they depict a harsh, desolate environment. Perhaps for this reason the stories were not very well received by her fellow countrymen. Herta Müller began to write in clear opposition both to the 'German identity' of the Banat minority, which evoked for her among other things her father's Nazi past, yet also to an official style based on a supposed monolithic Romanian identity and a social realism that brooked no individual expression, which left no room for subjectivity. Her oeuvre always portrays the social reality from an individual perspective in which subjectivity is defended.

In 1986, she published *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt* (published in English as *The Passport*), which tells the story of a family awaiting permits to leave Romania. In 1987, she immigrated to Germany along with her then-husband, Richard Wagner, and her mother. From then on she published a spate of short stories and novels, of which here I shall only mention a few. *Barfußiger Februar (Barefoot February)*, stories about life in the villages of Banat, was published in 1987; *Reisende auf einem Bein (Travelling on One Leg)*, set in Berlin, in 1989; and *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger (Even Back Then, the Fox Was the Hunter)*, in 1992. In 1994, Müller published the novel that made her famous, *Herztier (The Land of Green Plums)*, an autobiographical work about the Aktionsgruppe Banat told through the lives of three students who were friends in Romania during the repressive dictatorship. The novel earned her the Kleist Prize and the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. In 1997, she published *Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet (The Appointment)*; in 1999, *Der fremde Blick oder das Leben ist ein Furz in der Laterne (The Foreign View, or Life Is a Fart in a Lantern)*; and in 2003, a volume of essays, *Der König verneigt sich und tötet (The King Bows and Kills)*. Her volumes of poetry include *Im Haarknoten wohnt eine Dame (A Lady Lives in the Hair Knot)*, from 2000, and *Die blassen Herren mit den Mokkatassen (The Pale Gentlemen with their Espresso Cups)*, in 2005. Her latest novel, *Atemschaukel (Everything I Possess I Carry with Me)*, was published in 2009.

Herta Müller has been writer in residence at numerous institutions (Universities of Paderborn, Bochum, and Wales-Swansea, and Dickinson College in Carlisle) and a guest professor, holding the Brothers' Grimm Chair at the University of Kassel, in 1998, and the Heiner Müller Chair at the University of Berlin, the city where she lives, in 2005. She has received numerous literary prizes, including the Würth Prize for European literature,

the aforementioned Kleist Prize, the Aspekte Prize, and the Joseph Breitbach Prize. She is a member of the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung. She is an extraordinarily active writer, the author of not only works of fiction but also essays on literature.

Müller's poetic language

In awarding Herta Müller the 2009 Nobel Prize in Literature, the awards committee cited the sobriety and objectivism of her prose, which depicts impressive landscapes of the dispossessed, and it praised the intensity of her poetic language. I shall discuss this language based primarily on two novels, *The Land of Green Plums*, in my opinion the most impressive of her works, and *Everything I Possess I Carry with Me*, her latest novel, which I have tentatively translated into Catalan as *Balanci d'alè*. The publication of the translation has been announced for the spring and the Catalan title has not yet been decided on, so the book is still being advertised under its German title.

I shall begin by talking about the language of Herta Müller. It is extraordinarily poetic, as I have said, yet also desolate. She appeals not just to the sense of sight, but to all the senses in order to reveal but also unmask reality, to make hidden aspects visible and to trigger unexpected interpretations, that is, to encourage a new look at reality, as strived for in the language of all good writers. The speech that Müller delivered to thank the Würth Foundation for the 2006 European Literature Prize began with an explanation of a sentence in one of her stories, in which she describes the hairstyles of the women in her village, who wore braids gathered to the head and secured with tall combs.

The women's hairdos were seated cats seen from behind. What should I speak about seated cats to describe their hair?

Everything always became something different. First discreetly, if you only looked at it for yourself. But then it became clear, if you had to find words to describe it because it was being talked about. To be precise in your descriptions, you have to find something in the sentence that is totally different in order to be precise.

In this example, just like in her Nobel lecture in which she discussed the handkerchief, we can see that the comparisons and images that Herta Müller creates always have a logic, a truly visual basis that can be interpreted. This is also the case for the metaphors that she constructs in her stories, which are often based on the German language's extraordinary capacity to build compound words. The titles *Herztier* (literally the Heart-Beast) and *Atemschaukel* (literally The Rocking Chair of Breath) are good examples. But this possibility is precisely one of the greatest difficulties in translating her works.

The richness of her language is also due to another factor she regards as extremely important: her life in two languages. To Herta Müller, the experience of living with two languages

has been very positive. Her mother tongue is German; it was only as an adolescent that learned Romanian, which was difficult for her because at that time she was preparing to leave her native city to attend secondary school, and the entire process of acquiring a second language was complicated. Her written language is German, and she says that it never would occur to her to write in Romanian, yet it is always on her mind. For her, having two languages in her head means that the two are independent, yet they question each other, illuminate each other, operate in parallel. This makes it possible to better appreciate the beauty of a given image or a joke in each language; it makes new images and unusual constructions possible; and it adds richness. Müller offers the example of the German pheasant compared to the Romanian pheasant.

The German pheasant is presumptuous, a personage sure of itself and arrogant; the Romanian pheasant is the loser, the one who is not quite equipped for life, the bird that does not know how to fly, and since it is relatively large and heavy it is the target of the hunter's bullet. One language only looks at the appearance of the bird, its feathers, and it categorizes it based on that; the other one categorizes its existence and sees the danger it faces. I was convinced by this image of the loser, not the image I have in my language. In this sense, this language has always taught me that things might be different from the way in which I see them in my mother tongue. [2]

According to Müller herself, the best thing that could happen to a writer is to have two languages, and it is even better if they are different, as hers are. The volume *The King Bows and Kills* includes an essay entitled "Different eyes sit in every language." The examples she provides are comparable to the pheasant. For example, she speaks about how in the dialect in her village they said 'the wind walks, goes' (*geht*), while in the educated German spoken at school they said 'the wind blows' (*weht*). Both words sound quite similar, but Herta Müller the child associated *weht* with *Weh*, 'pain', so she felt that the wind blowing bore some relationship to pain. In Romanian 'the wind beats' (*vintul bate*), and thus the relationship with pain was cemented on an intimate, creative level.

Other examples cited by the author refer to the fact that a given word is masculine in one language and feminine in another, such as 'the lily,' which is feminine in German and masculine in Romanian. What happens with the 'lily' in two languages that operate in parallel? "A woman's nose on a masculine face, a long, green palate, a white glove or a white neck:" all of this is possible ([3], p.25). With the concurrence of another language, things that seemed obvious become chance; they could be otherwise. The word in the mother tongue is no longer the sole measure of things. "I have not written a single sentence in Romanian in my books," says Herta Müller. "But Romanian is naturally always in my writing because it has penetrated my worldview." ([3], p.27)

In her case, having two languages fosters her linguistic awareness, and therefore her creativity. However, Herta Müller's writing starts with an awareness of the fraught relationship between language and reality, which has been deeply rooted in

the German literary and philosophical tradition since the early 20th century. In the same essay I just cited, the writer describes how as a girl she wondered whether the names truly corresponded to the plants in the meadow where the cows were kept, and she recounts how she gave them alternate names to see if they were a better fit.

It is not true that there are words for everything. Nor is it true that a person always thinks in words. Even today I think about many things beyond words; I haven't found them in village German, in city German, in Romanian, in East or West German. Or in any book. Internal spaces are not covered with language; they drag us to where words cannot be. [...] What is the power of words? When most of life does not work, words also fall to the bottom. [...] And despite everything, the desire: to be able to utter them. ([3], p14–15)

This desire is what drives her entire oeuvre, which seeks a language to narrate the suffering of characters who are almost always the victims of the reality of the dictatorship.

Biographical works and 'self-fiction'

Herta Müller's works are very systematically based on autobiography, and therefore on memory. In this sense, she says that her model has always been authors in which biography was visible and determinant. In an interview from 1997, she mentions Primo Levi, Jorge Semprún, Ruth Klüger, Alexander Solschenizyn, Imre Kertész, and Paul Celan. She says that they had no choice in their biographies. The weight of everything that had happened to them determined their persona so clearly that their first need had been to gain clarity about what had happened. The state power imposed its subjects on them, and she says the same happened to her. She was unable to choose. But what she writes is not autobiography; she prefers the term 'auto-fictionality.' Her writing is based on her experiences but highly crafted, converted into literature, into fiction. She explains it this way: "I had to go through 20 interrogations in order to invent just one." A perfect example of this self-fiction can be found in *Herztier (The Land of Green Plums)*, in which there is also a precise example of this use of language that I mentioned above with the quote on the cat-shaped hairstyles of the village ladies.

The novel narrates, with many retroactive incursions into the narrator's childhood, the life of young people living under the Ceaucescu dictatorship. Most of them end up dead. The book was inspired by the members of her group in Banat, and the author's autobiographical references are clear. The novel begins with the memory of Lola, the young girl who leaves the country for the city with aspirations of improving her social standing through the party, her sexuality, or both, but who ends up killing herself, the victim of both, more specifically of the double morality of the party leader who got her pregnant and who denounced her. After her suicide, Lola, who the narrator has always regarded somewhat disdainfully, turns into an important character in her own right thanks to her diary, which

she has hidden inside the narrator's suitcase. This diary, covert and secret, becomes the link between the narrator and her friends Edgar, Georg, and Kurt, who, like her, study, finish their degrees, and begin to work at various places, where they do not fit in and where they refuse to collaborate on certain activities, until they end up being pursued by the secret police. One of them commits suicide, and the other meets a mysterious death. Along with her empathetic, posthumous friendship with Lola, the narrator befriends Teresa, and a close friendship between two women from very different backgrounds develops, although this does not stop Teresa from turning in her friend to the secret police. Suicide, a probable murder, death from cancer, madness, flight, and emigration all make an appearance in *The Land of Green Plums* as the last stations in life in totalitarian Romania.

The novel's introduction is in the guise of a dialog, a conversation between the narrator and her friend Edgar. This dialogue is a concentrated glimpse of the subject and intent of the novella, which is the difficulty, the aporia, of speaking about the victims of a dictatorship: "When we shut up we become unpleasant, said Edgar, when we speak we become ridiculous." In German, the word 'wenn' which introduces the sentences means both 'when' and 'if', that is, we could also translate it as "If we shut up we become unpleasant, said Edgar, if we speak we become ridiculous."

This same sentence is also the last one in the novel, its end, so we have to wonder whether and how the novel has achieved this talk, whether it has spotlighted the conditions under which aporia develops. Silence is passive; speaking is active. If both acting and not acting have negative consequences, the individual has no chance to act properly, in a way that is neither uncomfortable nor ridiculous, for example. Yet nor can he or she fail to act. This dilemma frames the entire story, and it also determines the search for the language to narrate the lives of these young people.

The symbolism of objects

In Herta Müller's writing, the style is eminently concise, the sentences short and they succeed each other inexorably, through parataxis and a lack of subordination. If there is virtually no subordination, how does she manage to link things, to create causalities, to weave the web of the narration? Fundamentally through the use of metaphors, of images that gradually fill with meaning as the story develops. I think that this is the most spectacular characteristic of the author's writing. Thus, in the dialog that introduces the novel, the narrator says:

Even today I can't imagine a tomb. Only a belt, a window, a nut and a rope. Each death is like a satchel to me.

If someone hears that, said Edgar, they'd think you're crazy. And if I think about it, then it seems to me that each dead person leaves behind a satchel of words. I always think about the hairdresser and nail scissors, because dead people no longer need them. And that dead people can never again lose a button.

Maybe they felt in a different way than us that the dictator is a mistake, said Edgar.

They had the proof, because we were an error for ourselves, too. Because we had to walk, eat, sleep, and love someone in fear, until we once again needed the hairdresser and the nail scissors. [4]

This beginning mentions a series of objects which will prove crucial to the development of the novel. For the time being, the images seem incongruent, almost surreal. But as the novel goes on these objects will gradually fill with meaning. The belt, the window, the nut, and the rope in fact evoke four deaths. The death of Lola, who hangs herself with the main character's belt in the student residence; the death of one of their friends, Georg, who throws himself out of a window; Teresa's death by cancer, as a nut under her arm grows bigger and bigger; and the possible murder of Kurt, the other friend, who officially hanged himself with a rope. That is, all the objects evoke forms of death that we shall see throughout the story.

Every death is like a satchel to the narrator. A satchel is a coarse item, used to carry all sorts of things, but its association with deaths is the polar opposite of the classic journey in Charon's boat. However, the negative, sordid image changes tone when we are told that each dead person leaves behind a satchel of words. Behind each death, therefore, is a legacy, documents, words, which might be all that remains between the uncomfortable silence and the ridiculous speaking referred to in the first and last sentences of the novel. In fact, each death leaves documents: Lola's diary, the documents that Kurt had been gathering on repression, the letters the friends had written to each other using a code to report on whether they are the victims of interrogations, inspections, or recorded conversations. All of these documents are evoked by the narrator and make up a kind of polyphonic voice of the novel, building the narrative proposition of trying to reveal the victims' lives without the speaking being ridiculous.

On the other hand, the figures of the hairdresser and nail scissors also appear in this first paragraph. While they may seem arbitrary or even outlandish now, they fill with meaning as the narration progresses. Both the hairdresser and the nail scissors work as images of socialization, of ordering the individual. The only people who do not need them are the dead, we are told; they are the only ones who do not have to keep watch over trimming and tidying the disorderly growth of their bodies. The living do need them: long hair and long nails are paradigmatic signs of a lack of order and socialization. A 19th century children's book that all German children, at least until my generation, read (and which can still be found in bookshops) is *Struwwelpeter*, which tells the stories of children who suffer from outrageous and extremely violent punishments for relatively innocent infractions, such as sucking their thumb or refusing to eat their soup, walking without looking at the ground or flying away with an umbrella. The child who lends his name to the title of the book, Struwwelpeter, is drawn on the cover with extremely long, messy hair and fingernails that almost reach the ground.

Both hairdressers and nail scissors are part of the order and regularization of the living. Both appear repeatedly throughout

the text. They do so during the narrator's childhood, in the first stage of her socialization: "Hair has to be cut; if it is not cut, the head becomes a mess of thickets," says her grandfather's barber to the girl. The heading turning into a jungle implies two things: first, that the hair becomes knotted, yet also that the contents of the head do, too, because the head can refer to both the container and the contents. The girl hears this utterance from the barber when she has been tied to a chair as a way of overcoming her resistance to having her nails cut. She fantasizes and turns the scene into a nightmare. She dreamed that her mother did not actually cut her nails but her fingers, to eat them later. In doing so, blood flows over the green grass belt tying her down, and the girl knows that when a person bleeds, she dies. We should recall that later in the story Lola hangs herself with the narrator's belt. Therefore, both the barber and the scissors and belt are items that refer to the individual's place in society, in the established order. And to the fact that non-adaptation, rebellion, is rewarded with death. In one of the essays compiled in *The King Bows and Kills*, Herta Müller comments that all the people whom the state had taken under its watch had their hair shorn extremely short: the soldiers, the prisoners, and the children in the hospices. And at both school and the university, one's hair had to be cut the official length.

The color green is also part of this set of symbolic references that constructs the text on repression. The belt is green, and after Lola's suicide the police use a poisonous green powder to look for and investigate clues. Nail-cutting, the belt, and the color green are associated with determining the individual's place in society. Later, when the friends invent a code to include in their letters information on the repression they are suffering from, they decide that a phrase containing nail scissors will mean that they have been interrogated. This affirms the repressive nature of the order connoted with the image of the scissors.

The only character who seems to escape this order of scissors is Lola, who always cuts her nails on the tram with borrowed scissors, thus showing a kind of bohemian, vagabond order. But Lola pays for her lack of order with death. Both the hairdresser and the nail-cutting reveal the deformations that permeate the private spheres of life, which apparently remain outside of politics, under a totalitarian regime. In this way, the hairdresser becomes part of the executive violence of the dictatorship and turns into a symbol of it. In dictatorships, the individual pays for his place with a brutal limitation on any show of individuality, with a strict ordering of all the levels of his or her personal life. That is what these images represent.

The country and the city

Another important group of objects in the novel that are filled with symbolic personality are products from the country. The young people move from the country to the city to study and work. In Herta Müller's work, the country is always shown as an extremely harsh, desolate environment that devours those living there. The author perceives the nature of the vast cornfields of her childhood, where sometimes she had to work to help her mother, as an immense organism that swallows life:

I hated the stubborn countryside, which devours wild plants and animals to feed domesticated plants and animals. Every field as an infinite panoptic spattered with forms of death, a flowery funeral banquet. Each landscape exercised death. [...] I always saw that the country only fed me just to feed on me later. [5]

The city represents an alternative to the country, and therefore its connotations are positive, in theory. People flee from the country to build a new life in the city. This is the case of both Lola and the narrator. The dreams and wishes of the immigrants from the country come to the city. They are present in the novel with the image of the mulberry trees that people bring from the village to plant in the yards of their new homes. These mulberry trees are a recurring theme throughout the entire story, and they, too, gradually fill with meaning. They are vestiges of the country in the city, remnants of the wishes that came with them. Yet there they remain as testimonies: they wither; they never actually grow.

Based on Lola's diary and her description of the dry and castigated country where the drought has devoured everything "except the sheep, the melons, and the mulberry trees" ([6], p. 9), the sheep and melons become metaphors for poverty in the novel. Mulberry trees are metaphors for the dreams of a better life that are transported from the country to the city and end up marking the faces of people: "In Lola's diary I read later: what one takes from the region one wears on one's face" ([6], p. 10). The old folks have brought mulberry trees from the country to the city, and now they sit alone in the shade of the mulberry trees in their yards. The men who made love with Lola under the trees in the park at night were country folk who had set out for the city to work in the factories: "No more sheep ever, they had said, no more melons either" ([6], p. 36). However, the story reveals this hope as a failed illusion:

The men know that their iron, their wood, their washing powder did not count. That's why their hands remained rough; they made bricks and globs instead of industry. Everything that should be large and angular became, in their hands, brass sheep. What should have been small and rounded became, in their hands, wooden melons ([6], p. 37).

When Edgar is sent to work in an industrial city, the narrator describes the city with the comment that "everyone in this city made brass sheep and called it metallurgy" ([6], p. 93), and she especially tells us that the industrial city where Georg works as a teacher is a city "where everyone made wooden melons. The wooden melons were called the woodworking industry" ([6], p. 97). With these images, the story builds metaphors to present a fundamentally agrarian society where industrialization has failed, a degraded society where industrialization cannot be seen as progress. Instead of sheep, now brass sheep are manufactured; instead of real melons, wooden melons. This does not seem like a major step forward.

The cityscape is dominated by factories and workers. However, they appear as a mass; individuals are not differentiated. They are utterly functional, extensions of their respective

trades, which have come to dominate all spheres of their lives. They live off of the factory, and given the precariousness of objects that they can buy to make their homes inhabitable, they use what they scrounge from the factory to set them up. Those working in leather have houses filled with hides; the sofa cushions, bedspreads, rugs, slippers, and even kitchen rags are made of leather. Those working in wood have houses that are paneled floor to ceiling. The workers in the slaughterhouse bring home the cow tails to make brooms, the animal entrails to eat, and the blood to drink.

Images of childhood

The universe of images used in the novel to build its meaning includes many others. I shall only mention two more, as they are good examples of the complexity of meanings created in the text: green plums and the image used in the original title of the book: the *Heart-Beast*. Both originated in the narrator's childhood.

Green plums are dangerous. Her father has to warn the narrator as a child not to eat them because she could die if she did. Given that her father is a negative, terrible character, the girl interprets that deep down he wants her to die, so she eats them compulsively. Thus, the act of eating green plums has self-destructive connotations: "A child is afraid of dying and eats even more plums and doesn't know why" ([6], p. 90). However, the policemen of the dictatorship also swallow them compulsively, so eating green plums becomes a kind of idiosyncrasy that encompasses the effects of the different dictatorships, the Nazi and the communist. It also turns out that "plum eater" is an insult in Romanian which means an unscrupulous person capable of treading on corpses ([6], p. 59). The nickname "creator of cemeteries" also encompasses the effects of the dictatorships, and the narrator applies this name both to her father and his war companions and to the dictator.

Herztier, the 'Heart-Beast' of the novel's title, like green plums, is an image from the narrator's childhood. When her grandmother put her to bed, she would sing a lullaby whose lyrics said: "May the beast in your heart rest; today you have played a lot" ([6], p. 40). This could be a heartwarming reference, yet it is not very clear that it is. Her grandmother is an ambivalent character, and so are her songs. When the narrator's violent, alcoholic father dies, a father who when drunk always sang nostalgic songs from his past as a soldier or "creator of cemeteries," his heart-beast comes to nest in this grandmother who is always singing. The heart-beast seems to be the image of the life force that inhabits people, and as such it can be ambivalent. It is referred to many times over the course of the novel. The young friends and opponents of the regime seem to sense their heart-beast as weak and fleeting:

From every mouth the breath came out challenging the cold air. A herd of fugitive animals passed before our faces. I said to Georg: Look, your heart-beast is leaving.

Georg raised my chin with his thumb: You with your Swabian heart-beast, he laughed.

[...]You're made of wood, I said to save myself. Our heart-beasts scurried away like mice. They shed their skins, leaving them behind and disappearing into the nothingness. If we talked a lot and in quick succession, they remained in the air for longer. ([6], p. 90)

The friends, now in danger, are deciding on a code for reporting in their letters whether they are being persecuted. In this dangerous situation, life forces are diminished, we could say. In any event, the narrator's heart-beast is strong enough to withstand her desire to commit suicide:

A book in the summer home was called *To Raise a Hand at Oneself*. There it said that only one form of death takes place in a head. However, I was running in a cold circle between the window and the river and vice-versa. Death called to me from afar; I had to go headlong towards it. When it almost had me in its hands, only a small part did not cooperate. Maybe the heart-beast. ([6], p. 111)

The reference to Jean Améry's book on suicide, *To Raise a Hand at Oneself*, furnishes an image of the seriousness of the undertaking, yet also of the narrator's ability to withstand it. In his book, Jean Améry upheld suicide as the supreme act of liberty, but he did not commit suicide in the concentration camp. He did so many years later. In the concentration camp, suicide would not have been an act of liberty but a victory for the executioners. The narrator's heart-beast still has enough strength to stand up to the executioners.

With this structure of images and concentration of the details of everyday life, the novel requires us to forge relationships of causality, conclusions from an analysis that are never exposed and that unmask the dehumanizing effect exercised by the dictatorship on the individual. There is a moment in the novel when a boy who is playing at being a ticket-puncher on the tram appears, checking the passengers' tickets and alternating the rolls of ticket-puncher and passenger. A neighbor offers to play with him as the passenger. "I prefer to do everything myself, said the child, so I know who can't find their ticket" ([6], p. 194). This child seems to have perfectly internalized totalitarianism's spirit of absolute control.

Everything I Possess I Carry with Me

Now I will discuss *Atemschaukel* (*Everything I Possess I Carry with Me*), the author's latest novel. Published in 2009, it prompted some controversy when it appeared. Two opposing reviews were published in *Die Zeit*, the most important and prestigious German cultural weekly. One review, by Michael Naumann, was extremely favorable; he wrote that the work had literally left him breathless, and he viewed it as a wonderful example of the power of poetic language to describe an unbearable reality. The second review, by Iris Radisch, was extremely negative, as she regarded the novel as perfumed, false, and derivative in the way the author developed the main character's memories of deportation. The awarding of the Nobel

Prize has smoothed out these disagreements, and afterward Radisch herself wrote in a more conciliatory tone, although she did not retract her criticism. However, it is clear that the novel has the potential to be controversial.

As noted above, this story tells of the deportation of German Romanians to the Soviet forced labor camps, and it is based on the stories of a friend, the poet Oskar Pastior, and those recounted by Herta Müller's own mother. When she explained the genesis of the novel, the author said that from a very young age she knew that her mother, like all the women in the village and all the men who were too young or too old to have participated in the war, had been deported to Russia, specifically to forced labor camps in the Ukraine. But they never spoke about it; it was taboo. She knew that her friend Oskar Pastior had been deported and she began to talk to him about it in order to gather documents she could use to write the novel. Oskar Pastior was a poet; he never wrote prose and never told the story of his deportation.

In a text from 2007, Herta Müller talked about the process of creation: they met regularly, he talked, and she took notes. He used concise language that focused on details and objects. He spoke of the "zero point of existence." Just like Kertesz, he believed that his place of socialization was the camp, and this determined his damaged existence, to put it one way, but also his life. Müller also says that in this narrative process they very soon began to invent things to better describe what had happened. In June of 2004 they traveled together to the Ukraine. Some of the buildings were still intact, a bazaar was still running, but nothing was left of the barracks in the labor camp. Pastior believed that he closed a cycle of his existence on this trip. When he suddenly died shortly thereafter, in 2006, just before he was able to collect the Georg Büchner Prize, the most important literary prize in Germany, Herta Müller set the project aside, only to resume it later, publishing the work in 2009.

In the novel, she re-creates memories that are not her own but are very familiar to her. She uses the material from her conversations with Oskar Pastior and her mother's experiences, even though the latter were less verbalized. She constructs a fiction using others' memories, although in this case it is not self-fiction. Yet the subject is very similar to the subjects of other works by Müller in that it attempts to describe a reality of utter domination, of an endangered life, of the attempt to annihilate, even liquidate the individual, written from the perspective of the victim.

Edgar's sentence that opens and closes *The Land of Green Plums* is also valid here: "When we shut up we become unpleasant; when we speak we become ridiculous." Müller sets out to speak in the quest for a language that is not ridiculous and that reconducts memory. We should recall that the dead leave a satchel of words behind them. Oskar Pastior left the words that the writer jotted down. The novel that Herta Müller has written with these notes links up perfectly with her previous writings. She herself has said that everything she experienced under the Romanian dictatorship helped her to write it. The authors that she cites as influences on her literature include Kertesz, Levi, and Semprún, all of them writers who narrate the

experience of the camps based on their own memories, yet also claim the need for fiction to retell them.

We were wondering how it should be told so that we would be understood. [...] How to tell a story that is scarcely credible, how to arouse the imagination of the unimaginable if not by crafting, shaping reality, putting it into perspective? [7]

Semprún and his fellow writers asked themselves this question after being released from Buchenwald. And very early in their conversations, Herta Müller and Pastior would start to invent, *flunkern*, Pastior used to call it. Yet it is 'invent' in a relative sense of the word, as *flunkern* does not exactly mean 'invent' it means 'to be more or less literal,' but there is always a relationship with reality, and in no way does it mean to fabricate.

How to bring memory into the present? We need to tell the story in order to organize what we remember, to confer order on what we have experienced. However, traumatic memories often escape narration; they hinder it. A language able to narrate the victim's experience must be able to attest to this realm, to what cannot be narrated, and it always falls between the two extremes of speaking and remaining silent. One of the problems in narrating victims' experiences is that what has to be narrated is a process of dispossession, humiliation, maximum aggression, and if the author does not want to assume the vantage point of the executioner, then a perspective that revives the victim's dignity must be adopted. This problem has been dealt with by all the authors that have written on the Holocaust; Claude Lanzmann, for example, turns it into one of the axioms of his anthological film, *Shoah*, and of the ban on showing denigrating scenes. How to convey the horror that the victims have been through without turning into the executioner? Behind Herta Müller's narration are Oskar Pastior's stories, yet also the stories of the other authors mentioned.

The novel is written in the first person to narrate the memories of a 17-year-old boy, Pastior's age when he was deported. It begins with the deportation. There are many ways of organizing memory or of showing the impossibility of organizing it, and traditionally the discourse of memory has been linked to places and images, and especially to places as elements that help to recall time. The discourse of memory can be compared to a stroll through the places where the things we already recall and can recall have happened. The places become the repositories of our memory, if you will; they are places of individual memory (or of collective memory, what Pierre Nora termed *lieux de mémoire*). But images also take part in organizing memory, the uncontrolled perceptions of the senses, objects. They can all bring back memories at the wrong time, unravel the narration. These manifestations of involuntary memory which bring the past into the present can lead to the joy of rediscovering lost time, as in Proust's oeuvre; yet in stories of traumatic pasts, they submerge the narrator in the horror of the past that becomes the present. What could Herta Müller do to organize Pastior's memories in a narration told by a fictitious self?

Broadly speaking, she retains a chronological order that begins with his deportation and ends with his return home. Within these sweeping events there are many leaps back in time,

flashbacks to the main character's childhood or his experiences before being deported. In any event, the story is basically organized around objects and actions that mark the dailiness of life in the camp. These elements showcase the author's poetic power, as well as the poetic power of Oskar Pastior himself. Pastior is the author of poems that play with language, experiment with meanings, compare etymologies, destroy, and develop a lyrical grammar of freedom that extends beyond the rules of linguistic logic. However, Pastior also destroys the vocabulary of the failed humanism of the time of the dictatorships with his games.

As an example of one of his 'games,' let us examine the introduction to a piece written to be read on the radio entitled "The Sauna of Samarkand:"

The sauna of Samarkand: an acoustic bath, a poem for five voices (WDR-NDR). Linguistic material: from the history of culture and customs in sweat baths. But deep down, "Sweat bath, sauna" as a metaphor of "closed institution". Institutions, groups of isolated people, communities outside the mainstream, and therefore also hospitals, barracks, camps, etc. And also, of course, the cultural blah-blah-blah. [8]

Pastior shared a similar background with Herta Müller, even though he came from a German-speaking minority in Siebenbürgen which has inhabited the region of the Carpathians since the 12th century. He also shared her passion and faith in the power of language to unmask reality, and in the power of word and metaphors to arrive at the truth of things, of human relations. The authors' metaphorical languages complement each other perfectly, and some of the key metaphors in the novel are Pastior's creations, as Herta Müller says, such as 'the angel of hunger.' The entire middle part of the book is devoted to hunger and dominated by this figure, which accompanies all the prisoners and guides the search for potato peels and whatever else in the garbage. Each prisoner has an angel of hunger, and when he or she dies the angel looks eagerly for a new prisoner. Pastior's memory was retained in the details, in objects, and this is what determines the narration of an everyday existence marked by the work gang, inhuman labor, roll call at night, and chronic hunger. People died of either hunger or cold, and the clothes were taken off the dead people before *rigor mortis* set in so the living could wear them again; the house leaders cut off the dead women's hair, if they still had any, to fill pillows and seal the windows.

I said that the story is structured around crucial objects or actions in everyday life in the camp. If we look at the sections in the index we see, for example: 'On how to pack a suitcase,' 'Cement,' 'On how to travel,' 'A bit too much happiness for Irma Pfeiffer,' 'On coal,' 'On how time stretches out,' 'On pine trees,' 'On the angel of death,' 'The red silk scarf,' and 'The potato man.'

The tone of the index mimics a breviary. It is as if the book were giving useful instructions on actions and things, as if it were defining the useful essence of reality. We learn how to pack a suitcase, to travel... but it is a suitcase and a trip to a forced labor camp. Everyday reality is distanced, while the ter-

rible reality of the camp turns into the last, sole authentic reality. And this also determines the lives of those who have already gone back, the ones who have survived, many years later. This is hinted at in the title of the last chapter, "The treasures." The main character never renounces his past; he cannot, so he makes it his own. It has built his persona. He makes an appalling, proud list of what this past has meant to the construction of his personality:

My pride of the vanquished. [...]
 My involuntary hurry; I immediately go from zero to everything.
 My ability to give in and let anyone be right in order to be able to retract it later.
 My dreary opportunism. [...]
 My weak envy when people know what they expect from life. A feeling like knotted wool, dull and vain. [...]
 My endless afternoons; the time passes slowly with me amidst my furniture. [...] [9]

The novel is not only a memory and testimony of the victims; it also turns them into subjects of the story, and it gives them a voice of their own. It airs their 'satchel of words' beyond silence and ridicule, just as all of Herta Müller's works do, with her belief in the power of language to reveal, unmask reality. A desolate reality, and a desolate, frightful, provocative, magnificent language.

Works by Herta Müller

Niederungen (1982, Kriterion, Bucarest; 1984, Rotbuch, Berlin)
Drückender Tango. Erzählungen (1984, Kriterion, Bucharest; 1996, Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg)
Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt (1986, Rotbuch, Berlin)
Barfußiger Februar (1987, Rotbuch, Berlin)
Reisende auf einem Bein (1989, Rotbuch, Berlin)
Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel (1991, Rotbuch, Berlin)
Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger (1992, Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg)
Eine warme Kartoffel ist ein warmes Bett (1992, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, Hamburg)
Der Wächter nimmt seinen Kamm: vom Weggehen und Ausschieren (1993, Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg)
Herztier (1994, Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg)
Hunger und Seide. Essays (1995, Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg)
In der Falle (1996, Wallstein, Göttingen)
Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet (1997, Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg)
Der fremde Blick oder Das Leben ist ein Furz in der Laterne (1999, Wallstein, Göttingen)
Im Haarknoten wohnt eine Dame (2000, Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg)
Heimat ist das, was gesprochen wird (2001, Gollenstein, Blieskastel)

Der König verneigt sich und tötet (2003, Hanser, Munich)
Die blassen Herren mit den Mokkatassen (2005, Hanser, Munich)
Atemschaukel (2009, Hanser, Munich)

Translations into Catalan

L'home és un gran faisà en el món (2009, Bromera, Valencia) [Trans. by Ramon Monton]
La bèstia del cor (2009, Bromera, Valencia) [Trans. by Josep Franco and Laura Almiñana]

Translations into Spanish

En tierras bajas (1990, Siruela, Madrid) [Trans. by Juan José del Solar from the original book *Niederungen*]
El hombre es un gran faisán en el mundo (1992, Siruela, Madrid) [Trans. by Juan José del Solar from the original book *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt*]
La piel del zorro (1996, Plaza & Janés, Barcelona) [Trans. by Juan José del Solar from the original book *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger*]
La bestia del corazón (1997, Mondadori, Barcelona) [Trans. by Bettina Blanch Tyroller from the original book *Herztier*]

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http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2009/bio-bibl_sp.pdf

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4. Müller H (1994) *Herztier*. Rowohlt, Hamburg, pp 7-8
5. Müller H (2008) In jeder Sprache sitzen andere Augen. In: *Der König verneigt sich und tötet*. Fischer, Frankfurt, p 12.
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8. Ramm K (1987) *Pastior Oskar. Jalousien aufgemacht*. Hanser, Munich, p. 153
9. Müller H (2009) *Atemschaukel*. Hanser, München, p. 295