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HERTA MÜLLER: THE PERFORMANCE ART OF POETRY AND INTRA-FAMILIAL EXILE

At first glance, the poetry and short prose written by Herta Müller appear to be the work of two distinct authors. Poetry functions as the expression of a mental state: the collage-texts are meant to convey the imponderability of the whole through the weight concentrated at a spatial extreme. As an expression of plurality, this technique does not combine rigor and lucidity in the manner of conventional art. Only with confessional poetry does the author succeed in creating a linguistic and technical spectacle – a form of performative art. In her short prose, the stage is her native village itself, where a patriarchal community, marginalized by historical stigma, symbolically murders its own daughter simply because she dared to articulate the truth in an atypical, literary process of exorcising consciences through satire and parody. Beyond the writer's debut, all these literary works reveal an invisible struggle of extraordinary ferocity: the dissident's war with the Securitate, a struggle in which everything is permitted for the political police – including the ostracization of the writer by her own family – while the author herself is granted no right other than that of hope, a hope inaugurated only with her debut in Germany. The dissident's success disrupts the mechanisms of the political police, and survival comes to mean, for Herta Müller, the overcoming of her own internal resources of femininity and identity.
Key-words: *domestic exile; Herta Müller; intra-familial exile; political dissidence; feminism; totalitarianism*

Existence Conceived as a Macro-Poetic Collage

Herta Müller's poems fascinate or hypnotize through their associative beauty. At times they seem to say nothing, producing an impression of gratuitousness. The history of poetic experimentalism here revisits the playful strategies of the writers associated with the Timișoara literary circle. Müller's technique records a postmodern neo-Dadaism, in which the spatial disposition of words and images recreates meaning within the reader's imagination, without predetermined rules. The subtle anarchy of the cut-out images is neutralized by fabricated rhymes. The process mimics spontaneity, yet the sensation of underlying signifying structures persists.

The writer acknowledges differences between poetry and prose. Nevertheless, poetry and the experimental books of lyrical collage are compelling through their spatialized correspondences and juxtapositions. An arbitrary arrangement with an often-psychedelic impact, poetry and collage together form an organic system of identity representation. Semantically difficult or constrained in German, the collages take shape naturally in Romanian. Pleasure replaces the incisive writing of prose.

Herta Müller has published several collections of postcard collages and poetry – *Der Wächter nimmt seinen Kamm* (*The Watchman Takes His Comb*, 1993), *În coc*

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locuieşte o damă (*A Lady Lives in the Bun*, 2000), *Die blassen Herren mit den Mokkatassen* (*The Pale Gentlemen with the Mocha Cups*, 2005), *Vater telefoniert mit den Fliegen* (*Father Talks on the Phone with the Flies*, 2012), and *Este sau nu este Ion* (*Is Ion or Is He Not*, 2005). The latter marks her editorial debut in Romanian, even though – an aspect often overlooked by critics who situate her exclusively within the German language – she actively participates in the Romanian translations of her books, supervises the texts, and intervenes whenever necessary.

In her poetry and collages, readers are granted access to a workshop of the playful processing of language. The writer performs, seemingly in full view. Herta Müller legitimizes meanings as they emerge before the reader, as in a linguistic spectacle enacted in the presence of an audience – an instance of performance art.

Conventional poems follow aphoristic trajectories. Photograms of reality underpin junctions within the elementary given. A staged separation – temporal, visual, and symbolic – transcribes existential circumstances:

> "This day is not a day off.
> This day is not a working day.
> This day is the light falling from the trees.
> Through the roots the canal spills over.
> I do not look that way. Yet I see it.
> Where my body ends, I can no longer be.
> I am here, I want to say. No, I do not say it.
> And yet I say it.
> Here I am no longer what I am.
> The fingers of my hands have shriveled."

The poetics of the gaze intertwine with verdicts marked by a heightened lucidity, for which the order of things coincides with the order of seeing. Confessional poetry mediates visual focalizations and plunges into the interstices of the world:

> "I have a desire in my head. And it can be read in my eyes.
> My head is blocked. My eyes close.
> Now it grows dark. The trees grow and grow, and so do the waters.
> And yet there is a hope belonging only to the trees and a hope belonging to the water.
> Nearby everything is abundantly green, and beyond, above, there is much fog.
> Even so, like the water, the vein of the leaf belongs to the same state of things.
> Like me.
> I am here, I think. But I do not think so…
> And yet that is how I think. Here my head rests in the light falling from the trees.
> The canal flows with convulsions, churning."
> (*The Light Falling from the Trees*)

Placed side by side, these urban tableaux contrast, through their verbal texture, an entire system of signs.

The verses display a subtle expressiveness reminiscent of Paul Celan, the writer's supreme model, in our view. On the other hand, when speaking about the literature of Rolf Bossert, the author noted that poetry begins where it ends. Crushed

by fear and anxiety, harassed by images and destinies, Herta Müller writes poetry under the imperative of muteness.

More often than not, the poetry written prior to exile functions as an exercise in reconnecting with life. Through extreme relativization, it comes close to the absurd. In order to write directly in Romanian, she cut out words for an entire year from a Romanian magazine, resulting in nearly one hundred collages. In opposition to poetry "with a pencil," the author promotes poetry conceived "with scissors," an object with which, as she herself says, she has a wonderful relationship.

The collage procedure begins as a game and is gradually refined into a method. By cutting out disparate words and images from newspapers and magazines, she searches for the primary rhyme that emancipates nomination. The playful practice that once replaced banal postcards or dull picture cards evolved into a poetics in its own right. Its effect on the reader measures the degree of defamiliarization: the collages initiate the transformation of the banal object or decorative image into something unusual.

The defamiliarization in Herta Müller's poetry also relies on the transfiguration or metamorphosis of the reader, who is compelled to view the outcome of the collages both with the eyes of an artist and of a spectator. The dialogue between the arts thus becomes an oscillating gain. For collages to be ideal, the writer insists, they must "fly."

As the result of a state of mind, collage-texts are meant to communicate the imponderability of the whole through the weight concentrated at a spatial extreme. An expression of plurality, this technique does not combine rigor and lucidity in the manner of conventional art.

Likewise – whether deliberately or inadvertently present – humour releases tension and sharpens contrasts: "Hey, I'll hold on for a week / until they give me sugar, hey. / It'll turn into poultry mess, / since even these beaten-down folks / will buy cigarettes tomorrow."

Everyday scenes, small family tableaux, and tragi-comic lines similarly generate caricatural effects, legible in biographical sketches and sequences with satirical potential. Linguistic humour, elements of jargon and slang, or even profanity invite spontaneous pleasure: "I'd eat your greenish eyes, they're like lame flies fallen into milk and yet-like / the numbers on the backs of trucks, seen from very / far away."

A human fauna with burlesque undertones inhabits the poems and collages. The poetic apparatus reprises and further develops the symbols of the prose. A fox "freezes in the throat," "well propped, / on one elbow, eating out of me."

Unlike conventional poems, the collages carry comic suspense and generate a spontaneous complicity with the reader. The tone can therefore be colloquial; orality becomes a mode of solidarity: "Well, that girl, Rița, with a moustache and / thin as a broom, had read my fortune in coffee. The sixth / station is another country (no matter which one it is), / oh my, green without a quarter to live is rather late, she said."

Through deconstruction and nonsense arranged in fascinating cleavages, collage emerges as a creative procedure – spectacular in its capacity for staging or for producing results subject to chance – precisely because it attracts through the illusion of participation. The writer's poetry and prose tend to limit the reader's involvement, whereas collage exploits the autonomization of imagination.

Kin to the neo-Dadaism of the 1960s, Herta Müller's collages can be interpreted through the lens of "accumulations" and montage techniques specific to

readymade art or to the associative practices of the *Wiener Gruppe* poets. Distinct from, and far removed from, the popular appeal of an Ion Bârlădeanu, the writer's collages sustain an associative spectacle, even if rereading does not promise immediate gratification.

In Herta Müller's work, the entire being becomes a collage.

Short Prose: Intra-Familial Exile and Moral Disaffiliation

When the writer published *Niederungen* in Berlin, the Securitate was taken by surprise. It was inadmissible for an individual placed on the blacklist of a totalitarian state to acquire prestige in the Western world. The dangers to the system would have been immense: Herta Müller could have escaped the denigrating portrait on which the communist state apparatus had worked so painstakingly. Had she been recognized, as she was in the West, as an important writer, she risked becoming a model for other dissidents. The methods of the political police therefore operated in the opposite direction.

When the Association of Banat Swabians began to slander the writer, the situation became clear. With her success in the West, a process of discrediting Herta Müller was initiated, moving from family and community toward urban society at large. The writer was accused of colluding with the Securitate and of anti-German attitudes. More than that, it was insinuated that her entire debut volume had been written on the orders of the political police. An attempt was made to isolate her in both directions: from the political police toward the community, and from the intimate community toward the macrosociety.

Her condemnation had to be flawless, leaving no remainder for interpretation. Who could still stand by her, once even her own family had exiled her? A few friends – victims themselves of Securitate persecution. An elite microsociety condemned, for the time being, to an invisible prison, manifested through continuous slander and emotional blackmail.

Paradoxically, the monographic portrayal of her own minority community stigmatized the author twice over: first, through symbolic exclusion from her community – an exclusion that was at once moral and identitarian. Second, she assumed a form of collective over-guilt. I call it this because the German community in Romania had already endured a historical trauma when it aligned itself with the Nazi war effort.

Now, decades later, one of its representatives – the most prominent one – was perceived as producing damage that suddenly seemed to exceed, in symbolic terms, the historical tragedy of the entire collective. No one assumed responsibility for the truth, and the "daughter" of society who revealed clarity and accountability was forced to become a new kind of Antigone. The communist regime did everything in its power to ostracize the opponent.

Intra-familial exile was the most significant victory of the Securitate in the process of defaming the dissident. From every perspective, Herta Müller's entry into literature meant her exit from the intimate family and from the community alike. Advancement in literature compelled her emotional and *moral disaffiliation*.

Only after thirty years was *Niederungen* translated into Romanian. In addition to the final version, three alternative titles had been considered: *Depresiuni* (*Depressions*), *Șesuri* (*Plains*), and *Ținuturile de Jos* (*The Lowlands*). All of them insist on the imaginary of a geographical space in Swabian Banat, where an old and

isolated village (Nițchidorf, without doubt) becomes a symbolic "place of time." The inflamed reactions of the period brought two realities out of anonymity. First, the existence of German-language literature in the Romanian Banat – a field more often discussed as an absence. Through Müller's volume, the literature of young Swabians asserted a generation that shocked its own community.

Second, the stories reactivated the public opinions of ultraconservative Swabians. What proved particularly irritating was the X-ray of the German enclave, especially in the Swabian Heath. The precariousness of Banat life and the historical and civilizational backwardness in which the Swabian minority lived were mercilessly satirized.

Niederungen has often been described as the work of an author always identical to herself. Nothing could be more inaccurate. The volume is not conceived within a structure of exile. It lacks macro-accusatory sentences and the acidic mode of judging multicultural history. Metaphorical language masked verdicts that were unacceptable in the 1980s. The uncomfortable truth is stratified into sliding nuances.

In the first edition of the book, censorship removed four stories. The manuscript underwent drastic alterations. The Romanian translation restores the complete text; moreover, it was revised and corrected by the author herself. In the context of texts previously published in journals, the nineteen stories in *Niederungen* do not offer entirely new subjects. What unsettles is rather the ambiguity of perspectives. Who truly narrates? The child, the adult seen through the eyes of the adolescent, or a unifying instance ready to clear the distances between voices? The result is a set of hybrid texts that may be read equally as autofictions or as autobiographical fictions.

The discourse is dominated by incompatibilities with the Swabian rural world, by the terror exercised by a father nostalgic for the Nazi past, and by the portraits of a mother devoid of personality, who imposes a life lived in falsehood. Specialized studies explain the presence of lying in society as a mechanism of survival.

Once exposed, premeditation functions as a generational fault line in Herta Müller's prose. Her literary project systematically investigates the psycho-mechanisms of manipulation, misrecognition, and error. The ethical and moral filtering enacted by the narrating instances expels sentimentality and identifies returns – whether affective or spatial – as figural enactments of intra-familial betrayal. Escape from the native village thus signifies both an act of survival and a Manichaean trial of moral positioning.

From her earliest writings to her most recent work, the impossibility of reconciliation remains a structural constant in Müller's poetics. Particularly noteworthy is the gradual emergence of a symbiotic logic between objects and living beings, as well as the consolidation of semantic overlays that will later become a defining hallmark of her style. In *Niederungen*, the reader's poetic involvement is restricted to an elementary level, prior to the complex perceptual dislocations characteristic of her later texts.

Psychedelic excess is virtually absent, and any fully articulated "theory of contempt" remains provisional. Radical melancholia is either nonexistent or markedly fragile, dissolved into a partially fabricated nostalgia. Only in later works does the author articulate the notion of happiness, albeit within a persistently somber tonal register. In *Niederungen*, beauty is subjected to a categorical devaluation – treated as

a trivial and even harmful category – through a reflexive rejection that frames it as an unexamined weakness.

The concept of the nation is articulated indirectly, through institutional and disciplinary mechanisms: the enterprise or inspectorate (*Inge*), standardized temporal regimes (*Workday*), repetitive holiday rituals (*Mother, Father, and the Little One*; *Back Then in May*), or allegorical totalitarian fables (*Opinion*). Romania, as a coherent national entity, is notably absent from *Niederungen*. Beyond minor episodic events, the totalitarian background functions as a generator of disillusionment and sedimented prejudice.

What remains symptomatic are the centrifugal and centripetal forces of the village-as-country: a totalizing microcosm in which Swabians and their histories operate simultaneously as homeland and nation, family and pathology, victors and defeated – yet also as involuntary agents of violence. In the novella that gives the volume its title, the village of the damned bears the visible stigmata of lived History. Its inhabitants are captives of a mythologized past. Excluded from historical temporality, the incompatibility between the autocratic memory of the narrating voice and collective remembrance sustains nostalgia through bacchic euphorias, artificial rituals, and paranoid compulsions. Beneath unacknowledged anxiety, the community projects fragmentary and inconclusive visions of the future.

Eschewing metaphysical ambitions, *Niederungen* foregrounds the absorption and transmutation of materiality. Fascinated by the conversion of matter into psychologically charged states articulated through fantastic or surreal modalities (for instance, rain as glass, reflection, or intimacy), Herta Müller exposes and satirizes the ethical vacuum produced in the disjunction between body and soul.

Always gravitating around fear, the narratives systematically discredit both stigma and the very process of cicatrization. The first literary phase of Herta Müller's oeuvre articulates a profound fear of humanity itself – a world that silently dreams of a lost humanism. The texts are constructed upon such identity deregulations. Even the erotic sequences – censured in 1982 as trivial – are nothing more than faintly poetic transcriptions of a woman whose metamorphosis of beauty is pathologically deferred (*The Window*).

This condition is rooted in the anxieties of a girl held captive within a dysfunctional family, deprived of any possibility of refuge. The Swabian family bathes in the same water (*Swabian Bath*), circulates adulterous legends, and tacitly accepts incest (*My Family*, *Rotten Pears*). The crepuscular faces of oblivion and indifference herald death (*The German Path and the German Moustache*). For more than just the castrating father, war becomes the "school of life" (*Mr. Wultschmann*). "Whatever the issue may be, it is about failure," the narrator concludes in *Dark Park*, "and if people do not fight back, what else could possibly happen?"

Herta Müller deploys insurgent formulas against ethnic vegetativity, in a gesture comparable – though not identical – to Ana Blandiana's celebrated 1984 poem *I Believe*. Yet Müller fractures the radiography of the "whole human being," who emerges as, among other things, "half-mad, half-drunk." This proves an arduous task for a narrator unable either to destroy the past (*The Man with the Matches*) or to uncover the truth in a world where "the postwoman knows every letter inside out and therefore even the most hidden thoughts of the villagers" (*Village Chronicle*).

A latent apocalypse takes shape in *Niederungen*. The repertoire of the collective subconscious reveals the erosion of social empathy. Without recourse to

judicial pathos, the writer relies instead on the alloy between ethnicity and a self-sufficient world. Metaphorical constructions compensate for the neutral or inaccessible zones of history and family.

The recurrence of prohibitions legitimizes an implicit revelation: the guilt of being born, together with the renunciation of femininity in favor of existential or expressionist symbols (blood, solitude, death). The community's drama engenders an inability to choose between solitude and – an unknown or forbidden term for the others – *aloneness*. The tableau of degradation in the stories can only be fully grasped by activating the semantic field between these pivotal notions. The sole imagined delight remains the privileged instant of distance, "before people turn malicious."

On a micro-scale, the aesthetics of distance inaugurate here what later becomes the poetic core of *The Passport*. In the short narratives, distance functions as a protective mechanism, a form of precaution in the face of the fragility of humanity and humanism, both of which may at any moment give way to hatred and violence.

As a collection of dynamic stigmas that recalibrate the dramas of failure and the concealment of error, and as a radiography of betrayal as a structural principle of collectivity, *The Lowlands* advances existential counter-concepts that affirm a paradoxical resistance to truth.

In one form or another, the unified voice of the female protagonists resurfaces throughout the writer's subsequent works. What is at stake are the inadequacies of a lucid being who settles for little yet receives nothing. Pressured by the dictatorship of fear and aloneness, by the fever of beginnings, Herta Müller assembles in *The Lowlands* fragments of a failed identity through which a psychology of confession announces the vocation of uselessness. Disharmony and dissimulation, concealment and non-confession progressively erode human relationships.

If in Herta Müller's subsequent works metaphorical mutation reaches full maturity, *The Lowlands* records its process of formation. The prevailing impression is that of a three-color cinematic sequence – black, red, and white – filtered through the gaze of a director obsessively attentive to detail and structurally committed to incompatibility.

This *trichromatic regime* persists in *Oppressive Tango*, where it acquires an additional grotesque inflection. "Wherever there is a house – where there are mothers and fathers and grandparents, children and domestic animals crowded together – there is always fear. Sometimes I feel fear. I feel fear of fear. That is not fear itself," the narrator observes. In this formulation, phobias and the dissolution of the archetypal family are sutured into a veritable cult of fear. Such anxiety can be conceptualized only through the metaphor of the mirror in which self-recognition is impossible; once shattered, reflection becomes either negation or illusion.

Without attaining the stylistic refinement and poetic density of the later works, these stories nonetheless unlock a past sealed within collective muteness – akin to the opening of a Pandora's box. In *Oppressive Tango*, narrative focalization becomes more complex. Tone and technique redistribute ethno-rural captivity through dramatized registers. The oneiric dimension is not ambiguous but sharply contoured, resembling the grotesque phantasmagorias of Müller's earlier prose. The narrating instance executes deliberate shifts of perspective. In *The Other Eyes* (*Die andern Augen*), the narrator articulates a prophetic displacement of subjectivity: "Dreams have eyes that are not my eyes. They have other eyes. Thus I see myself with other eyes." Simultaneously, the discourse opens toward urban experience. Dialogues with

objects and corporeal fragments delineate an emergent reality. In *Red Milk*, the act of catching flies and the appearance of swallows trigger associative chains in the daughter-narrator. Superstition acquires normative authority within the family: when children kill swallows, the milk turns red, the mother predicts.

Everything functions as a pretext. The fundamental tension between mother and daughter is translated through analogical structures – through the mother's eyes (or the mother-as-bird), through affective ambivalence and layered planes of perception. These carefully regulated analogies generate affective and grotesque identifications that permeate Müller's entire oeuvre, reaching maximal intensity in *The Hunger Angel*. Sentence-level dynamics are psychologized through chromatic modulation. Continuity with the previous volume is evident: *the chromatic system* subsumes idyllic, grotesque, and oneiric visions alike, always within the same triadic palette of black, red, and white. The girl's initiatory experiences are articulated as corporeal hypotheses rather than symbolic certainties.

A Thanatic Narrative Regime

Derisory scenes are ultimately mediated through a fabulatory register governed by thanatic semantics.

As early as the spring of 1985, Nora Iuga the first critic to produce a sustained essay on Herta Müller's work (*The Unforeseen Faces of the Real*) – identified the mosaic-like discontinuity of the texts, the density of banal events, the destabilizing observational gaze through which the Swabian village is monographically reconstructed, the reflexive and fantastic leaps, the syntactic architecture, the amplification of the child narrators' idiomatic vitality, the unconventional logic of reality, and the persistent interrogation of nature's meaning[2].

Writing on *Oppressive Tango*, Iuga further noted the saturation of narrative space by obsessive motifs – shadow, the sky swallowed by earth, cracking grass, the stranger, water, trees, the black woman – figures that consolidate Müller's early symbolic economy.

Sensory perception is rendered atypical through its proximity to paralogical structures and to continuous metamorphoses generated by elemental processes of osmosis. As Nora Iuga observes, the stories articulate an indestructible equilibrium between life and death, while bodies display "a form of mimetism that betrays the force of contamination between the world's modes of existence." Sensation thus ceases to function mimetically and becomes instead a site of *ontological permeability*.

Markedly more thematically diverse than *The Lowlands*, and operating at a different altitude of grotesque imagination, the stories collected in *Oppressive Tango* capitalize on the dark undercurrents of the South American dance evoked by the title. They transcribe a radically deromanticized world that compromises the bucolic and installs disharmony as a governing principle. Among Romanian writers of the 1980s, Herta Müller is arguably the closest to the atmosphere of Stephen King's horror prose, not in terms of genre imitation, but through the cultivation of pervasive dread and the psychologization of terror.

On the human level, the writer already inhabits a symbolic and psychological prison following the publication of her short prose. Imagination itself becomes inseparable from trauma, anxiety, depression, and radical solitude. The psychological-

[2] Nora Iuga, „Nebănuitele fețe ale realului", in *România literară*, 13, 1985, p. 10.

thriller inflections of her prose respond to a fundamental certainty: social persecution functions as a mechanism that produces social death. The most significant phase begins precisely where her social legitimacy ends. Without fashioning herself into a martyr, Herta Müller nevertheless assumes a form of gendered stigmatization: in communist Romania, her guilt was structurally overdetermined by the fact of being a woman – culpable even for her words. The Securitate sought to multiply her civic engagements into collective incriminations, making public ostracism a necessary outcome.

Within her inner forum, the writer introduces into her short prose a subtle symbolic separation from the mother. By extension, this gesture entails a rupture from the female community itself, perceived as incapable of living according to principles of dignity and revolt against history and patriarchy. These women, in turn, initiate a parallel process of isolation directed at the writer who dared to transgress communal order, to articulate an opinion, and to oppose not only family and community, but an entire system. The first phase of Herta Müller's literary production thus narrates exclusion and identity alienation, while simultaneously marking the emergence of a surviving consciousness – one that ultimately prevails through the force of major literature.

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