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The Hero's Silences: Vulnerability, Complicity, Ambivalence

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Abstract

Silence features prominently in both political and academic debates about resistance and complicity with repressive orders. On the one hand, the dictum 'silence is complicity' is frequently taken for granted. On the other hand, heroes are thought to be those who 'speak up' or 'break the silence', contest the regime and its henchmen, agitate and take up arms. This paper troubles these assumptions about silence as complicity and speech as resistance. It argues that silence provides an interesting and productive angle for criticising the idealised, temporally static, voluntarist, act-centred and virtuous vision view of heroes that usually dominates national-myth making. The many ways in which resisters deployed silence selectively, strategically, sometimes courageously, sometimes cowardly is erased from redemptive, idealising national narratives of heroism. It is by looking at these silences theoretically and historically that I hope to decentre this hegemonic heroic understanding of resistance. The work of Nobel Laureate Herta Müller serves as an illuminating example.

Introduction

Silence features prominently as a topic in both political and academic debates about resistance and complicity with repressive orders. On the one hand, 'silence is complicity' is one of the most invoked dicta in – often virulent – political debates about the attribution of responsibility in the wake of historical catastrophe. In the context of authoritarian regimes (Cohen, 2000; Zerubavel, 2010) silence – either as the absence of dissenting speech or the presence of compliant speech – is generally associated with collectively sustained complacency, cowardice, shame, embarrassment, or desires to live comfortable and undisturbed lives. (Rousso, 1987; Zerubavel, 2006, p. 74) The silent witnesses are passive by-standers *to* and often beneficiaries *of* others' suffering. Silence must therefore be denounced, condemned and countered by voice and action. France's wild purges after World War II and the public *escraches* of by-standers in post-dictatorial Argentina are just two examples of public responses to silent complicity.

On the other hand, heroes are thought to be those who speak up, contest the regime and its henchmen, agitate against the authorities and take up arms. To 'speak up' or to 'break the silence' – are publicly-endorsed ethical imperatives that presuppose dissenting speech to be the only appropriate action, as it expresses moral integrity, courage, commitment and fortitude in the service of truth and justice. The hero remains silent only to protect her comrades or to refuse injustice. The individuals who are selected for consecration in the public consciousness and the national Pantheon are those perceived to make a conscious, sovereign decision to choose struggle, who unwaveringly assume the risks of confronting an unjust order, who display a pure and consistent ethical motivation and who sacrifice for the common good. (Campbell & Estés, 2004; Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011; Klapp, 1949, 1954, 1964) National myth-making celebrates them and future generations are instilled with a sense of pride and awe at their supernatural self-mastery, unequivocal dedication and sacrifice for an ethical cause, thus reproducing this regulatory, glowing image over time.

In this paper, I start with two hopefully unproblematic claims about the effects of this image that dominates national myth-making: first, it presents an implausible view of even the most exceptional heroes, and second, it crowds out other forms of resistance from the public imaginary, forms that might, however, serve as more plausible, more tangible and thus more inspiring exemplars. The image of the absolute hero colonises political memory, impoverishing collective visions of political agency and contestatory politics, discrediting and disabling less-than-absolute practices of resistance and critique. I suggest that silence provides an interesting and productive angle for criticising and subverting the idealised, temporally static, voluntarist, act-centred and virtuous vision view of the hero and for making the political imaginary more hospitable to a temporally dynamic, relational and vulnerable portrait thereof. I propose that narratives of resisters' silences give us important epistemic insight into the many, often contradictory factors motivating them: silence sometimes translates indignation and opposition to injustice, other times fear (for oneself, one's family, friends or allies) and ethical ambivalence. Accounts of the many ways in which they have deployed silence selectively, strategically, sometimes courageously, sometimes less so is erased from the redemptive and idealising national narratives that get consecrated and reproduced across generations. I suggest that it is by looking at narratives of resisters' multifarious silences that we can hope to decentre this ontologically implausible, hegemonic understanding of the hero and make space for more plausible alternatives within public imaginaries of political action, alternatives that do not frame vulnerability as an impediment to resistance.

Building on insights from political theory and social psychology, this paper has several objectives. First, it sketches a rough typology of heroism that holds citizens' imagination captive, zooming in on the political hero whose portrait dominates national myths. Second, it provides a systematisation of the problematic social and psychological assumptions underpinning the categories in the typology, including about their intentionality, unequivocal ethical purity and absolute individual sovereignty. While theoretical reflection on heroism has highlighted these issues, public images thereof remain reductive and wedded to implausible standards. Third, given that all heroes, however exceptional, are always located within a relationally complex, structurally organised and temporally dynamic social world, in which they are always inevitably enmeshed; that their interrelational positionality will influence *if, when* and *how* they break the silence and speak up; and that all their actions bear the marks of inescapable vulnerabilities, the paper highlights the costs involved in public imaginaries' colonisation by an implausible image of sovereign exceptionality. This is not to deny that certain individuals are outstanding in maintaining a high level of principled commitment for long periods of time, managing their vulnerabilities and fears. It is only to specify that, even in these cases, resistance does not fit the standard model and that, staying captive to this impoverished idea of resistance has a constricting and nefarious effect on citizens' imagination, especially when it comes to the opposition the model presupposes between vulnerability and the possibility of resistance. This is why, fourth, while a rich variety of social ontologies can be mustered to criticise the hegemonic model, I propose that an excursus into Judith Butler's work is particularly useful since it captures the compatibility between resistance and vulnerability in a way that undermines any unwarranted assumptions about the hero's self-sufficiency, sovereignty and strength. Which brings me to my fifth and final point, namely that narratives of resistance that acknowledge the compatibility Butler so powerfully theorises could underpin alternative practices of official remembering and political socialisation and ultimately, of political action. To render this last point concrete, the last section introduces the work of Nobel laureate Herta Müller. Her reflections on the protean nature of silence in long-term practices of resistance enable us to grasp more readily and vividly the relational vulnerability of all heroes and understand how vulnerability injects ambivalence, hesitation, impure motivations in the experience of even the most exceptional dissenters. I suggest her seductive[1] literary treatment of silence as revealing the intermeshing of resistance and vulnerability might hopefully serve as both reassurance and stimulus for anyone contemplating the sustained labour of contestation.

Before delving into the analysis, a few caveats. First, one might wonder: Don't supreme heroes fuel practices of solidarity and inspire action exactly because they appear superhuman? The suspicion

animating this paper is that an alternative, more grounded view of resistance – one that does not assume our resisters to be fully sovereign, invulnerable individuals, driven by an absolute commitments – will shift public perceptions in a way that enables higher levels of solidary resistance against systemic injustices. Seeing the hero not as an unattainable, Herculean giant of moral integrity or a saint, but as a relational being, sometimes hesitating, sometimes fearful, sometimes silently complicit or silently prudent, might inspire more citizens to engage in practices of contestation. This is, of course, an empirical question, quite difficult to test given how most – if not all – nation states narrate their past to future generations. There is, however, something to be said about the disheartening effect of impossible exemplars, pure, detached and unwavering. If what it takes is a hero, many will feel wanting: instead of inspiration, paralysis or despondency might be the effect. As Susan Sontag put it:

> Some lives are exemplary, others not; and of exemplary lives, there are those which invite us to imitate them, and those which we regard from a distance with a mixture of revulsion, pity, and reverence. It is, roughly, the difference between the hero and the saint. (1963)

Secondly, this paper does not follow James Scott in his attempt to recuperate secret, under-the-radar, and thus safer forms of uncoordinated, self-interested resistance, which have often had an important aggregate effect, but which do not get included in the annals of history on a par with overt challenges to an unjust order. (1989). This is not the focus of this paper. I am looking here at outstanding individuals who, while sometimes resorting to hidden tactics and also partially motivated by self-regarding reasons, engage in exceptionally risky forms of action in the service of a political vision that makes the challenge to the existing oppressive order necessary. Their main goal is not to live better lives under unjust circumstances, but to change them altogether.

Thirdly, this paper is not about efforts to excavate and denounce shameful episodes in certain heroised biographies – such as those targeted by the 'Rhodes must Fall' campaign. Such projects are crucial for problematising erasures in nation-states' political memory, erasures that can underpin ongoing inequalities and exclusions: prominent figures' 'clean' biographies reflect convenient ideas of who 'we, the nation' are. To give just one example, omitting to mention Jefferson's participation in the institution of slavery translates current governmental refusal to provide structural responses to African-American marginalisation.[2] My focus here is not on such reprehensible omissions: I look at figures whose biographies obscure their vulnerability, hesitations and ambiguity.

The Identikit of the Great Hero: The Image that Holds Us Captive

Public understandings of heroism and its variations has been the object of several literatures, including history, cultural studies, social psychology and literary studies. (Campbell & Estés, 2004; Franco & Zimbardo, 2006; Klapp, 1948, 1949, 1954, 1964; Walker, Frimer, & Dunlop, 2010; Zimbardo, Breckenridge, & Moghaddam, 2013). While motivated by different research agendas, most critical studies explain how heroism works an external, social attribution (Rankin & Eagly, 2008) that can be easily revoked by a fickle public. (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006) Scholars in these varied fields converge on several elements that constitute the defining features of perceived heroism, which they compile inductively, by studying national grand narratives as well as large *n* surveys probing citizens' perceptions of what counts as a hero. Overlapping typologies emerge from these two sources, highlighting the effect of national mythological socialisation on citizens and the contours of their imagination. Most include references to martial heroes, saints/martyrs, civil heroes and political resisters. Whistle-blowers and environmental crusaders are more recent addition to the panoply.

Whatever guise the hero might take in the public's eyes, the heroic act is generally seen as a voluntary, solitary, existential choice, motivated by a noble reason – to serve someone in need or a community. The heroic act expresses the hero's principled integrity, that goes beyond what is normally expected. He – for heroism is predominantly gendered as male – speaks up and acts in defence of a worthy cause, incurring great risks. Physical risk is central, though not equally dramatic and immediate for all categories of heroes. The hero displays a great capacity to transcend fear and act decisively and courageously. (Franco et al., 2011) Finally, heroic action often places the hero outside her community, in opposition to those who stand by, keep silent or turn their eyes away: even though she had ample opportunities to avoid the sacrifice, she decides to speak up, act and assume the risk. This is why, sometimes, the hero's acts can be seen to constitute a reproach to those who remain silently standing-by.

This vision of 'heroism-as-greatness' that dominates public perception, conceives of the hero as having 'specific, demanding, and exceptional traits that tend to be static and available to only a small subset of the population.' (Peabody & Jenkins, 2017, p. 11). The civil mode – the civilian who rescues a child from a burning building – and the martial mode – the soldier saving his companions' lives – are two dominant instantiations of heroism in the collective imaginary

(Zimbardo et al., 2013). These two modes are dramatic, involve quick decision-making and require resolute, punctual action by extraordinary (male) individuals.

As political theorists, historians and artists have shown – over and over again – heroism presupposes social scaffolding by others, is not immune to hesitation and cowardice, and changes over time. In what follows, I concisely systematise the main problematic ontological assumptions underpinning the hegemonic model, rendering it sociologically and psychologically implausible and I would add, politically ineffective in mobilising resistances. In general, the time frame is reduced so that heroism is a one-off phenomenon, emerging from a solitary, voluntary, lucid choice to act, despite all danger. The idea that heroes engage in 'a private, interior process' and that the decision is taken 'in complete aloneness' even though others are present (Zimbardo et al., 2013, p. 103) presupposes a monadic view of the person and a level of self-transparency that are empirically implausible. Discrete acts of resistance need to be understood in the context of a hero's biography, her intersubjective positionality, the character and dispositions she develops over time, and the situational variables of the context. The decision to act is therefore not as free and spontaneous as the model presupposes, since it will be of necessity influenced by prior experiences, commitments, professional roles, relationships and memories. The hero's social location within a community will predispose her to act at certain moments and not others. One's class, gender, religious creed or profession – the markers of one's identity, material condition and embodiment – will influence if, how, when and how often a hero acts. In this sense, discrete heroic acts never emerge *ex nihilo* in the way the hegemonic model presupposes.[3]

Secondary to the marshal and the civilian heroes described above are the long-term volunteer carer and the political resister. (Franco et al., 2011; Peabody & Jenkins, 2017; Walker et al., 2010). The former devotes her life to the good of the others – and this is a type normally gendered as a woman. Caring here is broadly understood, going beyond the activities and institutions traditionally associated with care, such as healthcare and education. The latter – and most relevant for this paper – is the heroic resister who dedicates her efforts to a more just society.

The political heroic resister is understood to engage in sustained political work in the service of a cause, notwithstanding adverse conditions and risks to one's personal integrity, but also to the integrity of one's relatives and friends. She speaks up when many are comfortably and self-interestedly silent, refusing to take a position on systemic injustices and wrongdoing that affect large numbers of people. These are virtuous, saintly individuals, who do not hesitate to sacrifice

themselves for the common good and whose firm and consistent commitment nurtures them through unimaginable hardship, including imprisonment, torture and social ostracism. The (predominantly male) figures most frequently invoked by respondents in empirical studies are those of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

The carer and the political resister bring a welcome expansion of the typology by enlarging the timeframe of heroism: they are seen to engage in prolonged labour for the good of the others. While this long-term vision of heroism is a much-needed corrective to the hegemonic greatness, act-based heroic variety, it too presupposes an implausible social and psychological ontology. Caring for the others and fighting for a political cause often involves conflict, compromise, frustration and resentment, especially since caring is seldom symmetrical and the struggle is often misrecognised. The heroic resister sometimes disdains the community for which she sacrifices herself, resents their silence, passivity and failures of solidarity. The assumed, saintly purity of the heroes' character obscures the vulnerabilities, ambivalence, the hesitations and the bitterness carers and political resisters often feel towards the very communities they seek to serve. The controlling image (Collins, 2000) of lonely, absolute, unwavering courage conceals most heroes' fears, moments of cowardice and complicitous silences. Most importantly, close relationships support all political resisters' actions, however extraordinarily heroic they might be, enabling and sustaining them in adversity but also constraining them: these relationships and all the vulnerabilities they bring along are side-lined in the standard story.[4] As we shall see in the third section of the paper, the hero often acts and speaks out of a commitment to immediate others with whom she shares a political goal, ties of solidarity but also friendship and love – and not for the broader political community or an abstract notion of 'the nation'.

Having overviewed the blind-spots of canonical visions of heroes, the next section will try to draw the contours of a more grounded, relational and impure picture of resistance, one that can hopefully expand the scope of ordinary citizens' imagination. While there is no shortage of critical accounts of heroism in political theory, literature and history, I draw here on a theorist who went furthest in articulating a social ontology that can sustain the compatibility between resistance and vulnerability in a way that, I suggest, undermines any ground for investing emotionally and cognitively in absolutist visions of heroism.

An Alternative Ontology of Resistance: Relationality, Vulnerability and Ambiguity

Situationalist social psychologists have argued that the problematic effect of the predominantly masculinist vision of heroism-as-greatness is that it prevents the average citizen from developing a heroic imagination and taking action herself: this model leaves no room for 'banal heroism' (Zimbardo et al., 2013, p. 111), i.e. the heroism of the ordinary person who can respond to a specific, trying situation that confronts her:

> The banality of heroism concept suggests that we are *all* potential heroes waiting for a moment in life to perform a heroic deed. The decision to act heroically is a choice that many of us will be called upon to make at some point in time. By conceiving of heroism as a universal attribute of human nature, not as a rare feature of the few 'heroic elect,' heroism becomes something that seems in the range of possibilities for every person, perhaps inspiring more of us to answer that call. (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006)

Banal heroism can be enabled by cultivating 'the heroic imagination' and developing of 'heroic habits', claim the situationalists. This can be done by taking several concrete steps to develop a certain orientation to reality: remaining critically aware and mindful, thinking beyond the immediate moment and envisaging alternative scenarios for the future, not shying away from interpersonal conflict, avoiding the temptation to rationalise inaction and embracing a readiness to accept certain negative consequences that can emerge from speaking up. Most importantly, we should get in the habit of reading books and watching films about the risks and costs moral heroes have incurred and the strategies they adopted to overcome difficulty – whether it be Achilles or rescuers of Jewish people during WWII. (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006)

While debunking the myth of the heroes as super-humans belonging to a small club of the elect is in line with this paper's ambition, I hesitate to embrace the situationalists' view of 'banal' heroism because, first, of the limited role they attribute to lifelong predispositions and second, the misrecognition of the complex vulnerabilities that underpin all human action, including heroic action. First, the ethical set of rules meant to foster the heroic imagination cannot, on their own, produce moral exemplars, for resistance emerges at the intersection of a set of circumstances and one of complex predispositions that are developed over time, through experience and exposure to cultural models, moral codes, from within a specific classed, gendered, racialised location. The very example the proponents of the 'banality of heroism' syntagm use to make their point shows the

limited power of training the 'heroic imagination'. Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese bureaucrat who saved numerous Jewish lives by issuing visas during WWII, had developed a life-long habit of challenging received ideas. He was a man torn between two contradictory codes of behavior (bureaucratic obedience and Samurai ethics) and had lived thoughtfully and reflectively throughout his entire life. The account of Sugihara's biography foregrounds, I believe, the importance of social (professional, cultural, gendered, classed, racialised) positional relationality and of stable dispositions that push some to speak up or take actions when the majority stays silently passive.

Second, this paper seeks to bring the focus on this very relational positionality and highlight the ways in which all heroes – to various degrees – are never the fully sovereign, unencumbered or invulnerable. On the contrary, they are all inescapably vulnerable, embedded in and scaffolded by complex relationships, and because of those relationships, sometimes hesitant, other times hateful, silent and complicit. Because they all take part in human fragility; because they recognise life's precariousness and are therefore afraid; because they move within grey areas of moral complicity and because they sometimes fail to speak up or they prudently keep quiet – for all these reasons, we might more readily join their struggle in solidarity. Contra the situationalists, I suggest it might be worth reading stories and watching films about heroes that reflect their inescapable vulnerability, ambivalence and imperfection. To flesh out this point, I now turn to an account of social ontology that can help us grapple with the fact that all heroes – including political resisters – are always vulnerable, and that their vulnerability is not an impediment to resistance. I suggest Judith Butler's reflections on the compatibility between resistance and vulnerability is best suited as a stepping stone for criticising the narrowness of the hegemonic model and for arguing in favour of diversifying the cast of history's protagonists.

Trying to propose 'a new bodily ontology', she writes that

> …to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology. In other words, the body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality – including language, work, and desire – that make possible the body's persisting and flourishing. (2009, p. 3)

Embodied individuals are intersubjectively constituted and positioned in a social world. The fact of human relationality – of dependency and the social constitution of the self – slips out of the widespread liberal view of agency in general, and of resistance in particular. Relationality, however, cannot be willed away – as Butler reminds us, though the wish to will it away is part of an attachment

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to the idea of the self as supremely autonomous. (Butler, 2004) This is evidently nowhere more acute than in the case of heroes, the assumed self-sufficient individuals *par excellence*. Since the ties an individual has with others are internal to who she is, an essential part of her, it is a chimera to believe in one's separateness and complete autonomy. We are constituted but also 'undone by each other' – when relationships and community are damaged or lost. (Butler, 2004, p. 24) It is through grief, passion and rage that we realise we are 'beside ourselves', becoming aware of both our own vulnerability to others *and* the others' vulnerability to our actions and practices:

> To foreclose that vulnerability, to banish it, to make ourselves secure at the expense of every other human consideration is to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way. (Butler, 2004, p. 30)

Human beings, heroes included, take their bearing from the relationships through which they are simultaneously constituted, constrained and enabled. Moreover, Butler argues that awareness and acceptance of relationality as a fact of human existence opens the space for an ethical orientation to the relationships that, whether we like or not, are part of who we are. A relational ethos takes seriously the forms of sociability we share with others and remains alert to the vulnerabilities that emerge out of them, both for oneself *and* for the others. In other words, our vulnerabilities – the fact that we can always be hurt by those we have relationships with – should make us aware of our own potential infliction of violence and suffering on them. Heroes, too, act constrained by the vulnerabilities that emerge from their embedded relationality and can inflict suffering on those they are related to through their very acts and practices of resistance. As we shall see in the last part of this paper, an awareness of this very fact and the risks it involves has made some historical resisters less intransigent, more compassionate, less reckless and therefore less heroic on the standard account.

Relationality exists within a field of power. No one, including resisters, act out of time, out of discourse, out of a power-structured social space, out of relationships. On the contrary, 'all action requires support and that even the most punctual and seemingly spontaneous act implicitly depends on an infrastructural condition that quite literally supports the acting body.' (Butler, 2016, p. 19) By 'infrastructural condition' Butler means the discursive, social and material underpinnings of our lives, the relationships and networks that nurture us, which we cannot deny or overcome, but only seek to make more just, more equal, more enabling. The hero too will act from somewhere, from

within a constellation of power that precedes her, vulnerable and never self-sufficient, enabled and constrained by her positionality.

Acknowledging the relational vulnerability of heroic resisters goes against the standard view. Two ideas hold captive the public's but also many academics' imagination:

> The first holds that vulnerability is the opposite of resistance and cannot be conceived as part of that practice; the second supposes that vulnerability requires and implies the need for protection and the strengthening of paternalistic forms of power at the expense of collective forms of resistance and social transformation. (Butler, Gambetti, & Sabsay, 2016, p. 1)

According to these dominant views, vulnerability is associated with victimization, passivity, inaction, a lack of decisiveness. Given the inescapability of human vulnerability, Butler proposes that 'vulnerability is neither fully passive nor fully active, but operating in a middle region, a constituent feature of a human animal both affected and acting.' (Butler, 2016, pp. 24–25) She alerts us that, when we deny vulnerability it is because we like to think of ourselves – and, I point out, especially of our heroes – as those who are acting, as opposed to those who are acted upon. This implausible model of individual sovereignty also rejects 'responsiveness, including impressionability, susceptibility, injurability, openness, indignation, outrage' (Butler, 2016, p. 24) – affective reactions through which we engage with and respond to reality. It thus fails to grasp the fact that

> … vulnerability is not a subjective disposition. Rather, it characterizes a relation to a field of objects, forces, and passions that impinge on or affect us in some way. As a way of being related to what is not me and not fully masterable … (Butler, 2016, p. 25)

Thinking through Butler's reflections on relationality and the vulnerability inherent in it, as well as her proposal on the compatibility between vulnerability and resistance, paves the way for imagining the hero as less voluntarist, less free, more fragile and thus more relatable. Reckoning with common human relationality renders everyone, the resister included, more aware of the multiple vulnerabilities that impinge on us. I argue that it can also render the resister more hesitant and more lenient in how she judges the silence of the acquiescent and the complicit. Adjusted to her relational fragility, she remains lucid about her own fears, cowardice, ambivalence in relation to her struggle, her desires for personal self-realisation that conflict with political engagement, as well as her own moments of silent complicity. Positively, she might also understand that '[F]rom the subsequent

experience of loss and fragility, however, the possibility of making different kinds of ties emerges.' (Butler, 2004, p. 40)

As the last section of this paper exemplifies, such heroes – more attuned to the variously located others, more aware of their own dependence on relational scaffolding, more receptive, lucid and honest about their own complicity and hesitations – might be more careful about the consequences of their actions, more discriminating and more forbearing towards the others' manifold silences. I venture to say that the image of such an encumbered hero, however exceptional they might be in their courage and the strength of their commitments, could more successfully seduce us to imitate them – rather than revere or worship them form a distance. Let us now turn to a resister whose silences give us an insight into the ambiguity, ambivalence and vulnerability of resistance, as proposed here, and whose story might mobilise others to entertain resistant hopes.

Reconciling Vulnerability and Resistance: The Hero's Many Silences

Upon winning the 2009 Nobel Award for literature, writer Herta Müller came to international attention. Her novels on the Romanian communist dictatorship are greatly inspired by her own biography, located at the borderlands between the Romanian and the German cultures. The cornerstones of her life are her belonging to the German ethnic minority in Romania, her work as a dissident writer, her enduring friendship with members of the left-wing Aktionsgruppe Banat, poets Richard Wagner, Rolf Bossert and Roland Kirsch, her subsequent persecution at the hands of the Romanian political police (the infamous Securitate) and eventual exile in the Federal German Republic in 1987.

The reasons for her and her friends' harassment was their clandestine critical writings, photography and music – artistic products aimed against the regime's claim to absolute authority, which they tried to smuggle abroad to alert the international community. The political police tried to recruit Müller as informer but she refused, something that led to intensified harassment. Due to the German minority's support for Germany in WWII and the geopolitical constellation of the Cold War, their ethnic identity made the artists suspicious in the eyes of the regime. Müller and Bossert managed to emigrate to Germany in the late 1980s. A depressed, despairing Bossert killed himself upon arriving in Germany. Kirsch died suspiciously, a couple of years later, his suicide possibly staged by the secret police.

These deaths – as well as the records of their permanent surveillance, social and professional marginalisation, beatings and harassment – put into perspective the kind of risks the dissidents assumed. In a country where politically targeted categories were imprisoned, interned in labour camps or deported and where surveillance by the secret police reached deep into individuals' private lives, their exceptional courage cannot plausibly be denied. They sustained a commitment to criticism and political freedom for a long time, frightened, despairing, sometimes cowering to the pressure, but never dissuaded. Those who migrated did so very late, even though, as part of the German minority, they were undesirable to the ultra-nationalist variety of communism embraced by the regime and so were allowed to leave the country – a 'privilege' for which the German government paid a *per capita* sum to the Romanian authorities, thus institutionalising a lucrative form of ethnic cleansing. (Copilaș, 2015)

With some but few notable exceptions,[5] Muller's writings mostly cover their experiences during later period of the communist dictatorship, (Müller, 2010a, 2011, 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2017) marked by deep material frustrations, the state's censorship of all cultural production, an acute lack of political freedoms and a pervasive infiltration of society by the police state. (Cazan, 2011; Corobca, 2016; Cristescu & Pipoș, 2016; Deletant, 1995; Pârvulescu, 2015; Stan, 2013; Stan & Turcescu, 2017; Vasile, Vasilescu, & Urs, 2016) She authored several volumes of autobiographical essays and interviews, as well as novels and poetry books, most of them published abroad after her exile. In what follows I rely on her essays and interviews, but also refer to some of her novels. The reason for including fictional work as evidence for my vision of heroic resistance has to do with the specific type of fiction she embraces: Müller's writing – to which she herself applied the label of 'auto-fiction' – enables her to deal with personal and political trauma, make sense of her own reality, and affirm her agency and authorship. Her novels are based on her own experiences and many of her characters are recognisable as Müller's friends, colleagues, interrogators. Details from her biography, which she discusses in her essays, forcefully emerge in her fiction, so much so that a rich, intertextuality defines the relationship between the auto-biographical publications and her novels (Marven, 2013).

Before zooming in on her silences,[6] which, I argue, offer us a prism for grappling with the hero's vulnerabilities, ambivalences and complicities, a few words on two of Müller's life-long dispositions[7] cultivated throughout her life: both born out of fear yet both treasured for the insight and motivating force they provided for survival and resistance.

In response to reality's hijacking by dictatorial ideology, Müller develops an 'alien gaze' (2017) – a heightened state of sensorial and cognitive acuity that help her grasp events, processes and people outside predetermined political frames. The 'alien gaze' is frightened – the gaze of a vulnerable resister under political surveillance – but it helps her keep control over reality, escaping political mystification. The 'alien gaze' thus supports Müller in articulating her political critique of the dictatorship but also of democratic politics in Germany after her exile. Second, Müller talks about the 'mad rush through the head' (2017, p. 98) – a repeated painful experience triggered by political anger and anxiety – that pushes her to the verge of insanity but also keeps her lucid and motivated. However painful this experience is, Müller values its capacity to move one into action and she hopes to trigger it in others via her writing: evocative language is masterfully deployed to get others to think beyond what there is, bravely and creatively. Both dispositions illustrate the productive synergy between vulnerability and resistance that Butler masterfully theorised. In what follows we turn to silence's multiple valences to understand how this synergy is navigated in practice.

The Resister's Complicitous Silence

Müller reflects on her own complicitous silence and captures it vividly in her essays. Talking about her bystander status to the organised, cold administration of death, she writes that she felt

> [A]n impetuous pity for those it [death] had touched, that spontaneous compassion that lasts for a while, then goes away. That petrification, fingers curled, nails painfully stuck in your palm, lips tight while you watched some unknown being arrested, beaten, crushed, in plain sight. Then you go away, your mouth dry, throat burning, walking fast, as if somebody had pumped fetid air into your stomach and your legs. You feel a languorous guilt that you cannot stop anything bad from happening to the others and a wicked happiness that you had not been the punished one. (2017, p. 56)

In writing about her struggle to find a precarious equilibrium between a powerless, raging indignation and a competing, voluptuous desire to live – both rarely recognised within the hegemonic model – Müller richly captures the hero's ambivalence, which sometimes translates in complicitous silences. Ambiguity marks everyone on the island Romania had become under communism, heroes included. As the title of one of her most powerful novels tells us, the *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger/ Încă de pe atunci vulpea era vânătorul /Even Back Then, the Fox Was the Hunter*: in a repressive regime, all hunters are simultaneously victims, and all victims are simultaneously hunters, though their co-implication in a complex moral landscape, which renders stark judgments

of guilt and innocence fraudulent. Resistance is often punctual, difficult to sustain unwaveringly, given the severity of repression, its duration and most heroes' all-too-human desire to survive. Where one ends on the spectrum of involvement – as well as the experience of that location – is deeply influenced by intersecting axes of positionality[8]. Even those who have the courage to mount resistance, will sometimes keep silent, out of an overwhelming desire for self-preservation, a lust for life. Explaining how she felt after each interrogation she survived, Müller writes:

> Even if only out of stubbornness, you learn to love life. Each day becomes valuable, you learn to enjoy living. You tell yourself you're alive. You really, really want to live. And this is enough, your life becomes more meaningful than you ever imagined. (Müller, 2017, p. 59)

This does not prevent the heroic resister from despising the category of those who 'did shameful things, lived lowly lives, behaved aggressively or obsequiously…' (Müller, 2016b, p. 72) Recognising her own complicity, she maintains the right to judge certain compatriots who stooped too low. She feels a deep repugnance towards those who complied too happily, eager to reap the benefits of their servility. At the same time, she is perfectly aware that

> Adaptation is something normal if you want to achieve anything in a dictatorship. Most people want a safe job and a salary. Even to pass unnoticed, you must pay the price of silence. You must at least pretend to adapt. The destruction of the person in a dictatorship is normal, impossible to avoid. You are destroyed whether you adapt or refuse. I thought political zeal was a form of destruction to which the individual agreed. (Müller, 2016b, pp. 87–88)

The politically zealous are to be avoided, treated with a disdainful silence. The rest, however, obtain Müller's indulgence, precisely because she is aware that the vulnerability inherent in relationality constituted an obstacle to resistance. One of Müller's characters says at the end of her novel, *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt/Omul este un mare fazan pe lume/The Passport:* 'What could I have done, the maid's daughter said, I had to keep quiet, I have a child.' 'I know, said Adina, men had women, women had children, and children were hungry.' (2011, pp. 213–214) This short dialogue highlights the ways in which one's deep imbrication in relationships, one's caring for others and their well-being made people more accommodating and less inclined to engage in contestatory practices, practices that could have endangered the dear ones' lives. In a place and a time where the secret police often harassed, kidnapped and imprisoned the relatives of whoever they targeted,

colluding with the regime – more or less directly – was a means of protecting loved ones. To support their families, feed their children and ensure their safety, many adjusted to constraints and limitations, engaging in various survival strategies, which, on the whole, reproduced the regime's grip over everyone. At the same time, this dialogue shows us how the heroic resister becomes more forgiving towards the silent because she shares with them the vulnerabilities that come with being connected to others through love, friendship and ties of obligation.

Sometimes, however, from the silent mass emerge characters who speak out – but not always driven by political agendas or righteous indignation against an oppressive order. Tereza, one of the main characters in *Herztier/Animalul inimii/The Land of Green Plums* (Müller, 2016a) repeatedly refused to join the Communist Party, publicly disdained the local leadership, only to cultivate her reputation of *enfant terrible*, who reveled in publicly showering the party potentates with vituperative sarcasm, humiliating and interpellating them when they expected an acquiescent silence. Talking about the real person on whom the character is based, her girlfriend Jenny, Müller describes her as being 'lustful for life's pleasures and frivolous, an urban child – an expert at rolling her eyes, she never meditated about words' meaning and despised the political regime for having bankrupted the nations' sensuality'. (Müller, 2017, p. 141) Because her father had been a party grandee, she was not punished for her impertinence. However, her irreverent remarks pierce the uniform silence of the others, revealing the vacuity of the authorities' claim to power and highlighting the absurdity of the endless party meetings, where much and nothing was said, given the regime's hijacking of language. Moreover, it is she who hides illegal materials entrusted by her friend, risking arrest, exclusively out of personal fidelity and not to advance a specific political project. Tereza/Jenny thus disrupts two illusions: about intellectuals' privileged role as lucid observers of reality and outspoken resisters, and about resisters' moral purity and unwavering commitment to a cause. Personal relationships can serve as strong motivators, sometimes more successfully than any altruistic dedication to a cause. Müller thus renders our vision of resistant speech messier, but more accurate for that reason.

Silence and Surviving Paralysing Fear
The universe Müller invites us in is claustrophobic. It is marked by fear – both in its general, atmospheric *and* concrete, material guises. Hers is a fear that deeply alters human minds and relationships, rendering compliance and complicity with the regime normal for everyone.

For the individual harassed by the authorities, walking in silence for long hours, aimlessly through the city, can help stall the mad galloping of frightening thoughts in the mind. Pushed to read reality paranoically, always trying to anticipate the interrogator's next move,[9] to devise strategies for surviving interrogations and find ways to protect oneself and one's loved ones, the traumatised resister gradually finds peace in the simultaneous tiring of the body and of the mind in long, silent walks.

Within the group of resisters she belongs to, the enormity of the terror pushes them, one by one, close to suicide. Because time stands still under the control of the regime, hope cannot move forward, it remains attached to a maddening present that would not pass, that is always pushing the mind to the limit of its resilience.[10]

Within the group, silence is, first of all, natural. When resisters share friendship, intimacy and unity of purpose, silence betrays a deep knowledge of – and solidarity with – one another. It is the mark of a close connection that does not rely on words to instantiate itself. Not all silences are the same, however. Verbalising what happens to each in turn – the police beatings, the humiliating interrogations, the violation of private space – is often impossible, for two reasons. First, common words cannot capture the experiential dimension of terror. When the world gets turned upside down, words cannot easily catch up with reality and encapsulate the horrifying situations people find themselves in. Second, even if words could communicate the terror, they would render it more vivid, more real, inescapable, overpowering:

> … I believe we should speak as little as possible about fear. You shouldn't keep calling it by its name lest you should feed it. (Müller, 2016b, p. 100)

This is why silence about what happens to each of those who resist the authorities is a pre-requisite for staying sane; it is a choice by the group's members, an agreed-upon strategy to avoid despair, collectively deployed to try and survive fear mentally intact. However, this is not without remainder, as the next subsection reveals.

Silence and the Perception of Relational Vulnerability

Moments of shared silence between friends enhance the acuity of perceiving the other beyond words. It enables a piercing sensorial and emotional awareness so powerful that it becomes

frightening in its capacity to see through and access the other in her vulnerability, revealing most powerfully co-dependency and the constitutive ties that bind individuals to one another. This is why, silence is also potentially disruptive for the relationship.

When one's silent perception 'sees' the other too clearly, the relationship can be threatened: the silent perception undoes the innermost core of the other's self, bringing to light its relational fragility, one that is difficult to accept – as Butler masterfully showed. To survive such moments as friends, the resisters engage in absurd games – playing tricks on each other, cursing and insulting each other – activating language as a means to re-establish the chimera of their integrity, their separateness, which had been threatened by the sensorial and emotional acuity of silence. In her novel *Herztier/Animalul inimii/The Land of Green Plums* sheds light into how

> [B]ecause we were afraid, Edgar, Kurt, Georg and I were always, everyday together. We sat at the table, but fear remained so personal, in each of our heads, the fear we had each brought within us to the meeting. We laughed a lot to hide it from the others. But fear is uncontrollable. When you keep a straight face, it sneaks in your voice. When you manage to keep a straight face and a steady voice… it sits somewhere, just outside your skin. It lies about you, you can see it in the nearby objects.

> We could see whose fear was where, because we had known each other for so long. We often couldn't stand one other, because we depended so much on each other. We felt the need to exchange insults. (2016a, pp. 76–77)

This fragment shows friendship's value in scaffolding, not so much the hope in a meaningful political change, but the hope of not going mad. It also vividly highlights the toll on friendship that fear took. In sharing fear, the resisters became aware how vulnerable to the others they were: 'Through that fear we had seen, more than was permissible, inside each other' (2016a, p. 77). Such exposure could only be made bearable by the deep love that thrived beyond and despite their despair. Coping with fear and maintaining the political struggle was tiresome and required an inventive imagination, as well as endless energy and patience: 'The effort to save ourselves was patience. Patience could never end or, in any case, if it broke, it had to renew itself immediately.' (2016a, p. 213) Thus, resisters lucidly – though sometimes unwillingly – admitted the role the others played in both supporting and constituting their lives and in rendering them more vulnerable to the suffering inherent in such deep ties. Which brings us, last but not least. to the issue of loss.

Silence and Loss

Müller lost relationships as a result of death or betrayal. Losing companions to terror or to suicide is for her one of the most painful and scarring experience, as friendship motivates both survival and resistance. For Muller, friendship constitutes a source, a support system and a motivator for political activism. It is this immediate community of friends and political kindred spirits for whom risks are taken out of a sense of reciprocal obligation and ethical commitment that they shared – rather than in the name of an abstract 'people' or 'nation.' The resister often acts for the sake of certain relationships she treasures, for the sake of friends who scaffold her and who are solidary with her, and not out of a conscious decision to serve the political community, most of which is deeply – though often understandably – submerged in a complicitous acquiescence. It is within these scaffolding relationships that the abstract cause becomes alive: without close ties of conviction and love, there would be no action. Müller acted for those close ones she deeply cared about, with whom she shared a vision of a different future. After their death, she wrote and maintained her political efforts in their memory, to honour their lives. These relationships were simultaneously personal and political: love is imbricated with political commitment in sustaining the resister though, in reading Muller's texts, one often gets the sense it is love – first and foremost – that makes fear and loss tolerable. Here again, the departure from the standard model is evident.

The worst type of loss is that of trusted friends through betrayal. Because of the deep relationships of trust and care between the group's members, betrayal is always a shock. And yet, the deep love and commitment that precedes it can never be fully replaced by hate *post factum*. Being betrayed pushes Müller in a thicket of love and hate from which she finds it difficult to extricate herself: the hero becomes torn and confused.

Assessing the toll the group suffered at the hands of the regime, the survivors conclude: 'When we are silent, we are unpleasant … when we speak, we become ridiculous' – this is how one of the novels *Herztier/Animalul inimii/The Land of Green Plums* ends. Having survived the dictatorship and their own suicidal temptations, the remaining two friends mourn in silence, reckoning with their deep losses. Capturing their pain in words is ridiculous, first because language is insufficient, and second because even if it were possible, it would be unnecessary between people who share such a deep connection. At the same time, silence is undesirable for it alienates the survivors from others, who might read their silence as a reproach for their standing by. Through this last sentence, Müller

reveals the tension at the core of silence – its simultaneous nurturing and corrosive effect on interpersonal relations.

Conclusion

To conclude, to the vocal, invulnerable and unwavering resister, Müller opposes the image of the fearful, often cowardly, often self-interested yet nonetheless recalcitrant resister, who keeps silent and speaks selectively, in both its complicitous and resistant modes. This is a hero who oscillates between hope and despair, who has suicidal thoughts but is also hungry for freedom and a rich private life, who is insolent towards the authorities but also cowers in silence when the pressure is too high. For such a hero, silence has a protean nature and emerges as essential for physical survival, a key coping mechanism, but also a basis for solidarity with others and an instrument of resistance. Silence is never a one-off, conscious, irreversible decision, but a response that resisters maintain selectively in different arenas of social life, depending on a variety of coordinates, sometimes amplifying, sometimes diminishing the effect of others' complicitous silence. In moments of exceptional lucidity, the hero will also reflect on their cowardly silence or complicitous speech, sometimes resigned to it, sometimes re-living it as a form of self-mutilation.

This paper suggests Müller's incisive analysis of silence can help us see more clearly the limits of the hegemonic image of the elect, and perhaps open up our cognitive and affective structures to incorporating an alternative view of the hero, simultaneously frail and strong, scared and upright. I have argued for reconsidering our national inventories of valour and move away from implausible models that oppose vulnerability to resistance. More humble processes of memorialisation would recognise all heroes, small and big, in their complex vulnerability, including their share of complicity, their traumas, and moments of ambivalence when their lust for life trumps their commitment to radical political change. I have engaged with some of the heroes' silences – cowardly silences, traumatised silences, mourning silences, defensive silences, alienating silences – in order to capture resistance's inescapable impurity, ambivalence, and complicities, as well as the compatibility between resistance and vulnerability, as theorised by Butler. Listening to these silences might pry open publicly-manufactured investments in sovereign heroism and better inspire citizens to engage in contestatory politics, thus avoiding the twin danger of paralysis or despondency that perfection imposes on us.

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[1] For my account of the seductive power of literary works, please see (Mihai, 2018).

[2] For US's official story on Jefferson, see The White House entry, Thomas Jefferson, retrieved September 20, 2018 from https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/thomas-jefferson/

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