
The Exile Memoirs – between the Identity Discourse and the Critique of the Totalitarian Ideologies: Herta Müller’s Case

Alina Crihană a *

Abstract

Believing that “the things one has experienced disappear in time and reappear in literature”, Herta Müller, the German writer of Romanian origin, writes her narrative – the fictional as well as the memoir one – by constantly relating it to the totalitarian ideological context. In his autobiographical essays from Der König verneigt sich und tötet (2003) and Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel (2011), the anamnesis focusing the personal history as part of “the great history” – both being deeply influenced by the experience of terror displayed by the “cannibal” and mnemophobic ideology – is permanently backed up by the meditation on the totalitarian mechanisms (social, psychological, ideological). The main point of interest entailed by the identity discourse – generating an exemplary history – is different from “self-edification”, pointing to the revival of “another time when I have always wondered about what is mere happening and what framing up in my own life” [Müller, 2011: 42], to the construction of a critical “meta-history” focusing the theme of mentally and behaviourally reshaping the intellectual portrayed as “totalitarian subject.” Being more than an existential testimony, Herta Müller’s autobiographical essays play a radiographic role for the period, equally interpreting a history of terror - her approach is totally justified, as the author strongly believes that the socio-cultural context mirrors the Communist past from a political and ideological perspective.

1. Introduction

As all totalitarian societies, the Romanian communist society displays an identity configuration that is closely connected to the phenomenon of collective memory manipulation by means of a double strategy of the political power, legitimized by the official ideology. Having as a goal the reshaping of the whole society’s identity, this strategy presupposed, on one hand, the instrumentation of a “politics of forgetfulness”, going as far

* Alina Crihană, Tel.: +40 741350935.
E-mail address: crihanoa@yahoo.com.
as “destruction-forgetfulness” [1] whose long term effect was “a structural amnesia” [2] and, on the other hand, the establishment of an official pseudo-memory, “a memory that was abusively commanded”[3].

Within the field of literature, constantly under the pressure of the political commandments, the strategy of the political power made the publishing of memorialistic texts almost impossible, most of them appeared outside the totalitarian context, either during the authors’ exile, or after the fall of the communist regime. Confronted with “the terror of history”, the authors of post-totalitarian memorialistic narrations choose to exorcise it by deconstruction, in order to initiate, afterwards, a reconstruction that is registered in their own identity projects. The reconstruction of “the self as an other” [4] has as a correspondent in the reconfiguration of history created from small fragments of life, preserved by the memorial traces, the one that the History with capital H had silenced in the name of a “cannibalistic” ideology [5]. After an era of “imposed forgetfulness” [6], a strategy founded on “the dispossession of the social actors of their original power of recounting themselves”[7]. the contemporary inflation of memorialistic narrations is the sign for the return of the repressed, who answers not only to the exigencies of a “duty towards memory” (a defining coordinate of the new cultural politics) with an atoning purpose, but also to a deep necessity of the authors, directed especially towards self clarification on the path to a truthful narration of the personal experiences inscribed in the “great history”.

It is also the case of the German writer, of Romanian origin, Herta Müller, whose autobiographic work (both fictional and essayistic) published in exile carries entirely, the mark of the resistance 2 against this “destruction-forgetfulness”, converted, by the criticism of the ideology that legitimized it, into an act of authentic disidence. Condemned to alienation as a form of exile from within, which exacerbates the dialectic of “soi-même comme un autre”, constituent of “narrative identity”[8], Herta Müller writes her prose with an obsession for the tropes of “dispossession” and “(self)destruction”, following a double objective: healing from the traumatic past (recomposed in the autobiographic narration) and having as corollary, the recovery of the lost identity, and counteracting the effects of some mnemophobic ideology, which becomes the privileged subject of the essayistic reflection.

2. From the autobiographical space to the writing experience: identity landmarks

A Nobel prise for literature laureate in 2009, a distinction awarded for “the depth of the poetry and the honesty of the prose which she has suggestively described the universe of the uprooted”, Herta Müller, considered at present “the most important Romanian German Writer since Paul Celan” [9], is additionally one of the most representative authors for the literature about the totalitarian universe. Born in the Romanian Banat in the “years of the obsessive decade”3 and emigrated in West Germany in 1987, after a long period of persecutions from the representatives of the Security (because of her involvement in the movement Aktionsgruppe Banat), Herta Müller experienced the communist dictatorship in Romania both in its Stalinist variant, under the Dej government, and the national-communist one, under the Ceauşescu regime.

In effect, the childhood of the future writer had been scarred by both forms of totalitarianism in the 20th century: as a daughter of a former Waffen SS soldier, an incurable nostalgic after the glory times of Nazism, and of a mother irreparably traumatised by the experience of the concentration camp (she had been deported in 1945 – for 5 years – to a forced labour camp in U.S.S.R., because of a double “guilt”, that of belonging to a demonized group4 after the so called "liberation" of August 1944, and, simultaneously, to a class of former "exploitors"),

---

2 Although resistance is a recurrent theme in Herta Müller’s prose, the author’s identity discourse does not seem to legitimize the idea of the so-called “resistance through aesthetics”. Regarding the ideology that validates, in the post-totalitarian intellectual discourse, this type of resistance, see Andrei Grigor’s reviews (Grigor, A., & Simion, E., 2004, In the rear guard of the avant-garde (interviews with Andrei Grigor. București: Univers encyclopedic) and Nicoleta Ifrim (Ifrim, N., 2011, Enjeu identitaire et légitimation de la valeur dans le discours critique d’après décembre 1989, Annales de l’Université « Dunărea de Jos », Fascicule XXIII, Mélanges francophones, 6, 47-57).

3 The syntagm, which belongs to Marin Preda – one of the most important Romanian fiction writers after the Second World War –, designates, in the contemporary critical and historiographic discourse, the period of the 50’s, the first communist dictatorship in Romania, when the Dej government launches, in keeping with the assumed Stalinist model, a series of repressive meant to annihilate the Romanian intellectual elite.

4 This guilt is deepened by another black mark on the family past: the brother of the mother, Matz, dead in the war, had been a Nazi himself.
Herta Müller experiences early the drama of the “totalitarian subject” [10], interiorized and deepened under the pressure of the memorial traces which burden her family’s destiny. From the experience of the child, who had the opportunity to face, from within the small confines of the family, two types of “ideologies”, both totalitarian – the one of the state that had stigmatized the entire German minority in Romania because of a supposed betrayal, and the “Banat-Swabian” one, centred on the idea of German superiority over the Romanians, which “was supposed to compensate for the stigma the State had put on us” [11] – and up to the drama of the young writer, harassed and threatened with death systematically, by the Security of the 80’s, Herta Müller’s existential trajectory sets the landmarks of an illustrative history for the condition of the intellectual condemned to inner exile, before having experienced the actual exile from this “island” of generalized terror that was communist Romania: “I have lived for over thirty years in a dictatorship, in Romania. Where each individual was an island within, and the entire country, itself a sealed space to the outside, controlled inside. […] Placed one over the other, by force, two realities forcefully juxtaposed. Although any of them could have crushed you by itself” [12].

Attached to the feeling of “being an island”, of estrangement, which defines not only the individual existence and the one within the family, but also the whole Swabian community of Banat where the author had lived her childhood and adolescence (“This German minority was regarded as an island of Nazi Fritzes, but it looked at itself as being an island of those punished by the Romanians without being guilty.”[13]), the trauma of the intellectual who is constantly confronted with the experience of terror and marginalization, both generators of a profound identity crisis becomes one of the main themes of the writing, both in Romanian fictions, and in the volumes of autobiographical and memorialistic essays. In effect, the border between the two forms of writing remains a permeable one due to the common autobiographical substance, as well as the inclination towards the meditative lyricism which often provides the texts with the aspect of ample poems in prose, sometimes slipping into the oniric register, yet always grounded in the “immediate [un]reality”

The constant, obsessive reference to the realities of the communist dictatorship, from the perspective of a memory keeper who is looking for the reasons of her existence in the permanent confrontation with the traumatic past, takes the form – both in essays and novels - of a meditation which permanently brings into discussion the logic of the totalitarian world and for whom the autobiographical – fragmentary, discontinuous, elliptical – narration serves as exemplary illustration. Omnipresent in Hera Müller’s work “as a textual metaphor for trauma” [14], the collage technique reflects, as well, beyond the identity fragmentation generated by the illustrated political context, an effort to resist any summation, reminding of the legitimating ideology of the oppressive regime: in Thomas Cooper’s terms, “the collages can be read as expressions of Müller’s resistance to any unifying total vision, including national communism and ethnic nationalism” [15].

The result is a (self)reflexively-lyrical writing, where the narrated world, built on basis of the appeal to memory, becomes the mirror of the reversed real world – “a mirror that stands in opposition to the manipulative images and representations of her homeland” [16] –, legitimizing the criticism of totalitarian ideology, which gets to dissimulate “the [auto] biographical ideology” [17]. Actually, the narrative voice in Herta Müller’s essays – which will be analysed in the following pages – is to a lesser extent that of an “ideologist of his own life” and rather that of a hermeneutist of the totalitarian ideologies, who, while dismantling the mechanisms of the reversed

---

5 In Karin Bauer’s words, we could say that “the totalitarian state was perceived by Müller as a mere extension of the isolated little village of her childhood.” (Bauer, K., 1997, *Patterns of Consciousness and Cycles of Self-destruction. Nation, Ethnicity and Gender in Herta Müller’s Prose*, in P. Herminghouse & M. Mueller (Eds.), *Gender and Germanness: Cultural Productions of Nation*, pp. 263-275, New York: Berghahn Books, p. 264).

6 I borrowed the syntagm – present in the title of a novel by a famous writer of the inter-war period, Max Blecher (*Adventures in Immediate Unreality*, 1936), whose writing describes an existential experience (with autobiographical roots) placed at the border of reality and nightmare, in a universe which can be compared with Kafka’s – in order to designate the context it relates to, openly, Herta Müller’s prose: a dual world, shifting between appearance and essence, between reality and the absurd spectacle, belonging to “another time, when I could never tell what is coincidence and what is staged in my own life” [Müller, 2011: 42]. Max Blecher’s book is, actually, the starting point for one of the essays included in the volume *Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel*, an essay entitled *Dass jeder Gegenstand den Platz einnehmen muss, den er hat: dass ich der zu sein habe, der ich bin*. The author finds herself in this type of writing described as “a school of observation”, generator of a universe where “the hero lives with objects the way you only live with people” [Müller, 2011: 201, 208].
world under communist dictatorship, takes upon itself the interpretation of “the small”, as well as the “big” history: “When I write, it becomes a moral duty, maybe a naïve one, distributed in small bites. It was and it still is the opposite of any act of looking “down”, of any type of ideology, and, because of this, the best remedy against it. Ideology looks upon the whole. [...] An inner moral duty, coming from very personal reasons, irritates and confuses the fans of ideology. Because such a duty does not know obligations towards the whole and, more than that: it knows that any text stays away from the predictable, it runs away from the field set up by ideology” [18].

As “the author of her own life” [19], of the identity project which configures, equally, the autobiographical narration and the essayistic meditation, Herta Müller cannot ignore the ideological strings of the world she lived in and which had irreparably condemned the intellectual to duality and inner rift, involving her against her will in the great performance directed by the political power. Within the space of writing with therapeutic-exorcist destination, the former victim of the dictatorial power’s abuses takes revenge by means of a reconstructive exercise, from the perspective of the personal identity project, and a deconstructive one, in regard to the communist “cannibal” ideology, looking for some answers to the existential crisis which exceeds the context of the dictatorship, remaining in the space of exile, and which seems to characterise, in the author’s opinion, even the post-totalitarian Romanian world: “I detached myself from Romania a long time ago, but not from the individual’s guided debasement in a dictatorship, nor from its various legacies which show their faces at any given moment. Even if the East Germans are reluctant to keep on saying and the Western to hear about it, I am still bothered by this issue. By writing, I have to keep myself in that place within where I was hurt the most – otherwise, what is the use of writing?”[20]

“The narrative identity” found in volumes as Regele se înclină și ucide / The King Bows and Kills [Der König verneigt sich und tötet (2003)], published in Romanian translation in 2005, and Mereu aceeași nea și mereu același neică / Always the same snow and always the same uncle [Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel] from 2011 is constructed starting from this permanent interrogation of the self and the world which destined it for “displacement”, generating beyond the identity narration, a critical “meta-history” focused on the issue of mental and behavioural remodelling of the intellectual as “totalitarian subject”.

3. Building identity in the essayistic writing: between literature and ideology

Regele se înclină și ucide (The King Bows and Kills), the second essay included in the volume of the same title, published in the Romanian version in 2005, confronts a double issue, which is one of the thematic obsessions in Herta Müller’s work: on the one hand, that of the relationship between the identity of the totalitarian subject and the great mechanism of terror personified here in the symbolic figure of the “king”, and, on the other hand, that of the transformation / recovery, by means of the writing exercise, of this identity which caught in the process of fictionalizing itself. It should be noticed that the narrator operates a distinction between the two symbolic stances of the “king”, corresponding to the two worlds of the recalled past which divide the personal existence (and identity): the one of the village from the Banat of her childhood and youth – perceived as “a box that is ghostly separated from the world, with people mercilessly stunned” [21] – and that of the city, where the experience of “insularity” and falling into nothingness intensifies, firstly under the pressure of feeling different, of that which decisively separates her from the others (in high-school and university), and later under the terror of the Security. It is, equally, about the two narrative chronotopes which alternatively mark the remembrance and to which the author permanently relates, from the perspective of the present of writing, of this time which, while circumscribed to the space of exile, has become – through writing – “a paradigm of the past”, just as the past appears here as “an intensification of the present” [22].

As a result of the daily experience transposed into narrative, an experience which feeds from the contact with the “flesh” of things, of objects (as are, for example grandfather’s chess pieces – genuine reflection metaphors of the book), of the internalized material world which is converted into a world of symbols for the human condition, the images of the two kings become in essayistic meditation, the pretext for bringing under discussion the two ideologies obsessively revisited by the narrator’s identity discourse: “The king from the city will not allow you to see his weaknesses: when he staggers, you could think he is bowing, but he bows and kills.
[...] The king from the village “was bowing slightly,” staggering to the fashion of the whole land. You lived in this land, which devoured itself until it devoured you also, and you eventually died from yourself. It was only the city king who was able to fill in the sentence “the king bows and kills”. The instrument of the city king is fear. Not the rural fear, made up in one’s head, but the one you devised, planned, administered with a cool head, a fear which tears your nerves to pieces”[23]. This symbolical incarnation of fear is “compensated” by another image where the narrator symbolically projects the idea of resistance: it represents “a verified sense of life, as valid as breathing itself. This greed for life, growing inside you despite all exterior circumstances, is also a king. A refractory king whom I know well. […] I invented “the animal of the heart” for the very purpose of being able to talk to the king without saying his name. Only a few years later, when that period was sufficiently far away from me, I changed this expression “the animal of the heart” into the true word “king” …”[24].

The narrative identity of the author takes shape between the ambivalent image of the king which embodies de-individualization under the rule of fear – a fear of alterity, first, of the expropriated Swabians’ child, with a “tainted” past, of the stranger who progressively experiences marginalization, then the fear of the retaliative apparatus of the totalitarian state – and the complementary one of the “animal of the heart”, each of them relating to a stage and a form of the writing. Acknowledging her duality, she manages to overcome it in this field of true liberty, which is poetry: “I have noticed that through rimes you can defeat the king. You can present him to the world. Rime forces him to re-follow the rhythm of the heart beats it initiates. Rime freely dangles through the disturbance caused by the king. […] Ever since I was a child, the king would go through my head. It was in the objects. Even if I hadn’t written one word in my life, he would still have been there, since I was trying to keep in check the daily complications newly appeared with the help of this well known image leitmotif, even though malignantly recurrent. […] Since always the king has been a lived word, you could not defeat it by word. […] By comparison with the lived word “king”, the “animal of the heart” was a written word. It resulted on the paper as a substitute for king, since, while writing, I had to find a word for the zest for life residing in the fear of death – one which I did not have at the time when I still lived with fear in my heart”[25].

The meditation – a recurrent one – on the relations between words and things, between the word “lived” and the written word cannot be dissociated from the experience of exile, that form of exile from within, already mentioned, which starts long before emigration, being determined by the constant pressure from the political factor, which is the generator of “The Strange Look”. The latter shapes the perspective on the world and one’s self in Herta Müller’s entire autobiographical prose, without being “a distinctive particularity of art, a sort of craft that separates writers from the non-writers”, as “The Strange Look” has nothing to do with writing, yet it does with biography [26]. “The Strange Look” “comes from familiar things, self understood, whose simplicity was taken away from you” [27], from the daily experience of fear that projects over the “trivial matters” of existence, the image of some “significant shadows”, symbols of the threatening totalitarian evil converted in obsessions of writing.

In Herta Müller’s essays, writing is, declaredly, a way of defeating silence and, altogether, the place for an assumed exile, the space where “the animal of the heart” comes to life – “the hunger for life” identified with “the hunger for words” – that “unreality” governed by an “enchanted logic”, the only one capable of recovering the lived, inexpressible experience, to which the dictatorship theme subscribes. In the words of Elena Prus, “expérimentation interminable, de livre en livre, le sujet du communisme et celui, connexe, de l’oppression de l’individu forment les leitmotifs de ses livres, mais aussi de sa conscience”[28]. This major theme also subordinates essays from Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel (2011), where the re-enactment of the personal existential journey is accompanied by the meditation on the tragic histories of some writers whose destinies were equally influenced by the “terror of history” and who lived the experience of the exile and / or of the concentration camps (Oskar Pastior, Jürgen Fuchs, Theodor Kramer, Emil Cioran etc.). In the autobiographical essay from the beginning of the volume (essay called Jedes Wort weiß etwas vom Teufelskreis), the author tries to describe the process of transferring the lived experience into words – as an antidote against silence – underlining the therapeutic-redeeming importance of the writing act: “I was running after the traces of

7 It is the title of Herta Müller’s autobiographic novel of 1994, Herztier, where the discontinuous history, fragmented by accidents of the temporal order and (self)reflexive enclaves, of the author’s real experiences - from the university years to the moment immediately previous to emigration - passes to fiction without suffering alterations under the aspect of the narrated world’s authenticity.
the facts experienced within the devilish circle of words, until one thing would appear as I had never seen it before. Along with reality there came into action the words’ pantomime. [...] The theme “dictatorship” is implicitly included in it, because the ordinary never comes back after it has been taken away from you completely. The theme exists by default, but those that possess me are the words. [...] The more words we are able to take, the more we are independent” [29]. The way of acquiring possession of the experienced history, and, implicitly, of recreating / recovering the fragmented personal identity, the written word is also a way of fighting back the effects of an ideology, which, while making use of the same vehicle – the word – has a decisive contribution to the dissolution of this identity.

The identity reconstruction – through writing – of the author, thus appears as a process developed in two stages: firstly, the memory excavates from the “present past” separate fragments of a history haunted by “remarkable shadows” and, with them, “experienced words” compromised by their annexation to the official ideological discourse, so that, in the “past present” of writing these words may be given back their lost prestige, their capacity to express hidden truths, that have been buried into oblivion. Missed meanings of the already lived experiences become more visible through the process of making them literature, by reinventing words, to whom “the hunger of the eye offers […], surprisingly, intimacy, bringing them in a proximity that makes the experienced reality more transparent even than at the moment of living” [30]; therefore, “lived experiences” which “vanish in time”, “reappear in literature”: “I have never written about what I have lived on a scale of one on one, but only obliquely. Moreover, I always had to check if unreal inventions can imagine real events” [31].

If, at the level of the autobiographic narrative proper, the reconstruction of history passes into literature, shadowing any ideological message or condemning it to latency, the self-reflexive comments which duplicate, everywhere, the narrative discourse, traces a connection between literature (existence transfigured through writing and converted into parable) and ideology. Reflecting on the mentality re-modelling of the dictatorship victims (accentuated, in the personal case, by the traumatic experience of Security’s interrogations), Herta Müller analyses the mechanism of internalising an ideology which, by the practice of terror, determines the schizoid division of the totalitarian subjects who become chasers and chased: “[…] the less free a country is, the closer the state will watch you, the more upsetting confrontations you will have – sooner or later – with all kinds of things. And the lesser you will be able to clear your mind of yourself. At this point, self perception comes automatically: they survey you with every step you take, measuring you – thus making you keep an eye on yourself as well. […] It is not necessary for the follower to be always there in person in order to threaten you. He is everywhere anyway in things, as their shadow; he instilled fear into them […]” [32]. Writing arising from “hunger of the eye” allows at the same time the exorcism of the evil and the self clarification: “By means of invention, the experienced reality is forced to go back to a truth missed at the time.” [33] The painful dilemmas of a past lived under the rule of fear are answered by the act of writing, the present revealing, beyond the “experienced insanity”, the “practised literature” [34]. The re-composition of reality is conditioned, in Herta Müller’s writing, by the assumption of literature as a living experience, since, otherwise, “literature is a flat word”: “I owe nothing to literature, not even a single sentence, I owe it all to experiences” [35].

What the author rejects by the “flat word” literature is, basically, another ideology: the one that imagines literature as pure fiction, detached from “experienced things”. In this attitude towards the literary phenomenon, one can equally read a denunciation of official ideology that had turned life into literature, creating it according to the party slogans, so that “an entire nation” had been “forced to fantasize with objects and gestures, therefore, to create poetry” [36]. Finally, behind such a conception on the placement into text of “practised literature”, Herta Müller’s elliptical and discontinuous writing – haunted by the obsession of passing into nothingness whose antidote is the exile within the word – allows the perception, despite the author’s statements, of a particular “[auto] biographical ideology: refusing the “summation”, which probably appears to her as a textual expression of the totalitarian political ideology, the author of the essays succeeds in rendering “obliquely” an image as faithful as possible, even if apparently incoherent and fragmentary, of the world in which she has lived and which she carries inside her.
4. Instead of conclusions

“You shall eat everything you played at. This is how you could define writing, too. Who knows if things do not go around in a circle: what I write, I must eat, and what I do not write – devours me. But as much as I eat, it never ends. And no matter how much it devours me, I still remain. For this is how it happens when things acquire autonomy and metaphors thievishly gain possession of what does not belong to them. Here is why, just as I am writing and when words, in order to be as precise as possible, always get to be something else, I notice, nodding my head: always the same snow and always the same uncle” [37]. The reflection at the end of the essay which gives the title of Herta Müller’s volume in 2011 has the value of a mise en abyme: as everywhere in the author’s prose, its starting point is in a piece of experienced history, which the placement into text turns into an exemplary history, a mirror for all the experiences from where memory extracts “meaningful shadows”.

Among the apparently unconnected histories, words weave, across time, symbolical bridges, offering existence a meaning that had been hidden by the past: “the snow” (“nea” in Romanian) is the same both in the history of the mother who was deported, in her youth, to some place in Ukraine and in the history of the two women – mother and daughter – who cross the border in a truck, leaving behind the Romania of the 80’s, just as that “nea”/ “neică” – the informant, the inquisitor, the chaser – preserves his traits, himself immune to the passage of time, due to the process of converting life into writing. Similarly, the criticism of the totalitarian ideology – as source of existential evil, agent of the “devouring” of individuals in a logocratic universe – remains the same, converted into an obsessive theme in a work that the author wants to be an antidote against self destruction by forgetfulness.

Acknowledgement

This paper is supported by the Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number SOP HRD/89/1.5/S/59758.

References


[21] Idem, 186.

[22] Idem, 136-137, 142.

[23] Idem, 55-56.


[26] Idem, 162.

[27] Idem, 165.


[31] Idem, 189.


[34] Idem, 82.

[35] Idem, 120.

[36] Idem, 158.

[37] Idem, 115-116.