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Zero – A Gaping Mouth: The Discourse of the Camps in Herta Müller's *Atemschaukel* between Literary Theory and Political Philosophy[1]

I.

In *Atemschaukel* (Breathing to and fro),[2] the latest novel by the Romanian-German author Herta Müller, the first-person narrator, who is interned in a labour camp and suffering acute hunger, leaves his body from time to time. He undergoes an exchange with objects which 'are not living, but undead', which is to say that, as we expect of undead creatures, they need the blood of human beings to bring them to life.[3] The first-person narrator gives life to objects, and in exchange they give him the ability to endure. This exchange, in which the narrator perceives his salvation, his survival strategy, continues until 'the worst is past'. 'The worst' is the zero point.

1 I am grateful to David Midgley for his sensitive and incisive translation of this article from the original German, particularly for his brilliant translation of Müller's hitherto untranslated German texts.

2 Translator's note: No English translation of this work has yet appeared. The title adopted for the French edition is *La bascule du souffle* (2010). The German *Schaukel* is used to denote a swing or a rocking cradle.

3 The act of transfusion described in *Atemschaukel* differs from that in traditional vampire stories, however, in several respects. Firstly, it is not the desire of the undead that is directed at the living, but the other way round; secondly, giving life to the undead serves the preservation of human life or its conversion into an enduring (undead) existence, and not its termination; and this outcome is not a final and irreversible state of affairs, but a provisional way of coping with circumstances.

> The zero point is ineffable. On this we agree, the zero point and I: it is not something we can talk about. At best we can talk round about it. The gaping mouth of the zero can eat, but not speak. The zero encompasses you in its delicate stranglehold. The saving exchange cannot be compared with anything. It is as direct and compelling as '1 shovelful = 1 gram of bread'.
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> (A 249[4]: Der Nullpunkt ist das Unsagbare. Wir sind uns einig, der Nullpunkt und ich, dass man über ihn nicht sprechen kann, höchstens drumherum. Das aufgesperrte Maul der Null kann essen, nicht reden. Die Null schließt dich ein in ihre würgende Zärtlichkeit. Der Rettungstausch duldet keine Vergleiche. Er ist zwingend und direkt wie: 1 Schaufelhub = 1 Gramm Brot.)

These few sentences are the only comments we find in the entire novel on the subject of what can and cannot be said. In German-language discussions of the literary depiction of the camps, which for understandable reasons have focused primarily on writings about the Nazi concentration camps, this has always been a central issue, at least since the debates that arose from Adorno's publications on the subject.[5] There is more to this issue than the question of the legitimacy of storytelling after Auschwitz. It is also associated with questions of narrative technique, which link reflection about narrative forms to the psychoanalytical scenario of a talking cure and derive from it such forms of 'traumatic narration' as fragmentary narration, incomplete narration, etc. In terms of its narrative composition, *Atemschaukel* pursues a fundamentally different question, namely that of a *politically relevant ethic.*

4 Herta Müller, *Atemschaukel* (Munich: Hanser, 2009) (subsequently abbreviated to A).

5 The texts by Theodor W. Adorno that have provided an abiding focus for debate in this area are the radio talk 'Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit' first published in *Eingriffe: Neun Kritische Modelle* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963) translated into English as 'The Meaning of Working Trough the Past', in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) and 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft' in *Prismen. Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (Munich: DTV, 1963) translated as 'An Essay on Cultural Criticism and Society', in *Prisms* (London: Spearman, 1967).

The impossibility of speaking about the zero point is as self-evident to the narrator in *Atemschaukel* as the fact that it is possible to talk round about it. In adopting this point of view, he is not appealing to positions that have been formulated in recent Shoah literature and the discussions about it, which have shifted since the early 1990s from the question of representability to the question of forms of representation. Rather, the first-person narrator of Herta Müller's novel appeals to his *own* highly individual and intimate acquaintance with the zero point. It is his accord with this that legitimates his concise and somewhat apodictic utterance. Since I draw below on Roland Barthes's, essay collection *Writing Degree Zero* when I discuss the poetics of Müller's writings, in particular those of *Atemschaukel*, I should like to show here that it is no coincidence that Müller's first-person narrator uses the word 'zero'.

The narrator's certainty, which appears to be nourished solely by his personal experience, is recognizably constructed as an attitude informed by Shoah discourse as it has developed since 1945 and situated within it in a quite deliberate way. On the one hand, the talk of a zero point here has nothing to do with the debate about a 'zero hour' that developed in Germany after 1945, which was associated with the hope that literary writing might be able to leave the past in the past and start afresh. On the other hand, Müller's novel can be read as a critical engagement with the discourse about the literary depiction of the camps, which arose largely in response to Adorno, has continued since 1960, with variations, and has been substantially determined by Paul Celan's theme of the 'breathturn' (Atemwende).[6] But whereas Celan's breathturn is something momentary (the poet draws himself in to the confines of his inmost space, and then liberates himself from it with his work), Müller's term 'Atemschaukel' emphasizes the living process and the interminability of the artistic attempt to give expression to the memory of the camp. Correspondingly, the zero point referred to in Herta Müller's novel is also something other than the date that Paul Celan meant in his famous acceptance speech for the Büchner Prize in 1960.

6 See Paul Celan, 'Der Meridian', in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 3, ed. Beda Allemann, Stefan Reichert and Rolf Bücher (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 187–202, 195 and 200; 'The Meridian', in *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), 37–55, 47 and 52.

Celan had a very specific date in mind, 20 January 1942, the date of the Wannsee conference at which the systematic mass murder of the Jews was determined; and his implication is that the Shoah as an event can never be expunged, and should therefore henceforth be inscribed into every poem written. This perception predominated in the literature of the 1970s and continued to do so right up to the Shoah literature of the recent past. Oskar Pastior's little essay about the 'withdrawal poem', with its ironic tone, can perhaps be understood as a reply to the notion of the 'breathturn' in Celan's Büchner Prize Speech, and to the 'discreet narration' of the texts that were to follow it. Pastior describes the way these texts proceed as follows:

> The withdrawal poem is not able to perform any action, however, and therefore cannot withdraw itself either; so with this little linguistic trick, which does not amount to a precise description, at least we come a little closer to the possibility of description that we achieve when, by switching the negative in the DESCRIPTION OF INDESCRIBABILITY that we seem to be conducting, we derive the NON-DESCRIPTION OF DESCRIBABILITY. The subjective factor in the first element is an extra-literary one, and by extrapolation we arrive at bare DESCRIBABILITY. That is what we hold on to. We are still at a point in time where we pretend to omit the description, but we are already working with describability. That is quite something.[7]

If we read the term 'Atemschaukel' as – amongst other things – a reply to Celan's 'Atemwende' in his Büchner Prize Speech, then in contrast to Celan it is the processual nature of poetry, its living, 'breathing', 'rocking' character that receives a stronger emphasis. The decision to use the word 'Atemschaukel', which Müller and Pastior jointly adopted as the working title of the novel, was evidently influenced not only by this apparent intertextual allusion, but also by the existential dimension of breathing. Like food, breathing is a necessity of life; in this way, the 'Atemschaukel' can be seen as a counterpart to the 'angel of hunger' (Hungerengel) that hovers over everything.

7 Oskar Pastior, *Jetzt kann man schreiben was man will*, Werkausgabe, vol. 2, ed. Ernest Wichner (Munich: Hanser, 2003), 22.

Müller responds to Celan's demand that the date of the Wannsee conference should be inscribed in *any* poem written after Auschwitz by making a different kind of claim to universal validity. Müller's narrator-protagonist in *Atemschaukel* is not talking about the concentration camp, but a different kind of camp – even if this does not of course exclude the possibility that intertextual allusions also establish an unmistakable connection to relevant examples of Shoah literature. This extended claim to universal validity is, however, also to be distinguished from those tendencies to universalization that are characteristic of current discussions about the camps, as in Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* and those who have taken their cue from it.[8] The figure zero in *Atemschaukel* is specific in a different way, and it lays claim to a general validity that reaches beyond the Shoah. Its poetic and political relevance arises through the simple, sensually direct image of the figure zero, of its gaping mouth – although this is something we have to imagine, it is not depicted in the text itself.

The zero sign is hunger, that ever-present and all-powerful hunger of which the novel has to tell. In order to describe it, the first-person narrator adopts the clarity of mathematical expressions. The equals sign (=) describes precisely the relation between the single shovelful (denoted by an Arabic numeral) and the single gram of bread (also denoted by an Arabic numeral). By choosing a mathematical form of representation the narrator refuses to engage in the debate about the question of the necessity and admissibility of comparisons that continues to determine the discourse about Shoah literature to this day. The equation is immediately preceded by the comment, 'The saving exchange cannot be compared with anything.' This text works with *equations*, not with comparisons.

In recent German, and particularly Austrian Shoah literature, including the secondary literature, the debate about comparisons has been conducted in a careful and differentiated way. The dilemma that underlies it – the dilemma between making use of suffering for the purposes of a story from

8 On this issue, see the early critique by Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky: 'Homo Sacer, das bloße Leben und das Lager. Anmerkungen zu einem erneuten Versuch einer Kritik der Gewalt', *Die Philosophin* 25 (2002), 95–115.

which it might be possible to learn and simultaneously insisting that the sacrifices involved were senseless, or the danger that Ingeborg Bachmann noted at an early date of indulging in 'the most feeble and thoughtless poeticization' of sacrifice[9] – cannot be resolved simply by naming it. The narrator in *Atemschaukel* evidently recognizes this problem and is not prepared to dwell on it. The narrative procedure adopted might be described in Roland Barthes's terms as the ideal case of narration, namely a narration in which literature has been vanquished and the human problematics are recognized and presented without any added colouring, a narration in which the writer has once more become 'honest'. In Barthes's chapter on 'Writing and Silence' there is indeed a remark about writing in equations which can be directly applied to the mode of narration in Müller's *Atemschaukel*:

> If the writing is really neutral, and if language, instead of being a cumbersome and recalcitrant act, reaches the state of a pure equation, which is no more tangible than an algebra when it confronts the innermost part of man, then literature is vanquished, the problematics of mankind is uncovered and presented without elaboration, the writer becomes irretrievably honest.[10]

With the 'translation' of the mathematical equation into spoken language, the existential quality of the narration in *Atemschaukel* becomes apparent. The German verb 'ist' (is), which is how the equals sign might be spoken, sounds just like the verb 'isst' (eats), and thereby denotes what is always and exclusively at stake in the camp: hunger, the emaciation of the inmates through under-nourishment.

In *Atemschaukel* hunger is personified as an overwhelmingly powerful angel, which lies in wait for the first-person narrator to give himself up. The angel of hunger repeatedly invites him to 'let go'. But the narrator does not succumb to the angel's wiles, and unmasks him as a deceiver.

9 Ingeborg Bachmann, *Werke*, vol. 4, ed. Christine Koschel, Inge von Weidenbaum and Clemens Münster (Munich: Piper, 1978), 335.

10 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero & Elements of Sociology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), 65. Cf. also Barthes's remarks in the chapter 'Is there any Poetic Writing?', *ibid.*, 35–43, esp. 37–8.

> You are deceiving me with my own flesh. My flesh has fallen victim to you. But I am not my flesh. I am something else, and I won't let go. It is no longer a question of who I am, but I won't tell you what I am. What I am eludes your scales.
>
> (A 87: Du betrügst mich mit meinem Fleisch. Es ist dir verfallen. Aber ich bin nicht mein Fleisch. Ich bin etwas anderes und lasse nicht locker. Von Wer bin ich kann nicht mehr die Rede sein, aber ich sag dir nicht, was ich bin. Was ich bin, betrügt deine Waage.)

In its resistance to the angel of hunger, personal identity can no longer achieve an integral sense of identity, all that remains is the sheer will to survive. The only possibility of reaching an accord with the angel of hunger is by starving to death.

The distinction the narrator makes between *who* I am and *what* I am seems to correspond to a motif in Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*.[11] Agamben's thinking starts with Aristotle and his separation of human identity into social being (*bios politicos*) and bare life (*nuda vita*). Ostensibly following Foucault, Agamben argues that, by aiming to reduce human identity to a biological zero, biopolitics makes naked life the true subject of modernity. By contrast, the passage cited from *Atemschaukel* makes it clear that Herta Müller's view differs fundamentally from Agamben's in this crucial respect: in *Atemschaukel*, the *who* that has been reduced to a *what* remains the subject of the narration. The trope of personification – in this case the personification of the angel of hunger – enables the 'I' to retain its dignity, its ethical composure, in spite of everything.[12]

11 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

12 It was in this sense that, when she gave a reading from her novel in Munich on 12 November 2009, Herta Müller expressly said that Oskar Pastior had succeeded in preserving his dignity in the camp by personifying things. Similarly, the narrative sovereignty of the narrator figure who recalls his personal history from a distance of sixty years is founded upon the harmonious relation in which he stands to the personified zero point: the survivor in the camp and beyond the camp is broken, and yet he remains in command of the situation.

It is also questionable whether Agamben's writings about the concentration camps are really consistent with Foucault's thinking about discourses of power or whether Agamben is not rather extrapolating in his own terms – terms which Foucault did *not* pursue for good reasons. It is indicative that Foucault did not conclude his analyses of discourses of power with reflections on the (concentration) camps, but instead concerned himself in his late writings with distinctly ethical issues.[13] At the same time, Foucault emphasizes that he does not wish these reflections to be seen as a new turn in his philosophical thinking.[14] Rather, he speaks of his thoughts on care for the self as a pendant to his earlier analyses. Asked about the relation between his reflections on care for the self and his analysis of power, Foucault answers:

> It [liberty] is political in the measure that non-slavery with respect to others is a condition: a slave has no ethics. Liberty is then in itself political. And then, it has a political model in the measure where being free means not being a slave to one's self and to one's appetites, which supposes that one establishes over one's self a certain relation of domination, of mastery, which [in ancient Greece] was called arché – power, authority.[15]

Herta Müller expresses a similar view in her essay on Ruth Klüger's *weiter leben* (Still Alive) when she speaks of 'free' and 'arbitrary' as antitheses:

> Almost incidentally, Ruth Klüger teaches us *that freedom is always the opposite of arbitrariness*. She does not need to add a single word to the concrete process of events. Her choice of words is a matter of attitude and inseparable from ethical considerations. The book shows that morality shapes the way we deal with language as unfailingly as it does the way we deal with everyday events.[16]

13 See, for example, Michel Foucault, *Ästhetik der Existenz. Schriften zur Lebenskunst*, ed. Daniel Defert and Francois Ewald (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007). Cf. also Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

14 On this aspect, see Frédéric Gros, 'Course Context', in Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 507–50.

15 Michel Foucault, 'The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom', in James Bernauer and David Rasmussen, eds, *The Final Foucault* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 1–20, 6.

16 Herta Müller, 'Sag, dass du fünfzehn bist – *weiter leben* von Ruth Klüger', in *In der Falle. Drei Essays* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009), 25–40, 27.

II.

Atemschaukel tells of the deportations of Romanian Germans by the Soviet Union early in 1945.[17] The narrator is seventeen years old when he arrives in the camp; so he is about the same age as the first-person narrator of Imre Kertész's novel *Fateless*[18] when he is taken to a concentration camp. Their youthful naïvety means that these two narrators have much in common. But there is one important respect in which Müller's narrator differs from Kertész's: he is already familiar with his own sexuality. He is homosexual, and that means that, already in the life he leads *before* his deportation, the threat of torture and death hangs over him if this fact were to be discovered.[19] Müller's narrator is thus *not* confronted with a fundamentally new situation when he arrives in the camp; now as before, mistrust of others is of the essence. All that is new is that this mistrust is now something that all the inmates of the camp share – although, in the nature of mistrust, it is not something that can provide any sense of community amongst them:

> The mistrust grows higher than any wall. In the melancholy atmosphere of this building site, everyone is suspicious of everyone else, that he is carrying the lighter end of the sack of cement, that he is exploiting you and making it easier for himself. [...]

17 Between 70,000 and 100,000 people aged between seventeen and forty-five were affected by these deportations. The estimates vary (cf. Alfred-Maurice de Zayas, *Anmerkungen zur Vertreibung der Deutschen aus dem Osten* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1986)). Around 60 per cent of those deported were women. The first returned home in 1949, the last in 1952, except for a few who only returned in 1956; a third of them died in the camps.

18 Imre Kertész, *Fateless*, trans. Christopher C. Wilson and Katharina M. Wilson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1992). For the discussion of this text below, cf. also the title adopted for Kertész's screenplay, in which the series of steps evoked in the final chapter of the novel is emphasized: Imre Kertész, *Schritt für Schritt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002).

19 This threat is intensified in the camp. But in his innocence the first-person narrator nevertheless perceives it initially as a liberation from the narrow circumstances of the society he comes from – from the false intimacy with his mother, with whom he cannot discuss his homosexuality, and from the tormenting proximity of his father, an enthusiastic supporter of National Socialism.

> On the way home every evening, when you had to get away from the cement, and with my back to the building site, I knew that it was not us deceiving each other, but that we were all being deceived by the Russians and their cement. But the suspicion came back the next day, despite this knowledge, suspicion of everyone. And everybody sensed it. And they were all suspicious towards me. And I sensed that. The cement and the angel of hunger are in league with each other.
>
> (A 38–9: Höher als jede Wand wächst das Misstrauen. In dieser Baustellenschwermut verdächtigt jeder den anderen, dass er am Zementsack das leichtere Ende zu tragen hat, dass er einen ausnützt und sich schont. [...] Jeden Abend auf dem Heimweg, in der nötigen Entfernung vom Zement, mit dem Rücken zur Baustelle, habe ich gewusst, dass nicht wir uns gegenseitig betrügen, sondern alle betrogen werden von den Russen und ihrem Zement. Aber am nächsten Tag kam wieder der Verdacht, gegen mein Wissen und gegen alle. Und das haben alle gespürt. Und alle gegen mich. Und das habe ich gespürt. Der Zement und der Hungerengel sind Komplizen.)

In the theme of mistrust we may recognize what this text has in common with the other novels and stories by Herta Müller: they all tell of lives threatened by totalitarian circumstances, in the small and sharply controlled social units of the village, the school, the factory, the town, the dictatorship. Like the first-person narrator in *Atemschaukel*, all her protagonists lead solitary lives because of the mistrust that is essential to their survival. Herta Müller's novels tell of life under dictatorship, of escape to Germany and the continuation of terror there, with the result that no new homeland – or any kind of homeland – can be found in Germany either.[20] The life of the narrator of *Atemschaukel before* his deportation – a life forever threatened by torture and murder – resembles that of figures in earlier novels by Herta Müller who rebelled against dictatorship.

The new experience for the first-person narrator is that of hunger. Both aspects are important for a proper understanding of this novel within the context of Müller's oeuvre and of its claim to universality beyond the narrow context of its subject-matter. We need to understand, firstly, that the camp

20 The extent to which Müller's novels draw on authentic experience is documented by the record of the surveillance and persistent terrorization to which Herta Müller was subjected by the Romanian secret service, the *Securitate*, which is contained in the 'Cristina files'.

represents the continuation of a totalitarian system composed of smaller and larger 'camp' units, and secondly that the experience of hunger in the camp creates a state of emergency, which is what fundamentally distinguishes the experience of the camp and the memory of the camp from the experience of dictatorship and memories of life under dictatorship.[21]

Atemschaukel is an homage to Oskar Pastior, the German-language poet who was born in Siebenbürgen (Transylvania). In many respects it is his story that is told. The novel was indeed conceived jointly by him, the eyewitness, and Herta Müller. Together they sought out further eyewitnesses, and together they visited the site where the camp had stood. Herta Müller's decision to maintain the first-person perspective and to complete the novel on her own after the death of Oskar Pastior in 2007 attracted criticism when the work appeared in 2009. It is true that this criticism was subsequently muted when the public estimation of her work, and of the newly published novel *Atemschaukel* in particular, had been rendered sacrosanct, so to speak, by the announcement that Herta Müller had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. But such criticism might have been anticipated, because it draws on a long and by no means defunct tradition in the discourse about the literary representation of the camps. Until well into the 1990s, this discourse largely refused to acknowledge other literary works about the camps than those written by eyewitnesses. This strong association between literary writing about the concentration camps and eyewitness accounts was only broken by the writings of the so-called 'second generation'. From the point of view of literary and historical scholarship, this break with the assumption that autobiography was the sole criterion of authenticity in Shoah literature was long overdue. But what was often overlooked was that it is only to a limited extent that we can speak of a break with tradition here. For most of the recent Shoah literature only fits the category of 'second generation' (which is not exactly a category of

21 On this point, compare the many comments of the first-person narrator on the self-alienation that takes place in the camp, as the inmates themselves recognize, as well as on the problem that the narrator confronts when he looks back and reflects that he is a 'false witness'.

literary analysis) by virtue of the fact that the texts in question were written by authors who were themselves children or grandchildren of eyewitnesses. So what we are dealing with is rather a *'second degree' legitimation* – a notion that is in itself not unproblematic – to which nearly all authors of the relevant texts can appeal.

Precisely this 'second degree' legitimation has been claimed for Herta Müller, too. It was emphasized that the author's mother had been among the deportees.[22] In this way, the accusation that the author had appropriated and 'exploited' someone else's story for the purposes of their own literary work was defused by pointing to the fact that in this instance the people concerned were mother and daughter. This legitimation strategy was powerfully reinforced by the way it was presented in print and visual media: the Nobel Prize-winner was presented to the public gaze as a dark, melancholic, fragile and broken figure. In the way it deals with the incorporation of biographical material and with the viewpoint of the male narrator that it adopts, however, the novel works against this kind of legitimation strategy. It emphasizes instead the relationship in which it stands to the life of Oskar Pastior and, no less importantly, to the literary work of Oskar Pastior.

III.

For all the suffering that can be recognized as 'genuine', as we find it represented in the stories and novels of Herta Müller, her texts are always also concerned with putting up resistance through narration, with making narration itself recognizable as an act of resistance against the totalitarian structures of dictatorship and the camps.

22 This fact is mentioned in the afterword to the novel, albeit briefly. When Herta Müller was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, *Bild* was among the first newspapers to take it upon itself to 'investigate' this connection by calling on her mother in the privacy of her own home.

One characteristic of such narration has already been pointed out: Müller's novels are full of personifications of abstract and inanimate objects. Just like the first-person narrator in *Atemschaukel*, who speaks with the zero-point, unmasks the angel of hunger as a deceiver, or denounces the snow as a traitor because it shows the persecutors the traces that lead to the hideaways of the persecuted, so too do the first-person narrators in Müller's earlier stories and novels maintain a special relationship with inanimate objects. There is no world of objects in the works of Herta Müller. To assume a world in which things appear as things would mean accepting the notion of a world in which human beings, too, are perceived as objects, in which power is exerted over human beings as over objects. It would mean using the pretext of preserving 'objectivity' to elude those claims to respect for others that one's own humanity, individuality and subjectivity bring with them.

Another characteristic of Herta Müller's narration is one that she herself, in one of her poetological texts, calls working with 'the index finger in our heads'.[23] The index finger points to things and words, which the narration highlights and often detaches from their context in order to make their true significance apparent, and thus to lend them a new significance. This procedure, which is characteristic of all Herta Müller's novels, is recognizably one that she learned from structuralism. Narration with 'the index finger in our heads' is reminiscent in many respects of the 'structuralist activity' described by Roland Barthes. This is also true, in a particularly striking way, of Herta Müller's lyric poetry, of the collage poems she makes by cutting out words and pasting them together.[24]

23 Herta Müller, 'Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet', in *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel. Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1991), 7–31, 7.

24 Müller's first collection of poems, which was printed on index cards, bears the delightful and indicative title, 'The Watchman Picks up his Comb. Of Departures and Evasions' (*Der Wächter nimmt seinen Kamm. Vom Weggehen und Ausscheren*, 1993). In order to keep the collage character of the poems visible, they are photographically reproduced. In this way it becomes apparent that all the words she uses have been *found*, that they have all been extracted from other contexts and newly assembled, and finally that, as an image and sign, each word possesses its own optically transmitted aesthetic quality – just as the zero in *Atemschaukel* first appears as an image and sign.

The importance that Müller herself attaches to Oskar Pastior's work as an inspiration for her own early writing suggests that he also shared with her some of his own early attempts at storytelling in a structuralist vein.[25] As far as the novel *Atemschaukel* is concerned, our understanding of the zero-point is enhanced by a further, distinctly poetologic level of signification, as Roland Barthes describes it in *Writing Degree Zero*, where he sets out his thinking about an author's mode of writing as the site of his social engagement.[26] This engagement is articulated as a 'morality of form'. As Barthes puts it, the mode of writing is a form of literary expression transformed by its social determination:

> A language and a style are blind forces; a mode of writing is an act of historical solidarity. A language and a style are objects; a mode of writing is a function: it is the relationship between creation and society, the literary language transformed by its social finality, form considered as a human intention and thus linked to the great crises of history.[27]

For Barthes, the zero-point marks the centre from out of which this engagement writes itself; it should not be understood so much as the zero-point of literature, but rather as that of narration.[28] The gaping mouth of the

25 At the same time, Müller emphasizes that she always saw Pastior's (post-)structuralist way of writing as entirely 'realistic', as a way of looking at reality that corresponded to her own view of things. In this connection, Müller decidedly opposes the notion that Pastior's works are just surrealistic language games.

26 Barthes distinguishes the mode of writing (*écriture*) from 'fascist' speech on the one hand and from style, which is tied to the 'personal and secret mythology of the author', on the other: 'But language – the performance of a language system – is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist; for fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech'. Roland Barthes, 'Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France', in Susan Sontag, ed., *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 457–78, 461.

27 Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 15. In her comments on Pastior's works, Müller emphasizes the aspect of form precisely in relation to the subject matter of the camp, noting that, while he hardly ever deals with this directly, his work is moulded by the experience of the camp. It contains a number of 'code words'. And Müller places these 'found' words from her reading of Pastior as exhibits in her novel, such as the word 'Hasoweh', which stands, without further commentary, at the end of the short chapter about the hare (German: *Hase*).

28 The zero-point for Barthes is not a zero-point in any chronological sense, nor does it relate to literature arriving at or departing from a zero-point. Rather it refers to

zero, the memory of the experience of hunger, is the ethical centre of the novel *Atemschaukel*, or – as Müller puts it in her essay on Ruth Klüger's autobiographical text *weiter leben* (Still Alive) – the 'ethical claim' that remains 'constant in all its aspects' and is 'the point of orientiation for this writing'.[29] It is a kind of writing that does not aim for emotive empathy, but at intellectually guided precision: 'The author [...] does not set any dead person up on a pedestal. She sets them up at an appropriate height for precise inspection. Maintaining this height, which all the senses can reach, is difficult.'[30] Such precision aspires first and foremost to deal scrupulously with words: 'Survivors are broken people. And goodness only comes from intact people. What broken people require is sympathy through precision, with the intellect. By contrast with intact people, they have an ear for any verbal dissimulation.'[31] Herta Müller's use of metaphors, which the critics have always praised, corresponds to this demand for precision. They always prove to be particularly precise descriptions, rather than particularly effective images: they are equations, not comparisons. A particularly striking example from *Atemschaukel* is the image of a white hare that accompanies those who are dying. It is the white down that forms on the cheeks of the starving.

By exhibiting found words as if they were found objects, the text resists the construction of a beautiful world of art that promises refuge from an ugly reality. Precisely because there is this relation to reality, some words cannot be used, however beautiful they may be. It is this precision in dealing with language that distinguishes the poetic work that goes into Müller's writings. Accordingly, the first-person narrator in *Atemschaukel* explains his narrative strategy of selection with reference to a plant called 'Meldekraut' (a type of wild spinach). This plant is of immense significance in the lives of all the inmates of the camp because it provides them with nourishment

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a different level of signification, that of *écriture*. Cf. Ottmar Ette, *Roland Barthes. Eine intellektuelle Biographie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 62–4.

29 Müller, 'Sag, dass du fünfzehn bist', 27.

30 *Ibid.*, 31.

31 *Ibid.*, 36.

in the spring; for this reason a whole page of the novel is dedicated to a description of it.[32] And yet,

> 'the name MELDEKRAUT is a bit much. It doesn't say anything. For us, MELDE was a word without any particular associations, a word that left us in peace. It wasn't called MELDE DICH,[33] it wasn't a roll-call kraut, it was a wayside word.'
>
> (A 26: Der Name MELDEKRAUT ist ein starkes Stück und besagt überhaupt nichts. MELDE war für uns ein Wort ohne Beiklang, ein Wort, das uns in Ruhe ließ. Es hieß ja nicht MELDE DICH, es war kein Appellkraut, sondern ein Wegrandwort.)

IV.

In her works, Herta Müller presents us with the anarchic and politically potent explosive force of a way of writing that works with 'the index finger in our heads'.[34] It is a way of writing that articulates the refusal to reconstruct totalitarian structures in the act of narration. This refusal is not limited to the poetic work that goes into the writing. It extends to any form of narration, above all to the narration of the self.[35]

32 It is only in the course of the summer that the leaves of the Meldekraut become increasingly woody and are no longer edible – the plant loses its use value in proportion as it gains in beauty, putting out a glorious radiant flower.

33 Translator's note: in the context of the camps, the most likely connotation of this phrase would be a command to report to someone.

34 This is true of the early stories, which evoke the comprehensive control to which the life of a child in her Transylvanian German village is subjected, and it is true of the novels that describe the continuity of terror in German exile as well as those that are dedicated to the ever-present surveillance and the threat of death under the Romanian dictatorship. The closed world of the camp in which the Romanian-German deportees find themselves represents an existential intensification of these scenarios.

35 In *Kritik der ethischen Gewalt* (Critique of ethical Power), the published version of her Adorno lectures of 2002, Judith Butler also speaks of an abandonment of the

In *The Course of Recognition*, Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between two sorts of first-person narration. One offers a coherent story of an 'I' that takes its story upon itself and accepts responsibility for its story: this is the 'idem'. Ricoeur places it in a dialectical relation of tension to the 'ipse', to the historically conditioned 'I', the 'I' that is entitled to movement and change.[36] It is precisely this entitlement on which the figures in Herta Müller's novels insist, in the face of all circumstances.[37] In her 1997 novel *Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet* (The Appointment), the security service man yells at the 'I' during her interrogation, 'You see, everything is connected,' and she replies, 'In your mind they are, in my mind they aren't.'[38]

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demand for self-identity ('Aussetzung der Forderung nach Selbstidentität'): Judith Butler, *Kritik der ethischen Gewalt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 36. By contrast with Müller, who always thinks in (socio-) political terms (and this is of particular interest in connection with her reflections on the theory of narration), Butler derives her arguments from psychoanalytical trauma-theory. Butler departs from the generality of research on the concentration camps, however, in that she draws no distinction between structural and historical trauma.

36 Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 89–149.

37 By comparison with earlier texts of Müller's, the situation of the 'I' in *Atemschaukel* is intensified to the extent that a starving person cannot oppose the totality of the camp with a resistant identity, but only with a resistant will to survive. A sense of identity is a luxury item in *Atemschaukel*, it is predicated on the assuaging of hunger.

38 Herta Müller, *The Appointment*, trans. Michael Hulse and Philip Boehm (New York: Metropolitain Books, 2001), 20. Cf. Oskar Pastior's little text 'Geschichte, Poesie' (History, Poetry), where he writes: 'History happens; historiography is done by somebody; poetry happens and is done. [...] I am horrified by what the fundamental and purposive logic of my own words can perpetrate, however charming and historically disturbed that logic might appear. By writing against the automatism of the fear of automatism, I am publicly playing with the history of automatism. My interest in saying "I" seems to be general; that is the basis on which I calculate the chances of achieving anything. I don't know what poetry is. I ascribe a meaning to sentences, and that meaning might contain me, but I don't know how to measure that meaning. Then there are disjunctures. And then there are no more disjunctures. In retrospect poetry degenerates into history'. Oskar Pastior, 'Geschichte, Poesie', in *"... was in der Mitte zu wachsen anfängt"*, Werkausgabe, vol. 4, ed. Ernest Wichner (Munich: Hanser, 2008), 306.

But at the same time, the resisting figures in Müller's novels are characterized above all by reliability. More than that, the absence of reliability separates those figures in her novels who work with totalitarian systems from those who refuse to collaborate.[39] And yet the demand for reliability does not fall together with the demand for a coherent and conclusive narrative of the self in Müller's novels; if that were the case, then things would link up and conspire in their totality against the protagonists. When asked about offers to work with the Romanian secret service, the *Securitate*, Herta Müller sometimes answers, in a succinct and lapidary fashion, that she never considered anything like that, that she is 'not that sort'. The same goes for the figures in her novels. Without pathos, but with an all the more decisive normative stance, they insist on this 'basic form' of first-person narration, the 'sort' that cannot be used for collaboration with totalitarian systems. The figures in Herta Müller's novels are rooted in this conception of themselves.

This is not true of the first-person narrator in *Atemschaukel*. He has had the experience of losing the ability to link the act of saying 'I' with an awareness of who he is. It is true that this experience was of limited duration. But the *memory* of this experience is not. Even sixty years later, the gaping mouth of the zero is the centre from which he narrates. Even sixty years later he therefore leads an existence that has lost its centre, an existence round about the gaping mouth of the zero. *Atemschaukel* does *not* pose the question whether this memory of the zero, of the loss of identity and social reliability, can be reintegrated into the construction of a socially acceptable 'I'. Rather, the novel shows *that* this occurs as soon as money is circulating again and hunger can be assuaged; in the novel this is the case in the last year of the camp. But it also shows that the damage done to the 'I' remains. It is in the light of this lasting damage that the novel formulates its question about justice and injustice, about morality and ethics in relation to the experience of a state of emergency.

39 All of Herta Müller's novels, from *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger* (1992) to *Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet* (The Appointment, 1997), tell of this gulf between human types. It is a gulf that Herta Müller also frequently notes in discussions.

V.

This question is not posed from a position external to that of the characters in *Atemschaukel*, it is presented from a first-person perspective. More than that, Herta Müller designates this novel, in which her material is for the first time *not* predominantly drawn from her own biography, as an 'autofictional' text, just like her earlier works.[40] The use of the term 'autofictional' is just as revealing for the earlier novels as it is for *Atemschaukel*. It makes it clear that Müller's conception of 'autofictionality' is not limited to denoting the freedom of a writer in dealing with autobiographical material. It is to be

40 The term 'autofiction' was first used by the French Jewish author Serge Doubrovsky to describe the construction of a fiction out of real events and facts that he had achieved in his work *Fils* (1977), and has subsequently been applied to a wide variety of quasi-autobiographical writings. Müller used this expression in a conversation with Jürgen König on 'Deutschlandradio Kultur' on 13 August 2009 ('"Es war ja eine ganze Generation". Herta Müller im Gespräch mit Jürgen König. Die Schriftstellerin Herta Müller über Deportationen von Rumäniendeutschen nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg durch die Sowjets und ihr Romanprojekt *Atemschaukel*'). The exchange runs as follows: 'Müller: "I always have to emphasize this: the first-person narrator is not Oskar Pastior. I can't be Oskar Pastior, so after Pastior's death I had to make a decision. And I can't behave as if I were Oskar Pastior and myself. That would be wrong." König: "So it's an autofiction." Müller: "It's an autofiction, and I think that when you have experienced something traumatic it's natural to want to isolate yourself, that happens a lot earlier, that sense of not being able to endure a relationship or not wanting to get close to someone as a relationship demands. This vicious circle you are subjected to, precisely when you most need a relationship you no longer have a way of sustaining that relationship, the fact that the two things exclude each other, that's what I was after."' In the context of Herta Müller's work to date, the narrative procedure adopted in *Atemschaukel*, i.e. the recognizable incorporation of biographical material, is by no means new. In the early stories as well as Müller's previous novels, characters are demonstrably and unmistakably endowed with a variety of features from her own biography. Statements by Herta Müller in interviews and on the occasion of public readings, as well as the afterword she wrote for the novel, indicate that she used these opportunities to draw attention to Pastior's life and works after his death.

understood in a broader sense as taking responsibility for the biographical material that is used.[41]

What makes the adoption of a first-person perspective in *Atemschaukel* remarkable, however, is the fact that the biographical material in question is that of someone else. It brings with it the adoption of a fundamentally new perspective towards the ethical interest in a 'state of emergency', and for this reason I should like to reinforce here the distinction I drew earlier between Müller's way of looking at the matter and Giorgio Agamben's. Agamben begins his reflections on the *homo sacer* with a discussion of Carl Schmitt's definition of a 'state of emergency' (in German more literally a 'state of exception': *Ausnahmezustand*). According to Schmitt, 'sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception.' What Herta Müller does in her literary work sets up an opposition to the political and juridical discussion that Agamben develops in response to Schmitt in *Homo Sacer*. She departs from the external perspective that Schmitt and Agamben adopt in developing their argument from the point of view of a sovereign power that determines the 'state of emergency', and she adopts the internal perspective of the person who *experiences the emergency situation* and who subsequently has to live with this experience. This person is allowed to speak as the 'I' in the text. This shift of perspective on the 'state of emergency' is, I believe, one of the main achievements of the novel *Atemschaukel*.

41 Beyond this, the concept of 'autofictionality' implies that the characters in Müller's novels, like the words in her texts, are *found* in the realm of 'reality', they are not invented. The notion of 'autofictionality' also points to the sense in which the characters are not exhibited; they are imagined and presented in the text. This is what distinguishes the way she works with language from the way she works with biographical material.

VI.

Atemschaukel shows us figures who suffer the loss of their sense of identity, and along with it the shattering of civilities that had previously been self-evident to them. In the camp, even love, which under normal circumstances would promise a maximum of mutual commitment, is not protected from this effect. Thus the first-person narrator remembers the lawyer Paul Gast, who consumes the daily ration of his wife in the camp until one day she starves to death. The other inmates, the narrator amongst them, look on. Nobody protests. A little later we encounter the lawyer with Toni Mich, who is wearing the coat of his newly dead wife. Nobody passes comment on this event, nobody permits himself a moral condemnation. The narrator, too, withholds any judgement. But at this moment the novel cites a pertinent passage from Imre Kertész's novel *Fateless*. There, the first-person narrator, who has just returned from the concentration camp and is asked by a journalist about 'the hell' he has presumably experienced, tries to explain his view of things. It is not hell that he has experienced, Kertész's first-person narrator replies, but the camp, and there everything that happened had appeared quite normal; over time, he had accustomed himself, step by step, to this normality. And this was a good thing. For had it not been for this sequence of steps in time, he goes on, 'then it's possible neither your brains nor your heart could bear it. [...] "On the other hand," I continued, "there is the unfortunate disadvantage that you somehow have to pass away the time."'[42]

42 Kertész, *Fateless*, 182. The passage as a whole runs like this: 'I tried to explain how fundamentally different it is, for instance, to be arriving at a station that is spectacularly white, clean, and neat, where everything becomes clear only gradually, step by step, on schedule. [...] And while you come to understand everything gradually, you don't remain idle at any moment: you are already attending to your new business; you live, you act, you move, you fulfil the new requirements of every new step of development. If, on the other hand, there were no schedule, no gradual enlightenment, if all the knowledge descended on you at once right there in one spot, then it's possible neither your brains nor your heart could bear it. [...] "On the other hand,"

In *Atemschaukel* the story of the two wives of the lawyer Paul Gast follows Kertész, not least by adopting the calm sobriety of his language, as a story that arises out of the sheer passage of time and for which ultimately no-one carries the responsibility:

> thus the days couldn't help the fact that they were a chain of causes and consequences, any more than the causes and consequences could help the fact that they were the naked truth, although a coat was at stake.
> That was the way things went: because there was nothing anyone could do about it, nobody could do anything about it.
>
> (A 230: so konnten auch die Tage nichts dafür, dass sie eine Kette von Ursachen und Folgen waren, so wie auch die Ursachen und Folgen nichts dafür konnten, dass sie die nackte Wahrheit waren, obwohl es um einen Mantel ging.
> So war der Lauf der Dinge: Weil jeder nichts dafür konnte, konnte keiner was dafür.)

Alluding to Kertész in this way, Müller's *Atemschaukel* describes the dilemma that results on the one hand from the necessity of accommodating to the normality of the everyday life of the camp, i.e. to the continued existence of the state of emergency, in order to survive, and on the other hand from the associated abandonment of moral and ethical values. This description, let us emphasize once again, is tied, in Kertész's case as in Müller's, to the perspective of the camp *inmates*.

It is no coincidence that Herta Müller attributes the story of the man who steals his wife's food to a professional-class person. In her essay on

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I continued, "there is the unfortunate disadvantage that you somehow have to pass away the time. [...]" Because he was silent, I added: "You have to imagine it this way." He [...] then said in a somewhat more subdued, duller voice: "No, you can't imagine it." I, for my part, thought to myself: "That's probably why they say 'hell' instead."' (*ibid.*, 181–2). – Müller aligns herself with Kertész in her writing about the world of the camp by foreswearing 'poetic' metaphors of terror, which distort the state of affairs instead of illuminating it. But whereas Kertész opts for a decidedly sober description of the sequence of events that will, in retrospect, constitute the path taken by his innocent first-person narrator, Müller opts for a mode of narration that is full of metaphors.

Ruth Klüger – in which Müller, moreover, displays her familiarity with works of concentration camp literature from Primo Levi to Paul Celan and Jorge Semprún – she also cites Oskar Pastior at one point. She tells how Pastior had observed that the collapse of civilities in the camp began with the intellectuals:

> But there was one precept that the so-called simple people never forgot: 'We don't do that sort of thing.'
> This short and perhaps questionable sentence is enough to keep someone responsible towards others in all situations. For this sentence contains an image of the difference between justice and injustice, one that is not ideological. Where this sentence is ready to be levelled at people, they have already made themselves unforgivably guilty.
>
> (Die sogenannten einfachen Leute aber behielten einen Satz im Kopf: 'Sowas tut man nicht.'
> Dieser kurze, vielleicht sogar fragwürdige Satz reicht jedoch, um verantwortlich zu bleiben gegenüber anderen in allen Situationen. Der Satz hat nämlich ein Bild vom Unterschied zwischen Recht und Unrecht, eines, das nicht ideologisch ist. Wo dieser Satz bereit ist, gegen Menschen vorzugehen, haben diese sich vorher bereits unverzeihlich schuldig gemacht.)[43]

Atemschaukel is about this question of the possibility and the limits of responsibility towards others in all situations.

VII.

As in many other examples of the literature of the camps, there is also a moment of compassion in *Atemschaukel* that defies the logic of camp life. *Atemschaukel* depicts this moment as what Emmanuel Levinas calls

43 Müller, 'Sag, dass du fünfzehn bist', 28. The intellectuals on the other hand, who were used to maintaining social appearances, had no means of countering the 'dissolution of society in death by work, starvation and hypothermia'.

the encounter with the other. For if on the one hand the inmates look on passively when Heidrun Gast is dying, on the other hand they intervene decisively and in harmony with each other when the deranged Planton-Kati is about to be deprived of her bread ration.

> But Planton-Kati lives, though she does not know where she is. We know this, and we treat her as if she belongs to us. With her we can compensate for what we do to others. As long as she lives among us, we might be capable of all sorts of things, but we are not capable of anything. The fact that this is so probably counts for more than Planton-Kati herself.
>
> (A 122: Aber die Planton-Kati lebt, auch wenn sie nicht weiß, wo sie ist. Wir wissen es und behandeln sie wie unser Eigentum. An ihr können wir gutmachen, was wir einander antun. Solang sie zwischen uns lebt, gilt für uns, dass wir zu allerhand, aber nicht zu allem fähig sind. Dieser Umstand zählt wahrscheinlich mehr als die Planton-Kati selbst.)[44]

According to Levinas, the claim that the face of the other makes on me, and to which I unconditionally submit, stands in an antithetical relationship to the claim of a third party – and this is what we see in Müller's *Atemschaukel*.

44 At this point in the text, Planton-Kati is expressly identified as the 'placeholder' of an ethic that is pledged to unconditional responsibility for the other. Her madness, which places her beyond all attempts to categorize her, predestines her for this role. This is the sense of Emmanuel Levinas's remark with reference to Wassilij Grossmann that 'the "small goodness" from one person to his fellowman is lost and deformed as soon as it opts for doctrine, a treatise of politics and theology, a party, a state, or even a church. Yet it remains the sole refuge of the good in being. Unbeaten, it undergoes the violence of evil, which, as small goodness, it can neither vanquish nor drive out.' Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Other, Utopia, and Justice', in *Entre nous. Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 193–202, 199. *Atemschaukel* hints at the other, endangered and dangerous side of 'small goodness', without making it explicit. For the deranged Planton-Kati could easily forfeit her function as 'placeholder' if she were to become in the least a burden to the others: 'The madness of Planton-Kati was always confined to forgiveable proportions. She didn't cling to you, and she didn't reject you. All through the years she retained the naturalness of a domestic animal at home in the camp. There was nothing strange about her. We liked her' (A 105).

This claim demands the establishment of a form of jurisdiction, as a guarantee of social co-existence.[45] In Herta Müller's *Atemschaukel* the jurisdiction exercised by the community of inmates forms the necessary counterpart to the particular relationship in which the community of inmates stands to the deranged Planton-Kati. In the face of hunger, which usually makes any form of sociability among the inmates impossible, only one kind of crime is recognized by this community, and that is the stealing of bread. Whoever commits such a crime is punished with a severity that corresponds to the overriding importance that food has in the camp. One of the forced labourers, Karli Halmen, is almost beaten to death by the fellow inmates of his hut for this reason. If the lawyer Paul Gast had not intervened at the last minute, Karli Halmen would have been killed – killed, moreover, by the first-person narrator. Here, too, the novel withholds any judgement, since 'ordinary morality has no answer to bread-justice' (A 114).

But since it is the first-person narrator who nearly kills Karli Halmen, *Atemschaukel* brings the question of morality as close as it can to the protagonist with whom the reader is invited to identify – even if that morality has no answer to bread-justice. And by having that protagonist repeat this story retrospectively to a third person, the novel does ultimately permit itself – through the medium of a listener – something like a moral judgement. The listener in question is a figure that we find in virtually every novel by Herta Müller, namely a hairdresser. The hairdresser is a receptor for other people's stories; for him they are not associated with any expectation in particular, nor do they enter into any kind of functional nexus.[46]

45 'In the meeting with the face, it was not one's place to judge: the other, being unique, does not undergo judgment; he takes precedence over me from the start; I am under allegiance to him. Judgment and justice are required from the moment the third party appears. In the very name of the absolute obligations towards one's fellow man, a certain abandonment of the absolute allegiance he calls forth is necessary. Here is a problem of a different order, for which institutions and a politics – the entire panoply of a state – are necessary. But a liberal state: always concerned about its delay in meeting the requirement of the face of the other.' Emmanuel Levinas, 'Dialogue on Thinking-of-the-Other', in *Entre nous. Thinking-of-the-Other*, 173–8, 174–5.

46 Together with the seamstresses, the hairdresser is the *epitome* of the listener in Herta Müller's works. The hairdresser sweeps people's stories into a bag as he does the hair

They are stories that are always told while looking into the mirror, and thus they are told with an aspect of self-reflection.[47] And this is the case in *Atemschaukel*, too:

> The barber laid his hairy hands on Karli's shoulders and asked, 'When did we lose those two front teeth?' And Karli Halmen replied, not to the barber, but to his hairy hands, 'On the occasion of the bread theft.'
>
> When his beard had been shaved off I took my place on the chair. It was the only time that Oswald Enyeter whistled a kind of serenade while shaving someone, and that a little drop of blood oozed through the foam. Not bright red like sealing-wax, but dark red like a raspberry in the snow.
>
> (A 114: Der Rasierer legte seine pelzigen Hände auf Karlis Schultern und fragte: Seit wann fehlen uns vorn die zwei Zähne. Weder zu mir noch zum Rasierer, nur zu den pelzigen Händen sagte Karli Halmen: Seit dem Kriminalfall mit dem Brot.
>
> Als sein Bart abrasiert war, setzte ich mich auf den Stuhl. Es war das einzige Mal, dass Oswald Enyeter beim Rasieren eine Art Serenade pfiff und aus dem Schaum ein Fleckchen Blut quoll. Nicht hellrot wie Siegellack, sondern dunkelrot, wie eine Himbeere im Schnee.)

The shaving 'accident' is taken by the first-person narrator to connote an unspoken moral judgement. Unspoken because, in the camp, before you can utter a moral judgement you first have to be able to afford it. The hairdresser in *Atemschaukel* can afford it for two reasons. For one thing, as a privileged prisoner whose hunger is more or less assuaged, he can afford the luxury of a moral judgement. For another, he can permit himself a moral judgement in accordance with the ethical orientation of storytelling in this novel. For what distinguishes him from the other privileged prisoner in this novel, Tur Prikulitsch, whom everybody hates, is that he is not someone who takes advantage of the camp system. In the contrast that is established between these two prisoners, each with their particular function, we find, once again, that characterization of figures as collaborators and objectors

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that he has cut from their heads; and when the bag is full, the people die. Herta Müller, *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2009), 19.

47 On the metaphor of the mirror, cf. Müller, 'Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet', esp. 25–7.

that fundamentally determines the character of Müller's works, and in this instance, too, the gulf between the two is unbridgeable.

It is noticeable that in this scene, which I believe to be crucial for an understanding of the novel, Herta Müller devotes much care to the precise description of the blood. We note at the beginning of this paper that blood is needed to bring undead objects to life by telling about them. Here, in the hairdresser scene, the constituency of this blood is described more precisely. It is 'not bright red like sealing-wax, but dark red like a raspberry in the snow'. As I should like to demonstrate by way of a conclusion, this image can be understood as an allusion to the work of the Russian poet Ossip Mandelstam. Mandelstam's work is devoted to the description of life under dictatorship, and he, too, spent many years of his life in Stalin's camps. What triggered his persecution was the famous epigram he wrote to Stalin, in the last two lines of which he says of the dictator that he consumes the deaths of those who have fallen foul of him with as much relish as if he were eating raspberries. The raspberry is a recurrent motif in Mandelstam's poetry, most often taking the form of the raspberry glow of the lamps that hang in front of pharmacies. In his well-known prose text 'The Egyptian Stamp' the raspberry colour stands for the feverish delirium of the poet figure, which also cures and saves him.[48] There, too, the glow of the pharmacy lamps in the snow is described once again. It is a snow that tries, as in many other texts by Mandelstam, to cloak the crimes of the dictatorship with silence and oblivion.

In Herta Müller's novel *Atemschaukel* we again encounter the snow as an accomplice of tyranny.[49] And in *Atemschaukel* we again encounter the raspberry, or more precisely the raspberry colour. By using these motifs

48 On the connection between the delirium in 'The Egyptian Stamp' and the journey to Malina, cf. Charles Isenberg, *Substantial Proofs of Being. Ossip Mandelstams Literary Prose* (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1987), 129–30. On the *malina* motif generally, cf. Omry Ronen, *An Approach to Mandelstam* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), 269–70. [Translator's note: The word *malina* is commonly used in Slavonic languages to denote various kinds of dark soft fruit.]

49 For the poetological level of significance here, cf. Roland Barthes's discussion of *écriture blanche* in *Writing Degree Zero*, esp. 66–9.

which establish a relation between her text and Mandelstam's writings, Herta Müller expands the intertextual resonance of her novel beyond the narrow corpus of texts about concentration camps to other instances of literature about camps. In this way her novel lays claim to a universalization of the questions that present themselves to the first-person narrator with his recollection of the experience of the camp: whether and how, in view of the emergency situation that this experience represented for the inmates, right and wrong can still be distinguished, or whether, as Agamben put it, 'the essence of the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception and in the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction'.[50] *Atemschaukel* vouches for the conviction that distinctions between right and wrong, between objectors and collaborators, between democracy and dictatorship, between state of emergency and normality can be maintained.[51] It is the task of literature to stand up for this conviction. Not through a literature that freezes the traces of the personal into a seal with its totalising coldness. But through a literature as it appears to Ossip Mandelstam's fevering poet figure in a truly wonderful image: as a raspberry bush bearing fruit in the snow.

50 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 174.

51 A distinction should be made between the emergency situation of a starving person in the camp and life in totalitarian circumstances, between dictatorship and democracy. Müller would scarcely subscribe to the notion of an 'inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism', as Agamben promotes it in the introduction to *Homo Sacer* (*ibid.*, 10, cf. also the closing pages of *Homo Sacer*). We should maintain the distinction between right and wrong, even if this presents itself in its most rudimentary forms as a 'senseless' act of charity (as 'bread justice'), and between those who are complicit in the totalitarian system and profit from it and those who resist such a system. Dictatorship and democracy, the forced labourer and the patient in a coma, are not the same thing. They do not even come near to being the same thing.

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