

Uncomfortable spaces: language and identity in Herta Müller's work

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When discussing identity in Herta Müller's work, one feels compelled to first do away with the concept of a monolithic, unitary cultural identity set in the traditional frame of 19th-century liberal nationalism. However, neither are postmodern theories of cultural hybridity (Bennet 2005, 1–7) more appropriate here, since Müller does not write about postcolonial societies. Her literature does not fall into the pattern of migrant literature (since the novelist did not chose to leave, but was, in fact, exiled by authorities from communist Romania in 1987), and her particular condition as a German émigré from her native Romania to Germany in the 1980s challenges the typical narrative of the exile writer coming back home after a long period of (forced) separation (Cooper 2009, 475). Müller was born in a multicultural province, Banat, in Western Romania, and her experiences, even as a child, were marked by the encounter between German and Romanian words and meanings. It was not a striking difference in customs, rites, or mores that prompted her to acknowledge living in the presence of otherness; rather, it was a particular way of describing the world in Romanian as opposed to German which opened her eyes to the diversity of this province's social environment. It is these differences that I set out to discuss in this article; given that Müller is a German author coming from a Romanian country, I shall address the Romanian *Hintersinn*¹ of her work, her intertextual references to Romanian literature and her reflections on Romanian language. Literature is part of the cultural canvas of the totalitarian regime described in most of her novels, and as such it either provides space to the freedom and authenticity of poetry or to the ideological manipulation by the state of cultural artefacts. On the other hand, Romanian language brings her the revelation of otherness and the intuition of the distance between language and the objects it designates. But Romanian language is also the expression of a traumatizing time of violence and sometimes of resistance to it; as such, Romanian appears as the symbol of an Eastern European culture that tries to find its way between suffering and the need for joy. The German writer is, of course, very much interested in the way (traumatic) experience is codified into words and in the way writing transfigures and also conceals the world it is supposed to name.

REFERENCES TO ROMANIAN LITERATURE IN MÜLLER'S NOVELS

The references to Romanian literature in Herta Müller's novels often seem rather obscure. Sometimes, they have an important contribution to the construction of a system of metaphors that functions throughout the writer's work: novels, poems, essays. Some of these recurring references have become part of her literary universe: I am referring to the lyrics to the folk songs interpreted by Maria Tănase (1913–1963), quoted repeatedly in *Herztier* (Heart's Animal, 1994) and *Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet* (Today I'd Rather Not Meet Myself, 1997), and then analysed in her conference from 2001 *Welt, Welt, Schwester Welt* (World, World, Sister World). In these texts, one finds the dark, lyrical intensity of popular curse ballads from Transylvania such as *Cine iubește și lasă* (He Who Loves and Leaves), the affective grammar of love songs such as *Am iubit și-am să iubesc* (I Loved and I Shall Love Still), as well as the ironic and carefree inventory of a poor girl's non-existent dowry in *Mi-o zis mama că mi-o da* (Mother Promised She Would Give Me). The author sees them as instances of spontaneous poetry, "surprise lyrical attacks" (Müller 2013, 238). In Müller's novels, the main quality of popular poetry is its ability to evade the manipulation of discourse in a totalitarian regime. In *Herztier*, students living in a shabby dormitory make fun of their uncomfortable lodging by singing *Mi-o zis mama că mi-o da*. Probably the same explanation may be invoked for the passage in *Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet*, where a popular sad song such as *Lume, lume, soro lume* (World, World, Sister World) has the ability to bring happiness to the life of a young married couple who are being terrorized by the Securitate: "The fact that a song about death could make our temples warm on the inside must have meant happiness."² The sadness or the irony of popular songs cannot be appropriated by the state security, with its "ideological theories and boulders", writes Müller (2013, 238). But this doesn't mean that the oppressive authorities' emissaries will not claim that the state "owns" folklore.

Gellu Naum (1915–2001) was one of the most revered Romanian poets in the post-war period. His surrealist poetry (and prose) is one of the most consistent bodies of avant-garde literature in Romania. He is seen as one of the most idiosyncratic writers in his culture, mixing elements of autobiographical imaginary and absurd poetic visions. The protagonists of *Herztier*³ often invoke a poem by Gellu Naum, *Lacrima* (The Tear); the poem opposes friendship to a series of mysterious, fearful, absurd images: "actually this is what friends are for when there is so much fear in the world". As a fragment of this poem is transformed into a code for solidarity by the group of friends in *Herztier*, the Securitate workers accuse them of anti-state propaganda. They reply by playing into a cliché of Romanian communism, claiming that the poem is actually an old popular song, since the regime professed affection for anything coming from the people. But folklore itself becomes suspect to the regime when it is too individualistic; the Securitate investigator blames them for publicizing old folklore, from the times when peasants had not yet acquired a class conscience.

The novel *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger* (Even Then, the Fox Was the Hunter, 1992) makes constant reference to Romanian literature in the context of an especially bleak period, right before the downfall of communism in December 1989.

The poverty, the constant surveillance, and the fear in the society are reflected in the random literary quotes that the protagonist meets by surprise. On the wall of a teacher's toilet in the school where the protagonist Adina works, somebody has written the words of a poem from the children's textbooks: "In the evening, on the hill, sadly the alpenhorn resounds". The verse is from a poem by Mihai Eminescu (1850–1889), one of the most important poets in Romania, a romantic who gave existential depth and seductive melodiousness to his melancholic landscapes. But the fact that his poem is written on the walls of a toilet signifies the degradation of cultural symbols in 1980s Romania. Rebelling against school authority, making fun of cultural symbols sanctioned by the state could be seen as liberating. The same signification may be ascribed to a parody of Eminescu's lyrical testament *Mai am un singur dor* (I Have One More Wish), which reflects the lack of solidarity in an impoverished and humiliated civil society: "I have one more thought / That I might exchange / One of my brothers / For a cigarette."⁴

LANGUAGE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF COGNITION

In what follows, I argue that Romanian language has a twofold relevance in Herta Müller's work. Firstly, it allows the cognitive revelation of a linguistic universe different from the native, inherited linguistic universe. When exposed to a new language, one realises that the world looks different in another language than it does in one's own or, as the writer puts it in an essay from 2001, that "in every language there are other eyes". The experience of the second language changes one's understanding of social life and even of inanimate objects. Secondly, Romanian language emerges in the author's memory whenever she recollects personal experiences, be they childhood perplexities or the traumatizing sessions of abusive interrogatories by the Securitate. Romanian was the language of the totalitarian aggressor who persecuted her for belonging to the German minority in Romania and therefore being a potential enemy; thus, Romanian became a language of exclusion and oppression. But at the same time, Romanian is regarded as a language that offered the individual a space outside the world of ideology.

Reading Herta Müller's essays on writing and language, one cannot fail to notice that most of her poetological reflections originate from recollections. The writer starts her essays from seemingly random images from her past, and then studies the transformation of these images into metaphors for specific cognitive conundrums⁵. In her most explicit text on the subject, *In jeder Sprache sitzen andere Augen* (In Every Language There Are Other Eyes, 2001), she evokes her situation when, at 15, she was for the first time immersed in a Romanian speaking environment, the city of Timișoara, that at first intimidated her. A comparison describes the experience of living in an environment where her native German was not widely spoken: "the Romanian language related to me like change in my pockets. When I saw something I liked in a window, I suddenly realised I didn't have the money for it" (Müller 2010, 26). Because the novelist had limited fluency in Romanian, she apprehended her second language in a slow, analytical manner, and this gave her the impression of acquiring not only a new linguistic competence, but also a new way of expressing feeling and reason.

Prior to learning another language, Müller says, one's native tongue appears as something natural, in that its words seem to be stamped on the face of the objects they name, as if contractually bound to them forever (ibid, 5). However, when meeting with a completely new language, the feeling that objects have an eternally predestined name has to give in. The process of acquiring a foreign language is slow and it involves a deconstruction of the most basic assumptions about words: "I know today that this step-by-step, this constant hesitation which lowered me beneath the level of my thinking gave me the occasion to marvel at the transformation of objects through Romanian" (ibid, 6). For instance, the writer confesses to suddenly discovering the arbitrariness of language by noticing that the *lily*, *die Lilie* in German (a feminine noun), switches gender to become masculine in Romanian (*crinul*) (ibid, 25). This observation gives birth to an ad-hoc theory of the foreign look that any language has on things, so that German and Romanian look very differently at the lily. This is why, the author argues, one has to come out of the comfort of one's native language to be able to understand the elusiveness of reality and the strangeness of objects, reflected, for instance, by their arbitrarily attributed gender. And from now on, language becomes an uncertain terrain, where words fail to convincingly and completely express the realities they are meant to refer to. The writer remembers the silence of people in the village, which to her indicates a distrust of speech, founded on the belief that the most important things are those that cannot be told, those so intimate that have no linguistic correspondent, since words cannot express the intricate processes of the mind (ibid, 20).

Between the masculine *crin* and the feminine *Lilie*, and having noticed the arbitrariness of this attribution of gender, it is surprising that the writer doesn't dispense with the notion that inanimate things may still have a gender. She is very much an adept of the idea that such examples attest to richness and character in a language: "in German you are dealing with a lady, whereas in Romanian with a mister Lily." Through familiarity with Romanian, the writer comes to identify in objects a poetic transparency and ambiguity, as their name in the second language indicates a new, fresher vision of their place and function in the world. For instance, *swallows* (*Schwalben* in German) are called *rândunici* in Romanian, and that inspires the author to trace their etymology to the habit swallows have of sitting perched in *rows* (*rânduri* in Romanian) on telegraph cables. The image is presented, of course, in a childlike, naive fashion, as if the child would have thought that swallows had to wait for the invention of telegraph to receive their Romanian name. The *palate* (*Gaumen* in German) is called in Romanian, with the help of an analytical metaphor, *cerul gurii* (literally: *the sky of the mouth*), which seems to indicate a fairy-tale representation of the human being as bigger than cosmos. A *handkerchief* is called *batistă* in Romanian, from the French name for the fine cloth handkerchiefs were made from, and this fact suggests to the writer the directness and naivety characteristic not of this single word, but of the entire language it belongs to (Müller 2013, 14).

Herta Müller describes Romanian as a very vivid and colourful language, which creates poetry as though by accident. It is seen as "voluptuous, cheeky, and astoundingly beautiful" (Müller 2010, 24), "sensitive," or "direct such as words can never be"

(Müller 2013, 238). Alex Drace-Francis correctly points out that this psychologized vision of the language can be traced back to the Romanian romantics of the 19th century, who discovered folklore as cultural heritage and idealised the peasants and their language as a nexus of national identity in its pure, unadulterated form (Drace-Francis 2013, 42). However, the critic is wrong to believe that Herta Müller ever succumbs to “the influence of this kind of thinking about language”. As a determined antinationalist, Müller risked marginalisation in her own community in a totalitarian country in the 1980s. It seems improbable that she would make any effort, in the years after 2000, to accommodate Romanian 19th-century myths of belonging. Actually, Herta Müller’s view of Romanian language may be better explained through personal experience and poetic intent. In the first place, she comes to know this language as a child and, as such, her visions of her second language are childlike. This is why Romanian phrases seem to Herta Müller direct, naive, sensitive, and beautiful. In the second place, as a writer, she is concerned with the possibility of exploring meanings. The divergences between German and Romanian help her see language as accommodating various creative modalities to describe the world, or rather, various modalities to express perplexity in the face of this difficult task.

Leaving aside the particularities of grammatical gender or of the occasional idiom, the role of the Romanian language *per se* in helping the individual realise the rift between speech and the world is accidental. Almost any other language that the writer might have had to learn at an early age would have engendered the same amazement at the richness and arbitrariness of speech in general. But Romanian is also an integral part of Herta Müller’s biographical experience, and as such it starts having more than a generic identity and is integrated in the writer’s personal history and in her cultural individuality.

LANGUAGE AS A SPACE OF VIOLENCE AND RESISTANCE TO VIOLENCE

Even when a language seems overwhelmingly poetic, rich, and colourful, such as Romanian seems to Herta Müller, it doesn’t mean that it is a perfect abode to live in. Although Müller praises Romanian for its expressive force, the language accommodated a culture of violence at various point in its history. It was for many years the language of a totalitarian regime, and as such it created memories of suffering. Since “language was never and is nowhere at any time a shielded, apolitical field,” Romanian bore, at times, the sins of the people who used it: “Language is inseparable from fact, and facts make it legitimate or unacceptable, beautiful or ugly – one might say: good or bad.”⁶ Romanian is not only the language of songs by Maria Tănase, but also the language of the interrogations conducted by Securitate officers.⁷ As such, Romanian is part of Herta Müller’s story of harassment by the Securitate, of friends being killed by emissaries of the totalitarian regime, and of her being driven out of the country by the secret police. It is of great significance that, among the very few phrases that are written directly in Romanian in Herta Müller’s work, most have to do with the abuses of the Securitate. In the speech held in December 2009 at the Swedish Academy in Stockholm at the reception of the Nobel Prize for literature, the

writer quotes in Romanian her reply to the proposition made by the political police for her to become a collaborator: “I said: *N-am caracterul*, I don’t have the character for it.”⁸ The language takes part in the author’s personal history of trauma and therefore cannot be taken out of it; the traumatic memory is inevitably haunting and it participates to any further semantic structuring of present and past experience.⁹ This is how Romanian comes to be associated with violence and insult and carries this connotation in Müller’s novels.¹⁰

The volume of collages *Este sau nu este Ion* (To Be or Not to Be Ion, 2005), Müller’s only book to date written directly in Romanian, bears traces of this view of Romanian language as a language of violence, yet with a surprising new turn. There are numerous instances where the writer’s haunting motifs (the fox, the hunger, train stations, haircuts) return, but usually in a lighter atmosphere, given the fact that the defining note of the book is the wordplay. The volume’s title suggests a traditional theme of Romanian literature, the ironic examination of national character and the denunciation of false patriotism. Recurring names like *Ion* and *Mitică* are indicative of this theme, since *Ion* is the generic name for the Romanian peasant, chosen by novelist Liviu Rebreanu (1885-1944) for his famous social novel *Ion* (Ion) in 1920, whereas *Mitică* was popularized as the typical name for Romanians in the urban South by comedian Ion Luca Caragiale (1852–1912). The book focuses on national stereotypes, which it addresses in a variety of playful intertextual allusions and double entendres that probably make the humour of these poems untranslatable. The juxtaposition of nationalist effigies and proud local dishes has a particularly familiar resonance with readers of Caragiale, who also made light of vain patriotic declarations through an ironic praise of culinary identity: “The month of stewed / vegetables in a jar / on the column of Trajan.”¹¹ Country and family are joined together in an uneasy mathematical equation: “I have a mother / and a father / in a melancholy country / the thing is / with all the taste of grass / I thought of them as being three / damn mathematics.”¹² Numerous poems are filled with meaningless and recurrent interpellation words or phrases: “bă”, “mă”, which pertain to colloquial speech and signify either jest, mockery, or insult. The abrupt, decontextualized gestures indicate violence and the absurd, elliptical situations referred to in the poems lend themselves to allegorical readings which usually concur in a feeling of ambiguous menace: “Maaaa / time of drought / Mitică / lost cow / sought in vain, man / not found / woke up lizard / small / doubtful / very scared / killed it.”¹³ The poem makes a hint at the author’s personal memories of grazing cows as a child and being afraid to lose them, and it also accommodates suggestions of irrational fear and of violence done to the meek. Other significant scenes from Müller’s novels can be equally identified: waiting in a train station for departure, the guilt and confusion of a blurry father figure, confronting abusive figures of authority, having to face threats or bureaucratic nightmares. Images of administrative and existential chaos can be equally attributed to the carefree (funny) or irresponsible (malevolent) behaviour of people and to the dreamlike composition of Müller’s collage poems.¹⁴ Müller profits from the freedom with which cultural clichés are visited, inspected, and pitted against each other in Romanian tradition. On the whole, the book constructs an image of an unstable territory, with unpredictable, morally shifty

people, which can be traced back to Ion Luca Caragiale's critique of patriotic clichés.¹⁵

But, inasmuch as Romanian is a component of the writer's and her character's cultural individuality, it can also be seen as a place of resistance to violence. Romanian is the language used by Securitate workers in abusive interrogations, but the lines of a Romanian poet, Gellu Naum, become the rally code for a group of dissident friends in *Herztier*. Maria Tănase's curse ballad *Cine iubește și lasă* (He Who Loves and Leaves) is seen there as a protest song (Müller 2009, 241). And in the same novel, the words of another famous song from the 1970s by the rock band Phoenix are invoked; the writer explains that people in Romania saw it as a declaration of opposition to the brutality of the regime.¹⁶ Romanian language means many different things in Herta Müller's writing, and its symbolic significance cannot be fully explained by its naive beauty as a foreign language, neither can it be definitively equated to the implacable sound of oppression. Since Romanian language is part of the writer's identity, its signification as a cultural symbol cannot easily be pinned down. Müller sees identity as something irreducible to clichés, a complicated construction that reveals its complexity by the obvious fact that it is formed at the intersection of cultures and languages. And the Romanian words that Müller evokes in her recollections are part of complex experiences that cannot be summarized, but only alluded to in dense symbols that require long narrations in order to unfold their rich array of significations. It is not, for instance, the beauty of snow (or the beauty of the words *snow*, *Schnee* or *zăpadă*) which turns it into a painful memory in the essay *Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel* (Always the Same Snow and Always the Same Uncle, 2011), but those moments in the past when the novelist had tragic encounters with the snow.

But one has to see beyond the mechanical identification of the Romanian referent in her work either to a miracle of linguistic creativity or to an image of compact violence. A petty and benign example of a language's vocation for ambiguity is given by Romanian jokes. Humour is a vast aesthetic resource used by a great many people to express their creativity and to delimit a private space to vent their anger and frustration in a dictatorship. But this instrument for mental resistance in a totalitarian regime was also prone to inflicting humiliation in racist jokes bordering on cruelty and thus losing all their grace and intellectual beauty (Müller 2010, 33). Just as the "distinction between *discours* and *histoire*" collapses in her novels (Marven 2005, 54), a clear-cut definition of identity also has to give in. The *Romanian* legacy of Herta Müller consists of the violence and vulgarity of the Securitate workers, but also of the lyrical pathos of popular songs, and most of all of their confusion with one another, in a highly creative, but also highly perverse mix of kindness and oppression in various life situations: for instance, in alternating brave and cruel jokes, or seeing a wise proverb turning into a sad memory. The *German* legacy, as defined in Herta Müller's work, probably consists of similar contradictory traits, for instance, being a German from a remote part of Eastern Europe, with a particular experience of history and a distrust of reason that contemporary German culture in the West seems to have done away with: "Only in the West did I come across the idea that man cannot stand the absurd."¹⁷

Putting the two together, one sees a definition of identity as an uncomfortable,

interstitial place between (at least) two cultures. This view of identity, which traditional delineations of national cultures fails to consider,¹⁸ may be, of course, due to Müller's situation as a forcefully *repatriated* (actually, exiled) German from communist Romania. But it took more than this particular experience to construct it. Resisting myths of belonging, refusing to fall into classical definitions of national identity, the German author does not fall back on the representation of personal identity as a self-sufficient unit that refrains from any cultural affinity. On the margin of adjacent cultures, borrowing lyricism and irony from different literatures, Herta Müller debates the weight of cultural legacies without letting go of them altogether. As a writer struggling with language and its meanings, she analyses the cognitive merits of walking on linguistic borders. And this is what makes her quest for identity in language and literature so fruitful.

CONCLUSION: THE SNOW AND THE UNCLE

One way in which Herta Müller signals the intricacies of past experience that still resounds today is through obscure metaphors, present mostly in prominent positions, and often in the titles of her books. Especially intriguing are the plays upon words that require both Romanian and German linguistic competence. Romanian puns are present in highly noticeable positions in Müller's books. The title *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt* (The Human Is a Big Pheasant in the World, 1987), Müller explained, is meant to refer to the Romanian playful meaning of the word *fazan*, namely "loser"; however, German critics only saw there a poetic image of a proud bird strutting over the world, and missed the ironic overtone. The title of her book *Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel* (2011) also plays on the divergent meanings of a Romanian homonym, *nea*, which can mean either *snow* (*Schnee*), in an archaic, poetic inflection, or *uncle* (*Onkel*), in a light, colloquial tone; while in the first version the noun is feminine, in the second it is masculine. In order to differentiate them, Romanian language has another word for the colloquial, masculine "uncle": *neică*, which is in no way associated to the meaning "snow". The phrase *Mereu aceeași nea și mereu același neică* (a playful phrase in Romanian, which the German title translates literally) speculates the semantic ambiguity of the word *nea*, drawing attention to its two meanings, which it seems to equate to one another (since *nea* and *neică* can be synonyms), while highlighting their irreducible difference (by using the demonstratives *aceeași* / *același* to insidiously underline their divergent meanings). Featuring as the title to a book of mostly autobiographical essays, this phrase serves more as a reminder of the elusiveness of language, than as a lingering reverie about the snows and uncles of yesteryear.

But why does Herta Müller choose such titles if their subtlety is certain to escape most of her readers, one might ask? Since her book titles are always enigmatic, these German-Romanian titles extend their mystery a little further. They draw attention to that which remains inexplicable even though it is presented in words, which are said to be a vehicle for reason and understanding. The writer's option for bilingual titles can be read as a suggestion that no single language can explain everything or can fully and aptly translate personal experience. As such, readers are urged to exit their com-

fort zone of language as an expression of individuality. The rift between objects and words is also present at the heart of one's identity, is what her elliptical, transcultural puns seem to say.

NOTES

- ¹ “The Romanian *Hintersinn* (deeper meaning) constitutes the deeper layer of Müller’s cultural identity, which positioned her in a specific historical and political Romanian context. To understand Herta Müller’s work, critics must accept and acknowledge all aspects of her cultural identity, because her uniqueness lies in the juncture of the Banat-Swabian, Romanian, and German presence and the style in which she imagines and gives expression to them” (Glajar 2004, 152).
- ² “Daß uns ein Totenlied die Schläfen von innen warm anhauchte, muß Glück gewesen sein” (Müller 2010b, 107).
- ³ Alex Drace-Francis suggests that the title of Herta Müller’s novel *Herztier* might be inspired by Naum’s volume title *Copacul-animal* (The Animal Tree) from 1971 (see 2013, 44).
- ⁴ “Ich hab nur ein Gedanken / Was könnt ich mit euch tauschen / Einen meiner Brüder / Für eine Zigarette” (Müller 2010a, 97).
- ⁵ For an analysis of Herta Müller’s poetics with specific reference to her essays in *Der König verneigt sich und tötet*, see Moyer 2010, 77–96.
- ⁶ “Sprache war und ist nirgends und zu keiner Zeit ein unpolitisches Gehege (...) In dieser Unzertrennlichkeit vom Tun wird sie legitim oder inakzeptabel, schön oder häßlich, man kann auch sagen: gut oder böse” (Müller 2010c, 39).
- ⁷ “For her, Romanian is a language of threat and oppression, as seen in her Securitate files, which she reproduced recently alongside an essay under the title of her code name, Cristina. But at the same time it is a second mother tongue and source of poetic imagery” (Marven 2010).
- ⁸ “Ich hab gesagt: *N-am caracterul*, ich hab nicht diesen Charakter” (Müller 2013, 9).
- ⁹ For a discussion of trauma as a mark of modernity, see Haines 2002, 266–281. For an analysis of the fine distinction between testimony and trauma narrative, see Driver Eddy 2000, 56–72.
- ¹⁰ In her novel *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt* (1987), a policeman profits sexually from a German woman’s need for a visa to emigrate out of communist Romania. His out of place courteous line, right before “Take off your clothes”, is given in Romanian in the original: “Ce dulce ești” (You’re so sweet.) (Müller 2006, 103).
- ¹¹ “*Luna zacuștilor / la borcan / pe Columna lui Traian*” (Müller 2005, 74). The joke of the association is the similar national character of both the southern vegetable stew and of the ancient Roman monument depicting the battles between Romans and Dacians 2000 years ago in the mountains of nowadays Romania.
- ¹² “Am un mamă / și o tată / într-o țară întristată chestia e că m-am gândit / cu tot gustul ierbii ca la trei la / ei fi-i-ar matematica” (Müller 2005, 79).
- ¹³ “Băăăă, / secetă / Mitică / pierdut vacă / căutat geaba mă / nu găsit / trezit șopârlă / mică / îndoielnică / tare frică / omorât” (Müller 2005, 41).
- ¹⁴ For more on Herta Müller’s poetics of collage, see Marven 2005.
- ¹⁵ One link between the German author and the Romanian 19th century writer is provided by the very source of Herta Müller’s textual material: the ironic and colloquial magazine *Plai cu boi* (Land of Oxen, a pun on the more famous Playboy magazine) that Müller used to cut off the words in her Romanian collages, is a descendant of the 1990s Romanian satiric weekly *Academia Cațavencu*, which claimed its ancestry with Caragiale starting from the title.
- ¹⁶ “Das war ein sehr bekanntes Lied. Jeder hat es auf der Straße gepfiffen in den siebziger Jahren. Denn es beschrieb mit seiner Stimmung unser Leben in diesem Land. Jeder war selbst der Kanarienvogel, wenn er das sang” (Müller 2010, 43–44).
- ¹⁷ “Den Glauben, das Reden komme den Wirrnissen bei, kenne ich nur aus dem Westen. Reden bringt weder das Leben im Maisfeld in Ordnung noch das Leben auf dem Asphalt. Auch den Glauben, was

keinen Sinn hat, hält man nicht aus, kenne ich nur aus dem Westen" (Müller 2010c, 15).

- ¹⁸ "Indeed her refusal to participate in the construction of a static identity suggests a reconsideration of the nationalist and gendered connotations of exile, inviting us to reconceptualise the literature of displacement not as an affirmation of an opposition of homeland and exile but rather as an articulation of experiences of movement, mixture, and instability" (Cooper 2009, 475–476).

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Uncomfortable spaces: language and identity in Herta Müller's work

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The problem of identity in Herta Müller's work presents the reader with a number of difficulties. First, there is the complicated mix of Romanian and German (Banat-Swabian, to be precise) culture of the region of this author's upbringing. However, because of her experience of trauma and painful testimonies from a family consumed with guilt during a time of state oppression, Müller refrains from choosing a singular version of cultural identity as repre-

sentative for the individual, and neither does she opt for a definition of personal identity as something isolated, self-sufficient, and untainted by the others' collective identity. This article addresses the question of identity in Herta Müller's works using the multiple, almost obsessive references to (Romanian) language and culture in her work. First, the German author's intertextual connections to Romanian literature are explored. The second part of the article is concerned with Müller's poetics and her reflections on language. The space between languages becomes an apt metaphor for a fragmented and troubled identity, which is more the result of chance than of choice. Her encounter with Romanian language is a decisive cognitive experience whereby the writer becomes fascinated by the divergences between words and things. Living in an oppressive, dictatorial regime means assimilating that space with a culture of violence that can only be exorcised later, through a resort to the critique of nationalist clichés in her Romanian volume *Este sau nu este Ion* (To Be or Not to Be Ion, 2005). Since culture is defined as plural and ambiguous, it appears that the space of identity is neither inside one culture, nor outside all of them. As Herta Müller's multilingual puns and enigmatic metaphors show, identity is to be found in the colourful and haunting space between languages and cultures.

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