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# Herta Müller

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Herta Müller



# Herta Müller: Politics and Aesthetics

Edited by Bettina Brandt and Valentina Glajar

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*Valentina Glajar and Bettina Brandt*

Herta Müller



# Introduction

*Bettina Brandt and Valentina Glajar*

Literature speaks with everyone individually—it is personal property that stays inside our heads. And nothing speaks to us as forcefully as a book which expects nothing in return, other than that we think and feel.

*Herta Müller, speech held at the Nobel banquet in the Stockholm City Hall,  
December 10, 2009*

Two languages inform the writings of Nobel Prize laureate Herta Müller: German as well as Romanian bear on Müller's novels, essays, and collage poetry. Born in 1953 in German-speaking Nitzkydorf—a Banat-Swabian village in southwestern Romania—Müller grew up as part of a linguistic and ethnic minority in a Communist state. Her writing career began with a fictionalized portrayal of the village of her childhood, an isolated backward community deeply influenced by National Socialism and characterized by narrow-minded ethnocentrism. Romanian literary censorship, which had dramatically increased in the 1980s, delayed the publication of Müller's first collection of short stories for several years. When *Niederungen* was finally published in 1982, the censor's fingerprints marked the text.<sup>1</sup> An uncensored *Niederungen* was published by Rotbuch in the Fed-

eral Republic of Germany (FRG) in 1984. An English translation, *Nadirs* (published by the University of Nebraska Press), came out in 1999.

In many ways *Niederungen* is a typical *Dorfgeschichte* [village tale], though the defining characteristics of this genre have all been distorted. The idyllic harmony of village life and unspoiled nature turn into a world of alienated relationships due to alcoholism, abuse, cruelty, and hate. The Banat-Swabian environment penetrates Müller's autobiographically inspired writings, but the writer deviates poetically from the facts of her own experiences through a style she calls "sich erfindende Wahrnehmung" [an invented and reinventing perception] that mediates between perception and its refracted form, the invented perception.

Müller's fictionalized stories brutally exposed life in the rural village; hence they offended the Banat-Swabians in Romania as well as the very vocal Banater Schwaben Landsmannschaft (Organization of Banat Swabians) in Germany and led to scathing critiques in the Banat-Swabian press. A few of these reviews had actually been penned by informants of the Securitate (Romanian secret police). In particular the source "Voicu" was instrumental in discrediting her texts. In his review of Müller's *Niederungen*, "Voicu" concludes: "Critică și iar critică. O critică atât de distructivă, încît te întrebi, ce rost au aceste texte?!" [Criticism and more criticism. This criticism is so destructive that one has to wonder what the purpose of these texts is] (ACNSAS 10).

After an unsuccessful and officially undocumented attempt to recruit Müller for the Securitate, a file on Herta Müller (I233477, "Cristina") was opened in March 1983, a dossier that eventually would grow to an astonishing 914 pages. Müller simply told her recruiting officer: "N-am caracterul" [I don't have the character for this (kind of work)]. This statement apparently infuriated the secret service officer to such a degree that he shredded the recruitment letter that Müller had refused to sign and threw the snippets on the floor, only to gather them all up again when he remembered that the failed recruitment attempt would have to be explained to his superior. This incident, of course, also highlights the moral quality of Müller's writings.

The Communist discourse of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu was imposed in all the languages spoken in Romania—Romanian as well



1. Herta Müller's childhood home in Nitzkydorf. (Copyright Valentina Glajar.)

as German and Hungarian, the language of another ethnic and linguistic minority. Müller has a complex relationship not just to (Ceaușescu's) Romanian, which she learned as a teenager as a second language, but also to German, especially the German of her Banat-Swabian village, in which the undefeated discourse of National Socialism seemed to ceaselessly carry on. The result is Müller's characteristic writing style, often associated with the *fremde Blick*, or the "strange gaze."

Faced with increased surveillance, a defamation campaign, and ongoing threats on her life, Müller finally decided to leave Romania. As the result of a bilateral agreement signed in 1978 between the Romanian dictator and the FRG's then chancellor, Social Democrat Helmut Schmidt, Müller was one of the up to twelve thousand ethnic Germans who were granted an exit visa every year for the price of around 8,000 DM (Ash 238). Müller and her husband at the time, the writer Richard Wagner, arrived in the FRG in February 1987. Placed in a transitional camp in Nuremberg, where their paperwork had to be processed for clearance, Müller insisted that they wanted the FRG to accept them as *political refugees*, not

as ethnic Germans. Müller and Wagner's application for political asylum complicated and delayed the process of establishing their status in Germany since German officials were looking for proof of German ethnicity, even if it meant disclosing a family member's collaboration with Nazi Germany or looking up the records of the old Deutsche Volkslisten (German People's Lists, created by the Nazis and on which people in German-occupied territories were categorized according to their degree of being German):

Daß ich 1987 bei der Offenlegung meiner Biographie von der rumänischen Diktatur redete, machte die Beamten nervös. Ich habe eine Diktatur aus politischen Gründen verlassen, und die deutschen Beamten wollten etwas über mein Deutschtum wissen. Als ich die Frage, ob ich mit meiner Haltung auch als Rumänin verfolgt gewesen wäre, mit Ja beantwortete, schickte der Beamte mich zur Ausländerpolizei. Er konstatierte: entweder Deutsche oder politisch Verfolgte. Für beides zusammen gab es kein vorgedrucktes Formular.

[That I was talking about the Romanian dictatorship when disclosing my biography in 1987 made the public official nervous. I left a dictatorship for political reasons, and the German officials wanted to know something about my Germanness. When I answered the question with Yes whether, with my attitude, I also would have been persecuted as a Romanian, the official sent me to the immigration authorities. He stated: either you are German or politically persecuted. He did not have a preprinted form for both categories at once.] (*Hunger und Seide* 25)

Both Müller and Wagner could have easily proved that they were ethnic Germans; indeed, Müller's father and uncle had been in the Waffen-SS during World War II.

Though Müller's characters are fictional, their stories tend to spring from the author's own life. Müller's writings often focus on the German ethnic minority in Romania with its complex and often duplicitous intertwinement into the two major totalitarian systems of the twentieth century: National Socialism (along with its Romanian fascist variation) and com-

munism. Müller depicts these ethnic Germans simultaneously as perpetrators of Nazi crimes; minority residents under an oppressive Communist regime; and in *Atemschaukel*, her most recent novel, which unfolds in January 1944–49, as victims of Stalinism.

The author herself likes to use the term “autofictional” to describe her writings. Fictionalized accounts of suffering and persecution under the Ceaușescu regime are reflected in novels such as *Herztier* [1995; *The Land of Green Plums*, 1996]; *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger* [1992; The fox was already the hunter]; and *Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet* [1997; *The Appointment*, 2001], as well as in her collections of essays *Barfußiger Februar* [1987; Barefoot February]; *Hunger und Seide* [1995; Hunger and silk]; *Der König verneigt sich und tötet* [2003; The king bows and kills], and numerous other essays and interviews.

In these texts, Müller exposes the Romanian Securitate’s practices and the trauma of individuals who had to experience death threats that continued even after their immigration into Germany. *The Land of Green Plums*, for example, is based on the experiences of a group of ethnic German writers and exposes the persecution by the Securitate in the 1980s, as well as the atmosphere of fear and hopelessness in an economically and culturally disastrous Communist Romania. The characters are to a large extent based on the real-life writers Rolf Bossert (1952–86), who emigrated from Communist Romania and committed suicide weeks after his arrival in Frankfurt; Richard Wagner (b. 1952); and Roland Kirsch (1960–89), who committed suicide while waiting to emigrate to Germany. In a recent article, however, Müller clarifies that the Securitate most likely killed Kirsch, as neighbors had heard a fight in his apartment before he allegedly hanged himself.

Müller’s experimental prose and poetry are exemplified in her literary collages, a radical form of representation based on the transformation of preexisting elements—that is, a form of dislocation in which the familiar becomes surprisingly unfamiliar. Collage making is first described in Herta Müller’s short novel *Reisende auf einem Bein* [1989; *Traveling on One Leg*, 1998], a text in which one of the protagonists engages in this activity. A couple of years later Müller started making actual postcard-size collages that were first published in her essay collection *Der Teufel sitzt*

*im Spiegel* [The devil sits in the mirror]. Three German collage collections followed: *Der Wächter nimmt seinen Kamm* [1993; The guard takes his comb]; *Im Haarknoten wohnt eine Dame* [2005; A lady lives in the bun]; and *Die blassen Herren mit den Mokkatassen* [2006; The pale gentlemen with the mocha cups]. In 2005 Müller published her first Romanian-language-bound collage, titled *Este sau nu este Ion* [2005; Is it or is it not Ion]. Müller finds the materials for her collages in the illustrations and in the potent commercial language of advertisements in German and Romanian newspapers, magazines, and catalogues that surround her. She then cuts out letters and entire words or parts of words; sorts them alphabetically; and finally stores them in drawers until they are all posed in front of her on a flat surface, when she is ready to make a new collage postcard. Collage functions in Müller's universe as a device that mediates between art and life.

Thematically divided into three parts, *Herta Müller: Politics and Aesthetics* is addressed to a general English-speaking academic audience with an interest in dissident, exile, migration, experimental, and transnational literature. The book presents a variety of literary, cultural, and historical approaches and covers the major topics of Müller's writings while bringing together Herta Müller scholars from Europe and the United States.

The first part, "Life, Writing, and Betrayal," prefaced by Allan Stoekl, features Müller's Nobel lecture, in which she describes the unlikely story of a little girl herding cows in Nitzkydorf who grew up to become a writer and Nobel Prize laureate; it also includes Müller's own original contribution to our volume: four hitherto unpublished collage poems. The interview with Ernest Wichner, a German-Romanian author, translator, editor, and Müller's personal friend, allows the readers insight into Wichner's fascinating experiences as a founding member of the Aktionsgruppe Banat (a German literary circle of Banat-Swabian authors) and the group's constant surveillance and persecution by the Securitate.

Wichner's early memories of Müller and her literary debut, as well as his close friendship with both Müller and the poet Oskar Pastior, evoke various stages in the life of German-Romanian writers and the intricate web of friendship and deceit under communism.

The essays in the second part of the volume, "Totalitarianism, Auto-

fiction, Memory,” focus on the political aspects of Müller’s texts and discuss life under the Romanian Communist dictatorial regime of Ceaușescu and his vigilant watchdogs, the Securitate. In a post-Communist Romania, since 2007 a member of the European Union (which has done very little to research its Communist past and the practices of Ceaușescu’s secret service), Müller’s Nobel Prize has certainly, and finally, struck a chord with Romanians. While Romanian intellectuals have either jumped at the opportunity to share the prize with her on the basis of her Romanianess or rejected it because of her Germanness, Müller continues to ask fundamental questions about totalitarianism and its tools. She writes about the new Securitate, the post-Communist SRI (Serviciul Român de Informații—the Romanian Information Service) and claims that 40 percent of the old Securitate members are part of it, while the other 60 percent are either retired and receiving very high pensions or are now in charge of the economy: the new nomenklatura and the nouveaux riches. Müller’s poignant discourse of discontent, as well as her personal history as a political writer, allows for a sophisticated perspective on Communist life in Romania, and it reaches a wider audience than most historical texts ever could.

Based on Müller’s Securitate file, Cristina Petrescu discusses the author’s “Romanian period” as she provides a detailed analysis of the political context of Müller’s work before her emigration in 1987. Perversely filed under the category “Fascist German Writers,” Müller’s file reveals, in Petrescu’s words, “an Orwellian world of dictatorship that aimed at total control.” Through its elaborate practices and the often voluntary collaboration of its many informants, the Securitate realized a world of fear and opportunism, betrayal and hopelessness, that has profoundly impacted Müller’s writing. As Petrescu shows, Müller’s refusal to collaborate with the secret police in spite of death threats and interrogations was not a common attitude in Romania. On the contrary, in a much-debated discussion with the Romanian intellectual Gabriel Liiceanu during a post-Nobel visit to Romania, Müller bluntly exposed Liiceanu’s claim to “resistance through culture” as futile.

Brigid Haines offers a close reading of Müller’s most successful novel to date, *Herztier* [*The Land of Green Plums*], against the political back-

ground of the 1980s in Romania. Like most of her previous writings, *Herztier* is deeply rooted in Müller's own biography and her experience of a wide range of Securitate practices, which entailed both physical violence and psychological mind games. Haines focuses on what she calls "an aesthetic of atomization and dispersal," which in her opinion makes Müller's work profoundly political and an appropriate and effective response to repression. With Hannah Arendt, Haines asks relevant questions regarding the very theme of loneliness in a totalitarian society that denies the individual a right to privacy in an attempt to control lives through an ever-present fear.

Drawing on Serge Doubrovsky's and Raymond Federman's useful concepts of "autofiction" and "surfiction" respectively, Paola Bozzi analyzes the writing style in which Müller fictionalizes and transfigures her biographical experiences. As Bozzi pertinently observes, Müller often focuses her attention on experiences that reveal life itself as fiction, or rather as "autofiction." Bozzi challenges the readers to approach Müller's writing style not only as a mode that resists the effacement or erasure of memories, but also as one that attempts to transcend "history."

Müller's latest novel, *Atemschaukel* [*The Hunger Angel*], represents a break from her direct personal biography as it addresses the deportation of ethnic Germans from Romania to Ukrainian labor camps in January 1945 in the fictionalized story of another famous German-Romanian writer, Oskar Pastior. Olivia Spiridon argues that Müller creates a site of memory for the ethnic Romanian community as it focuses on this understudied historical event. As Spiridon shows, the representation of this particular historical event raises questions about the relationship between literary texts and historiography, and it also allows various groups to appropriate this highly successful novel for their own political purposes. None other than the controversial Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen (Center against Expulsions, a yet-to-be built site closely associated with the Banater Schwaben Landsmanschaft), for instance, has awarded Müller the Franz Werfel Humanitarian Award for *Atemschaukel*.<sup>2</sup>

The essays in the third part of this volume, "Müller's Modes of Writing and the Aesthetics of Experimentation," stress key elements of the Nobel laureate's avant-garde poetics, an aesthetics that promises both

self-conscious formal experimentation and political intervention. Beverly Driver Eddy, Monika Moyrer, and Arina Rotaru analyze different aspects of Müller's collages, a particular form of modernist writing that increasingly dominates the author's style. In the collages a critical mode explicitly comes to the fore that can be said to be the driving force behind Müller's writing as a whole: a formal radicalism combined with a highly politicized content.

Eddy examines Müller's collections of collages as total works of art in which cutout picture meets cutout text. She indicates how Müller's collages relate to her prose texts, traces their origins, and shows their thematic and artistic development through Müller's three German collage collections: *Der Wächter nimmt seinen Kamm*, *Im Haarknoten wohnt eine Dame*, and *Die blassen Herren mit den Mokkatassen*. Finally, Eddy's essay acknowledges the ongoing popularity of collages as marketed items of popular culture.

Monika Moyrer examines one particular cutout, the *Mokkatasse*, or mocha cup, which circulates in Müller's German collages also as *Knorpeltasse* or *MOKKATASSE* and in her Romanian collages as *Ceașca de moca*. Analyzing the textual and linguistic border crossings within the context of Müller's close collaboration with Oskar Pastior and focusing on both the visual and the tactile aspects of these cutouts, Moyrer reads Müller's textual collection of mocha cups as textual *Vitrinen* [glass cabinets] in which the possibility of assuming agency over recollected transnational memories is on display.

Arina Rotaru stresses the aesthetics of sound and reverberation in a number of Müller's collage poems and prose texts, thus offering an alternative interpretation of Müller's relationship with the Western world and its exaltation of the image. Analyzing Müller's use of Surrealist and Dadaist techniques, Rotaru comes to the conclusion that Müller's collages are not only an attempt at validating her writing identity beyond gender, but also an attempt at transcending ethnicity in the name of the globalized practices of the avant-gardes and their use of sounds and performance. Indeed, the accented German and Romanian voices present in Müller's poems form a distinct, fragmented sonoric spectrum "that echoes in the past and chimes in the present."

Anja Johannsen's and Katrina Nousek's essays shed light on Müller's complex literary strategies. Drawing on the theories of the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky and focusing on selected passages from Müller's prose works (mainly *Herztier*, *Heute wäre ich mir lieber nicht begegnet*, and *Atemschaukel*), Johannsen presents Müller as an author whose literature irritates and captivates its readers by continually challenging the patterns of perception. Nousek focuses on Müller's poetics lecture held at the University of Tübingen "to demonstrate the inadequacy of representing subjective experience within a temporal structure divided into past, present, and future." In this same lecture Müller addressed the critique that her writings, after more than two decades in Germany, continued to address the Romanian past:

Wenn ich über zehn Jahre zurückliegendes aus Rumänien schreibe, heißt es, ich schreibe (noch immer) über die Vergangenheit. Wenn ein hiesiger Autor über die Nachkriegszeit, das Wirtschaftswunder oder die 68er Jahre schreibt, liest man das als Gegenwart. Das hiesig Vergangene, wie weit es auch zurückliegen mag, bleibt Gegenwart, weil es sich hier zugetragen hat, weil es durch Zugehörigkeit bindet. Bei Autoren wie . . . Imre Kertész wird das zeitliche Kriterium nicht verhandelt, weil die räumliche Trennung klarstellt, dass sie nicht dazugehören. Ich bin aber in dieses Land gekommen, meine Zugehörigkeit muß verhandelt werden.

[When I write about something that happened in Romania ten years ago, people say that I am still writing about the past. If a local German writes about the postwar period, about the economic miracle, or about 1968, this is read as having to do with the present. The local past, however far back it might go, remains present because it happened here, because it connects through a form of belonging. When talking about authors such as . . . Imre Kertész the time criterion is not brought up because the spatial distance makes clear that they don't belong. But I have come to this country; my belonging needs to be negotiated.] (37)

The award of the Nobel Prize committee affirms that Herta Müller's writing is not trapped either in Romanian or German local histories but speaks to a broader cosmopolitan, politically engaged audience.

## Notes

1. In the summer of 2011 the University of Nebraska Press published a new edition of *Niederungen* with four additional chapters that had been part of the original manuscript.

2. While the debate over the location of the Center against Expulsions is still ongoing, it will most likely be built, despite considerable political opposition against the project because it memorializes the fate of German expellees without simultaneously addressing the *causes* of World War II; the mass killings of Jews, Poles, Roma and Sinti, homosexuals, Soviet prisoners of war, and other persecuted groups is an affront. Herta Müller, one of the vocal opponents of the center, therefore recently wrote an open letter to the German chancellor, Angela Merkel; published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, a national newspaper with a conservative readership, the letter demanded that a Center for Exile should be built in Germany as well—a space in which the experience of exile, what Müller calls “the very first expulsion,” can be properly commemorated.

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# Part 1

## Life, Writing, and Betrayal



# 1

## Herta Müller

Writing and Betrayal

*Allan Stoekl*

Herta Müller's is a poor writing, or a writing that uses the poverty of means to escape, momentarily, a greater and much more profound poverty. The world presented in her writing, in a collision of verisimilitude and surrealism, is a world in which one makes do with very little; Müller's Nobel Prize speech (titled "Every Word Knows Something of a Vicious Circle"), for example, is an extended meditation on words and things, starting from, and always coming back to, the handkerchief.<sup>1</sup> In a world outside of, or below, the consumer economy, small objects, passed from parent to child, assert themselves.

For Müller the handkerchief is a marker, a badge, of her mother's love—a love that is expressed with difficulty in the harsh, stripped-bare existence of the village, but the love that surfaces is the mother's constant concern for her daughter's possession of a thing—a single, small thing—with which she can carry out any number of tasks. It's a micro-survival tool and at the same time the metonym for a much larger strategy of survival. And as often happens with metonyms, Müller's handkerchief joins, melds with, leads into and out of any number of other metonyms that make up her writing. After the powerful initial question—Do you have your handker-

chief?—we see the morphing of the handkerchief into any number of other objects, through contiguous contact.

Müller's uncle—whom she characterizes only as “the son” of her grandparents—is, as a young man, won over by the Nazis when he goes to study business at a school in Timișoara in the 1930s. More Nazi than the Nazis, Uncle Matz inevitably finds himself in the SS, fighting—along with Müller's father—on the Eastern Front. And soon enough he is killed, and his photo—or rather the grisly photo of his body lying on a tarp—is sent back to his grieving parents. Müller writes: “The death-photo is hand-sized: in the middle of a black field a little gray heap of human remains can be seen resting on a white cloth. Against the black field the white cloth looks as small as a child's handkerchief, a white square with a strange design painted in the middle. For my grandmother this photo was a combination too: on the white handkerchief was a dead Nazi, in her memory was a living son” (6).

What first seemed merely a symbol of parental concern thus quickly becomes a framing device for something much larger. The handkerchief is now a setting for a memento mori that is also a reminder and stark indictment of the complicity and guilt of many members of the Banat German community. As Matz's father, Müller's grandfather, puts it: “When the flags start to flutter, common sense slides right into the trumpet” (8). And one metonym slides right into another: handkerchief as care; handkerchief as death-frame, as indictment; handkerchief as trumpet announcing; trumpet as alimentary or excretory canal swallowing and excreting; canal as toilet in which deluded idealism, as well as cynical commitment, are swept away, down and out: “[My grandfather's] warning also applied to the following dictatorship, which I experienced” (7). Later, Müller as a child learns to play that beloved folk instrument, the accordion; the instrument is her dead Uncle Matz's, its straps way too large to hang from her shoulders—so they are tied together behind her back, with a handkerchief.

Müller's style, then, is comprised of series of metonyms, circling, indicating a whole, indicating each other, indicating the impossibility of a total indication. A metonymic cloud. Müller herself has another name for it: a devil's circle.<sup>2</sup> “Can we say that it is precisely the smallest objects—be they trumpets, accordions, or handkerchiefs—which connect the most dispa-

rate things in life? That the objects are in orbit and that their deviations reveal a pattern of repetition—a vicious circle, or what we call in German a devil’s circle” (7).

The devil’s circle is that of writing and all it implies in a repressive dictatorship, where independent expression tends to land its author in a captain’s office, undergoing psychological and physical torture—if not death. But there is a larger devil’s circle, which itself is a function of the circulation of metonyms *as* writing. Müller writes because speech is incapable of expressing what writing *does*. “On the stairs”—in the factory after she has been sacked, sitting on the stairs, refusing to leave, refused an office, Müller tells us that she realized the futility of talking. A nonperson in the factory, a nonperson everywhere, she was fired for refusing to spy on her friends. The devilish response on the part of the Securitate was to spread the rumor that, precisely, she was a spy. She writes: “I talked a great deal during the dictatorship, mostly because I decided not to blow the trumpet. Usually my talking led to excruciating consequences. But the writing began in silence, there on the stairs, where I had to come to terms with more than could be said. What was happening could no longer be expressed in speech” (7).

Jacques Derrida famously argued that speech, rather than purer, more real, more authentic than writing, was itself a function of writing. Müller, under the constant gaze of the dictatorship, realizes that the devil’s circle is alone adequate to rendering “the totality of events themselves” (7). Speech is now and can be only silence, the spaces between the circles of words spinning in the head—and then on paper. “The mouth is skipped over,” she writes and goes on to state, “The subject is there implicitly, but the words are what take possession of me. They coax the subject anywhere they want” (7). Touching on surrealist automatic writing, the circulation of words is also the movement of a double bind into which falls any person who refuses to blow the trumpet. Another devil’s circle: one writes because that alone is adequate to the all-swallowing trumpet, that alone is the possible resistance to the trumpet, the escape from its double bind of resister and traitor, spy and spied upon, but by doing so, by writing silently, one nevertheless brands oneself a traitor and is all the more liable to being engulfed by the trumpet. The many sessions in the captain’s office

are, after all, the regime's response to Müller's defiant act of writing. Writing is both poison and cure, the *pharmakon*, and in a dictatorship of the sort Müller faces it is impossible even to separate the two: poison-cure, metonyms of each other, they circle like an accursed double star in the profound loneliness of the devil's staircase.

This to me is one of the strongest elements in Müller's project: writing is resistance, to be sure, in a sense the only resistance, and it is, it becomes, one's "life," yet it is never predicated on some fundamental innocence, some primary victimhood that graces writing with unshakeable virtue. Writing is betrayal, not only of the regime, but also of one's own sanity, of one's self-certainty, self-confidence, one's own authority. There is no truth in writing; that only belongs to speech, to the wit of the staircase. Terms circulate and always *implicate* each other. There is no community whose virtue or veracity will be or can be redeemed by Müller's writing. She "speaks" for no "minority" whose "rights" are to be guaranteed or asserted. Her "minority," if one can even call it that, is a disrupted, dispirited one: it seems all the fathers, all the uncles, are former members of the SS; the very ideal of a coherent and virtuous linguistic or cultural community has been flushed down the trumpet long ago. Nor is there any ideal in Germany, a country in which she has never lived, whose own history is hardly an innocent one; she cannot base her love of writing, mostly in German (but sometimes in Romanian), on some national essence. That has all been done before, to disastrous effect. At most she can read contemporary German writing as an example of what writing might be outside of a dictatorship, but once she actually gets to Germany, she realizes that its citizens are even more hungry than those of Romania under Ceaușescu—the only difference is that they don't know what they are hungry for. Müller is a "fascist whore" German in Romania, a totally marginal Romanian in Germany, shunned from the first by her own peasant-Nazi community for "shitting in her own nest," and her writing is most certainly not a home, not a place of stability or repose.

Perhaps in her writing Müller is tending toward another community; her devil's circle propels her out of or at least alongside the trumpet and toward a "coming community," as Agamben calls it, a community for whom identity is only a reference of partial, floating metonyms, as the

space of the left-behind, stripped of any general validity or truth-value. A community of readers and of writers, a community of those who have nothing in common.

Agamben writes: “[If] instead of continuing to search for a proper identity in the already improper and senseless form of individuality, humans were to succeed in belonging to this impropriety as such, in making of the proper being—thus not an identity and an individual property but a singularity without identity . . . then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable” (64).

But could they enter into the community of the handkerchief? Into the community of care, against the community?

### Notes

1. Müller’s 2009 Nobel Prize lecture, from which I quote below, is available online from the Nobel Foundation at: [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2009/muller-lecture\\_en.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2009/muller-lecture_en.html).

2. While the translator of the Nobel Prize speech into English (Philip Boehm) uses the term “vicious circle” in the title (“Every Word Knows Something of a Vicious Circle”), in German the devil makes an appearance: “Jedes Wort weiß etwas vom Teufelskreis.”

### Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.