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Uncanny Contingencies: Translation, Comparison, and Compassion in Herta Müller's *The Hunger Angel*

1 In search of a new language: The camp experience in literary discourse

If camp experiences, as has often been postulated, are formative of the twentieth century,[1] this implies that common traits may be discerned in different forms of totalitarian rule, suppression and violence. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt considers concentration camps, instruments of terror established both by National Socialism and Stalinism, "laboratories in the experiment of total domination" (Arendt 1973: 436). One of the main characteristics she describes is the effort, manifesting itself in the institution of the camp, to create a space sealed off from the rest of society, even totalitarian society, in which common ideas of guilt, legal punishment or individual responsibility are fundamentally broken. Entering the "concentrationary universe" – to use a term coined by David Rousset, himself a survivor of Neuengamme and Buchenwald[2]– thus means to be confronted with a reality that resists understanding and therefore narrative accounts able to explain the events and the logic of the camp to the outside world.

In Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*, the autodiegetic narrator soon after arriving in Auschwitz-Monowitz notes: "we feel outside this world" (Levi 1996: 23). In a similar way, many camp narratives describe the fundamental break between the world outside and the world inside, which, however, cannot be understood as such because it remains related to the outside precisely by this cut and discrepancy.[3] Levi's narrator asks a guard about reasons for the seemingly absurd regulations and events in the camp: "'*Warum?*" I asked him in my poor German.

1 See, for example Bauman (2001: 266), Kotek and Rigoulot (2000), Shalamov (2007: 194).

2 After 1945 Rousset was a driving force in Western investigations into the Stalinist Gulag system; he founded the International Commission Against Concentrationist Regimes in 1949.

3 In his much discussed observations on camps, Giorgio Agamben has stated that the "camp is the space which is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule. In the camp, the state of exception [. . .] is now given a permanent spatial arrangement, which as such nevertheless remains outside the normal order" (1998: 168–169).

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'*Hier ist kein warum*' (There is no why here)." (Levi 1996: 29)[4] The limits of understanding, accentuated in the text by the appearance of a foreign language as language of the perpetrators, are also reflected in the anticipation that readers will most likely not comprehend what it means to be completely stripped of any personal possessions and signs of individuality. The need to tell and to remember is thus confronted with the problem of translation, which exceeds the idea of different languages, codes or value systems by touching the abyss of an attempt at total destruction of human expression and dignity.

Hannah Arendt, who consents that eye witness accounts and recollections tend to be repetitive and "uncommunicative," in that many merely record the horror without being able to interpret or explain it, expresses a deep skepticism towards the idea that a lesson can be learned from the experience of the camps, nor has it, in her view, proved to be able to serve as a basis for political consciousness or action (Arendt 1973: 441). Instead, she asserts that only the fear of concentration camps can relate and preserve the idea of a threat of totalitarianism, which has unmasked the fragility of civilization in the twentieth century and needs to be acknowledged and remembered as such. This twist is certainly surprising in the analysis by a political thinker; however, it underscores the concern of the text to develop perspectives for modes of narration and memory that answer the challenges of the camps. While critical research on the history, phases, and different functions of various camp systems has by now provided a differentiated picture that alerts us to the fact that the term "camp" has actually been used to denote very different institutions and phenomena,[5] there is also a tendency in philosophy and cultural studies to embrace the term anew as signifying life under extreme conditions,[6] at the "absolute point zero of the political as well as the private" (Schwarte 2007: 168)[7] – even if brought about by different contexts and with different aims in mind.

Having analyzed the differences between Nazi concentration camps and the Gulag, Anne Applebaum contends that when reading accounts of survivors "one is struck more by the differences between the victims' experiences than by the differences between the two camp systems." (2003: 39) With the focus on the singularity of each life story the perspective changes, from the functions and effects of the system, as well as from attempts to systematize camp experiences according to the respective context, towards the experience as such. If

4 German words in the English translation appear as such in the Italian original as well.

5 See for instance Applebaum (2003: 36–39), Ganzenmüller (2014).

6 The term "extreme conditions" is used frequently when attempting to describe life in the camps (e.g. Suderland 2013).

7 Unless otherwise indicated, translations from the German are mine (D.B.).

this is typically not expressed in conventional terms and narratives – which is also indicated by the monotony and abundance of stereotyped speech Arendt notices in survivors' stories – it can be found in the narrative modes of repetition, mimicry, and ellipsis that exceed the order and the constraints of stereotyped thinking (*Lagerdenken*). Svetlana Boym, who has identified these narrative modes as typical of Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*, has read them in connection with a concept of imagination developed by Arendt. To use imagination "to confront what might seem unimaginable" in her view means to employ strategies "that can move outside the box of the temporal and spatial limitation of the present moment" (Boym 2008: 362–363) and thus disrupt the logic of confinement formative for the camp discourse. Thus, a specific "new form of imaginative documentary prose that doesn't describe but cocreates the experience" (2008: 362) can be discerned, which also lends itself to literary accounts of camp experiences that do not only bear witness to a specific historical situation and ideological framework, but that tend to transgress spatial and temporal confinement. This also implies that beyond the documentary impetus these texts expose an unprecedented experience, which cannot be described in traditional modes, nor with reference to the categories made up by the political systems that rely on camps as ultimate means of subjugation and control. By being inherently non-systematic and what may be called hyper-representational, they refute being reduced to, respectively, linguistic or literary accounts of a camp or the camp system – which have typically been aimed at subduing any human expression going beyond its immediate realm – but rather imply a claim to a testimony of the camp experience in a broader sense. In this perspective, with its focus on the unsystematic and the poetic, different forms of camps appear to coincide with regard to the experiences and the difficulties articulating and translating them.

Interestingly, Boym's approach to Shalamov's camp narratives reveals a similar train of thought as that expressed in the programmatic title of a book on the camp as a paradigm of the modern conception of space, which came out at around the same time. The book, *Auszug aus dem Lager* ("Exodus from the camp"), denotes a polyvalence by hinting, firstly, at a time after the camps were abandoned – which is the precondition for writing about them – and secondly, at the idea that because of this departure from the camps the possibility of a new kind of thinking about space, topography, power, and human expression opens up (Schwarte 2007: 165). *Auszug* here also means extract, combining therefore the notion of temporal distance with that of a condensed or fragmented substance, which can be grasped only tentatively and which is not revealed by attempts to point out systematic similarities between different types of camps. In recent studies cultural concepts of space have increasingly been associated with

negotiations of cultural multiplicity and difference, thus highlighting strategies of signification and a mode of translation that subvert the attempts at enforcing hegemonic or colonial power. Bringing together a comparative study of camps and a perspective on processes of cultural mimicry and translation still largely remains a desideratum. The following observations, regarding a particularly intriguing postmemorial camp novel, are intended as a contribution to opening up this field.

2 The text as a witness

In 2009, in temporal proximity to the texts and trends described above, Herta Müller published her book on camp experience, *Atemschaukel* (*The Hunger Angel*), which received a lot of attention, especially after Müller was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in the same year. The text describes the camp experience of a young man from German-speaking Transylvania, deported to a Russian camp in Ukraine shortly after the Second World War. The narrative is based on interviews with former inmates of similar camps, among them Müller's mother, and on a close collaboration with her friend and fellow writer Oskar Pastior, whose experience of internment was a starting point for the joint writing project that the two had originally planned, until Pastior unexpectedly died in 2006. In her afterword, Müller explains that after a first shock and perplexity as to how to carry on with the project, she resorted to employing a (male) first-person narrator, thereby indicating closeness and empathy with an eye witness whose testimony is thus interlaced with an act of memory, which transforms the eye witness into a literary figure (called Leopold Auberg in the novel). The afterword also gives a brief historical background concerning a wave of deportations of the German-speaking population, which was associated with Romania's fascist past and the attempt to shift the blame on to the German minority, who in fact had often sympathized and openly collaborated with the national socialists (Herta Müller's father was a member of the Waffen-SS). Not surprisingly, Müller's mother's fate as a deportee was a taboo in the family; this aspect of life in Soviet-occupied Romania had no place in the Banat-Swabian community in communist Romania. The biographic constellation that the mother is deported as a young woman while the father, who until his death continues to bawl Nazi-songs at village fetes (Müller 2011),[8] is not, in a certain

8 "I often thought that my mother had to go to the Russian labor camp because of the collective guilt, meaning because of my father's war. How absurd is this reflection of history as guilt

way is reflected in the novel as well, where the focus is on young people whose deportation stands in no relation to any personal deed or guilt (Spiridon 2013: 143).[9] Gender obviously plays an important, albeit undeclared, role when it comes to stabilization of power and victimization, as will be discussed later in greater detail.

In earlier accounts of deportations of Romanian Germans found in a number of Müller's texts,[10] interest and sympathy clearly lie with those who suddenly find themselves made liable for things alien to them and who resist the categorization that labels and convicts them (Müller 1992: 65).[11] Thus, the mechanisms used to construct homogeneous groups by assigning a collective guilt to those declared enemies are unmasked as such. In the transition or conflict of the (totalitarian) political systems and ideologies, guilt and suffering are not brought to the fore and settled; rather, the enforcement of new categories again subjects individuals to alienating classifications. The fatal dilemma exposed in those texts, particularly in the fate of *The Hunger Angel*'s protagonist Leo Auberg, is created by the overlapping and entanglement of suppressive systems, which highlights the fact that there really is no before or beyond the alienating experience to rely on for identification and the projection of alternative individual or collective life. Auberg, who as an adolescent suffers from a suffocating and threatening atmosphere within a post-Nazi, homophobic social environment, at first projects vague expectations on the other space to which he is bound to be deported.[12] However, of course, life in the camp reveals another, more extreme form of suppression and estrangement.

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and punishment in a single married couple, how unjustly it is distributed among my two parents." (Müller 2014: 38).

9 Historical accounts hold that in fact it was mostly "the wrong persons" who were subject to retribution and deportation: "...women, older men and adolescents, sometimes even children. Many of those who were guilty among the Germans of Romania – who had been active agents of the national socialists [...] were not within reach any more. They had long fled the scene together with the retreating German troops." (Sienerth 2009: 336).

10 Spiridon remarks that the theme of deportation (to Russia) runs like a golden thread through Müller's work (2010: 380). See also Müller: "For forty-five years I have thought that one should write a whole book on the deportation, and then I always shrank back from it and wrote another book. For in my head the threat of the topic of deportation has never ceased." (2014: 199).

11 The essay *Eine warme Kartoffel ist ein warmes Bett* ("A warm potato is a warm bed") (Müller 1992) begins with a memory of a survivor of the deportation who is characterized as "one of the few Romanian Germans who during the Second World War were not in the SS."

12 "I wanted to escape from my family, to a camp if need be." (Müller 2012: 4).

By narrating the story of deportations of Romanian Germans to Stalinist camps Herta Müller contributes to the memory of a group that did not have a voice in the official Romanian narratives of history, from which the German minority, as Dieter Schlesak observed, simply disappeared – together with the memory of Romanian collaboration with Hitler (Spiridon 2010: 369). The novel, as well as Müller's earlier works, does not give a voice to the minority as a collective, but explores the fate and suffering of those who lack any recourse to a community, any "we" that could orientate and reaffirm their individual needs, wishes, and hopes. This also implies that language, particularly the mother tongue, cannot only be used to express one's inner thoughts and feelings; instead, the deep estrangement manifests itself through language as well. Even before his time in the camp (*Lagerzeit*) Leo Auberg is not only haunted by words like *Rassenschande* ("racial shame"; Müller 2012: 4)[13] when thinking of his intimate life, but seemingly ordinary words also appear to acquire a life of their own, when they come "out of nowhere" and catch him, instead of him being able to employ them to articulate his wishes and concerns. Neologistic word creations, like *Atemschaukel* (breath-swing), *Herzschaufel* (heart-shovel) or *Hungerengel* (hunger angel), which epitomize the novel's strife to open up traditional language to an otherwise inexpressible experience, reflect the poetic commitment to break up spatial, ideological, and linguistic confinements to give voice to a singularity beyond forceful constructions of collectivity and masterhood. By evoking similar word compositions as those known from texts by Paul Celan (*Atemwende*) or Primo Levi (*Atempause*), *Atemschaukel* (*The Hunger Angel*) also establishes a connection with a number of intertexts witnessing Nazi concentration camps and the Shoah. Müller's texts repeatedly reference Paul Celan, Primo Levi, Jean Améry, Jorge Semprún, George-Arthur Goldschmidt or Ruth Klüger, sometimes in connection with her own complicated heritage as a child of a Nazi father and a mother who only three years before her birth had come back from a five-year internment in a Russian camp (Müller 1996: 21–24, 40; 2014: 38).[14]

In the afterword of *The Hunger Angel* Müller explains her impulse to write about the deportation of Romanian Germans as having been triggered by

13 German in the English version.

14 See also the early literary account of a visit to Maramuresh, a region in Romania (formerly Hungary) from which the Jewish population was deported to Auschwitz and Birkenau. Here the autodiegetic narrator, who visits Jewish cemeteries, reflects: "If I were to die now my hair would not be a brush, my bones would not be flour. My death would be German like my father's. He was in the SS, after the war he returned to the village, got married and fathered me." (Müller 1987: 105).

experiences she had had as a child when overhearing furtive hints and sensing a still vivid anxiety. Thus, the novel might also be viewed as a document of writing in the second generation, which in a certain way is affected by transgenerational transmission of subdued feelings and memories that now call for expression and treatment (Bannasch 2011: 125–126). By drawing on the form of autobiographical camp narrative *The Hunger Angel* cites the blurring of factography and fiction characteristic of this genre (Taterka 1999: 184–185; Toker 2000: 123–140). However, the novel has also rightly been regarded as a phenomenon of transition, since it bears marks of a fictionalized account of a personal experience while at the same time clearly breaking the factographic pact by reflecting on itself as post-testimonial.[15] Thus it draws attention to the fact that there is no testimony "as such" without narrative modes of mediation and intertextual traces and that the generations coming after the eye witnesses have to develop their own literary forms of remembrance, lest camp experiences be forgotten.

As a poetic and a comparatively belated account, this treatment of camps does, of course, already rely on a number of literary intertexts that have addressed the Gulag, especially Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*, written between 1954 and 1973 and first published in German between 2007 and 2010, but also Aleksandr Solzhenizyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* or *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, or Eugenia Ginzburg's autobiographical works (Eke 2011: 56; Opitz 2012).[16] However, having been written in German, the novel is also more closely bound to the context of German history and memory than can be said of texts that are exclusively focused on the Gulag system as a symptom of Stalinist totalitarianism. Thus it can also be viewed as being part of a larger, until recently little acclaimed, field of German literature in Romania in which the general taboo concerning deportations to Russia had in fact constantly been broken (Spiridon 2010: 371).[17] Furthermore, some of the rare accounts of the Gulag experience in Kazakhstan and the Kolyma region in German come to mind as possible intertexts: Angela Rohr's (alias Helene Golnipa) *Im Angesicht der Todesengel Stalins* ("In the face of Stalin's death angels") and *Lager* ("Camp") as well as Margarete Buber-Neumann's *Under Two Dictators: Prisoner of Stalin and Hitler*, which actually testifies to camp experience on both "sides": having been handed over to the Nazis in 1940, communist Buber-Neumann was imprisoned in Ravensbrück (Toker 2000: 40–42).

15 See, for instance, Braun (2011: 48), where the novel is called "postmemorial heterofiction."

16 Müller herself mostly refers to "literature about the camps of the Gulag" that she read during her research (Müller 2014: 207).

17 For intertexts see also Maurer (2013: 39).

The Hunger Angel certainly does not engage in explicit comparisons between the two systems' ideologies and systems of mass murder. However, by evoking the memories and narratives referring to different types of camps, and especially by focusing on a character who in a certain way is affected by the dehumanizing violence of both systems, it can be seen as a contribution to the more recent debate on camps and mass violence as a general phenomenon of the time (Etkind 2004; Snyder 2010). It can also be viewed as increasing our awareness of the interrelatedness of memories and the limitations revealed in any national or group-oriented memory when contrasted or brought together with conflicting narratives. The perspective of Leo Auberg who is the focalizer of the entire narrative is far too limited to actually be suitable for a well-informed and distanced comparative account: he is 17 when he is deported and has had no higher education or job experience. However, he is an acute observer and some of his reflections reveal not only parallels but also entanglements of the two repressive orders. Thus, through his perspective, which is the non-sovereign position of someone who refutes the dominant discourses of identity while not having recourse to an alternative collective or memorial narrative, a multidirectionality of memory is highlighted in the sense espoused by Michael Rothberg (2009). Instead of being the architect of a picture and interpretation of two (or more) competing systems and memories, the character of Leo Auberg is positioned at the point where they intersect and reveal uncanny contiguities without, however, being systematically set in relation to each other. Thus, what is at stake here stands in clear contrast to the striving to compare, which initiated the historians' debate in Germany in the 1980s (Katz 1993: 18). Instead of leveling the differences between Nazi camps and the Gulag by establishing a teleology or moral hierarchy, but also instead of setting them as absolute, thus implicitly affirming ideological claims to internal homogeneity and clear distinctions, the text stays with the non-sovereign position and thus with the effort to witness an experience that does not testify to the Gulag system only – and that does not simply witness a coherent system at all.

3 Body image, masculinity, and homosexuality in the Soviet and Nazi ideology

In the chapter "Exciting times," Auberg's experiences as camp prisoner are intertwined with memories of the fascist home from which he has seemingly escaped through his deportation. Like other forced laborers, he can sometimes leave the camp and go to the nearby Russian village to trade coal and other

items for food. A gramophone reminds him of a radio at home, which his father had bought in 1936 to follow the Berlin Olympics, staged as a triumphant event reflecting the supposed historical superiority of Nazi Germany. The radio also broadcast exercise classes, which his parents took at home every day, thus linking "great" history and the private realm, which appear similarly permeated by propaganda, with the radio as its medium. This also affects Leo, who as a child is made to go to an exercise class called "gymnastics for cripples" (Müller 2012: 45) because his parents want him to be "more soldierly" – that is, more in compliance with the normative idea of the perfect male body propagated by National Socialism. That this also implies a specific concept of a "healthy" racial corpus (*Volkskörper*) is reflected in the fact that the class is associated with "cripples," a category that ultimately signifies the limits of even forced compliance and coordination that aimed at relinquishing individuality and difference. "Cripples" were regarded as "worthless life" in the Nazi ideology and were subject to euthanasia programs set up to exterminate "unhealthy elements." Influenced by this ideology, the child Leo perceives himself as an outcast, as somehow not in order. When in an "act of disobedience" he decides to skip a class called *völkischer Donnerstag* ("national-socialist Thursday"), where children are engaged in a military drill, this only "reinforces [his] sense of being crippled" (Müller 2012: 46). Disobedience does not strengthen the child's sense of the self as autonomous but rather reenacts the internalized racist order, leaving him torn between affirmation and resistance – a non-sovereign position, which in its description nevertheless reveals a lot about the totalitarian politics and the phantasm of a "healthy" body.

In the very dense description of the transformations at home indicating its infiltration by Nazi ideology, Leo as narrator also links his father's interest in "girl gymnasts and Transylvanian Saxon girls in folk costume," whom he likes to photograph – another medium combining official racial ideology and personal desire – with his new interest in hunting. Photo shooting the young German girls' bodies and shooting hares is thus presented as connected. An aggressive (male) desire to fix a certain ideal coincides with the killing of animals whose skin is removed: "the hares looked like the Saxon gymnast girls at the barre. The hares were eaten." (Müller 2012: 47) For a while a Jewish character, Herr Fränkel, is associated with the hares' skin – and therefore with their violent death – as every six months Fränkel comes to pick up the furs. Until he stops coming: "No one wanted to know anything more. He was Jewish, reddish-blond, tall, and nearly as slender as a hare." (2012: 47) The comparison alludes to the fact that Jews were not regarded as human anymore. Prior to extermination they are associated with animals that are condemned to be chased.

The fact that "[n]eighbours and relatives and teachers went off to fight for the Romanian Fascists or for Hitler" (Müller 2012: 47) is mentioned alongside the stories about gymnasts, the photo shooting and hunting, creating a dense network of textual clues and contiguities that show any expression of private or everyday life as pervaded by and interwoven with Nazi ideology and the developments on the German scene. At the same time the novel interweaves these glimpses of Fascism in the Romanian German community, presented as the narrator's childhood memories, with his present experiences in a Russian camp. The word "cripples" induces the narrator to switch to a recent event in the camp when an outside officer lectures about "peace and FUSSKULTUR" (Müller 2012: 45). The strange word that disrupts the reading process – marked by capital letters in the original – turns out to be a mistranslation. As is explained by a bilingual fellow inmate, the Russian speaker had originally intended to talk about the importance of physical training to "steel" people for the establishment of the Soviet Union. By trying to use a German equivalent of the Russian term *fiscultura* (physical culture) he had produced the non-existing *Fusskultur*, which to German speakers sounds like "culture of the feet," and made the plea to engage in bodily enhancement that directly results in a strengthening of the heart and thus "the heart of the Soviet Socialist Republics" (Müller 2012: 45) even more absurd. The propagated idea of bodily unity and centrality signified by the heart metaphor is decentered by the shift to one single body part, the one most "down to earth." The mistranslated word stands out and blocks the transmission of an ideological message. As something not understandable in the present context, it prompts the narrator to refer to contexts better known to him:

> I knew all about FUSSKULTUR from the cripple gymnastics and from our *Volk* course [*völkischer Donnerstag*] in high school [. . .]. We were drilled in the schoolyard: lie down, stand up, climb the fence, squat, lie down, push up, stand up. [. . .] Wotan, Vikings, Germanic ballads. (Müller 2012: 46)

On the one hand the episode with the lecture on physical culture accentuates the differences between Nazi ideology (and camps) and Soviet propaganda, which is shown to be based on the idea of reeducation and betterment,[18] while the Nazi ideology upholds the notion of an (uneducable) foreign body that has to be eliminated to strengthen the body of the people (*Volkskörper*). On the other hand, however, parallels and similarities come to the fore in the seizure of the body and concepts of community, which eliminate individuality and

18 For this central ideology underlying Soviet camps, see Maurer (2013: 37).

difference. The narrator is associated with a moment in which the performance of one ideology – in an attempt to reach and subject even those who speak a different language and come from another country, in an attempt, that is, to translate and universalize it – is interrupted, displaced, and affected by difference.[19] His sudden memory of "cripple gymnastics" inserts a foreign element into the observed context of the camp, which itself is presented as a space sealed off from any contrasting or conflicting notion of reality. However, an attempt to ideologically justify this space by performance and translation reveals two aspects of untranslatability. First, clashes are shown between the Soviet discourse of betterment and the Nazi discourse of elimination, which is part of the heritage these particular inmates came to the camp with and which affects their understanding of the situation. Thus, total control over humans, over bodies and meaning, which is to be implemented by the institution of the camp, is subverted. The second aspect of untranslatability can be seen in the fact that the act of (mis-)translation brings out the similarities of the propagated system and the system of its proclaimed enemy. Instead of being reeducated according to communist ideas these inmates, who have officially been sent to the camp because of their involvement with the enemy, German Fascism, can bring out the uncanny similarity of the two systems and their entanglements.

The narrator in particular occupies a position "between" the camps; his appears to be "an outsider's existence" (Spiridon 2013: 136). As a homosexual he would have been doomed to persecution, internment, and possibly even extermination in a Nazi-controlled world, which still haunts life in the Banat-Swabian land of his childhood. However, it is very clear that in the Soviet camp any open expression of homosexual desire would equal death, too (Müller 2012: 3). Both systems or ideologies are largely characterized by male dominance and a tendency to idealize a certain image of the body as well as a tendency to eliminate differences (also in terms of gender differences). They share homophobic tendencies and regard any crossing of boundaries, including articulations of intimacy, as threat to their control. Homophobia in Nazi Germany was actually ambivalent, since homosexuality was partly regarded as curable, which resulted in manifold efforts to influence and "reeducate" homosexual people in order to bring them back to the norm of male sexuality (including the obligation to procreation).

19 Here textual strategies resemble those described by Homi Bhabha, who has observed that the "migrant culture of the 'in-between,' the minority position, dramatizes the activity of culture's untranslatability; and in so doing, it moves the question of culture's appropriation beyond the assimilationist's dream, or the racist's nightmare, of a 'full transmissal of subject-matter;' and towards an encounter with the ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity that marks the identification with culture's difference." (Bhabha 1994: 224).

Individuals who were regarded as biologically inclined and therefore hopeless and incurable, however, were subject to the logic of elimination. The term "cripple gymnastics," which apparently is not an official term but rather a vernacular saying, reflects this ambivalence: the "real" people with disabilities would not be in the class, since they would have been singled out as hopeless cases. However, as a closeted homosexual who apparently does not meet the body norms of the hegemonic community, Leo Auberg is always in danger of being exposed and singled out – that he who has never been "part of any war" (Müller 2012: 36) is sent off to the camp almost appears as a fulfillment of this possibility. Thus, in more than one way, the narrator's homosexuality, for which he himself has hardly any explicit words, brings out uncanny contingencies between the systems.

4 Rifts in the Gulag system: Race and disability

Indicative of such contiguities is also the figure of Tur Prikulitsch, a sadistic, narcissistic, and corrupt camp warden. He is introduced as *kapo* – a term that, in German, is firmly associated with Nazi concentration camps, where it signified a prisoner with privileges who was supposed to support the brutal camp order; in the context of the Gulag the term is usually not used. Arthur (Tur) Prikulitsch is introduced as a native of the Carpathian Ukraine, which explains his Russian–German bilingualism. This double affiliation is indicated by his name, which combines a traditional German first name with a surname with a Slavic ending, which evokes a mythical figure from Transylvanian folk tales impersonating evil (Maurer 2013: 41). As a translator, he has access to both sides and obscures the possibility of drawing clear lines between Russians and Germans, victims and perpetrators. The fact that there is a Jewish prisoner among the inmates is remarkable here because he is said to have been arrested as one of the Germans accused of Hitler's crimes (Müller 2012: 36). This happened after "Zither Lommer" (so nicknamed because he plays the zither) had his tailor shop expropriated and left his family behind in the Bucovina[20] to make a living as an itinerant craftsman. Even if officially he is not interned for being Jewish, as he would have been under Nazi rule, his case still speaks of the coarseness of the supposedly political categories of the Gulag logic, which is blind to differences and questions of justice. He seems to be just another collateral damage, which cannot confute the rightness of the system as a whole. He remains in the camp for three-and-a-half

20 In the English version translated as "Moldavia."

years and is then released, an event quite unthinkable in Nazi camps (Thun-Hohenstein 2007: 194).[21] In a (non-equal) conversation between Tur Prikulitsch, the camp barber shaving him and Leo, who is standing by, the apparently highly charged question about the fate of David Lommer is raised. The barber, who is from the same region as Prikulitsch, has the courage to ask him why Lommer was sent to Odessa (which is far from his home town). Prikulitsch does not give a straightforward answer: "Lommer had no business being here, and from Odessa he can go wherever he wants" (Müller 2012: 37). What sounds like freedom of choice and mobility is only obscuring the fact that Lommer had lost everything. Leo comments: "But where is he supposed to go. There's no one left for him at home." So another interpretation of his "release" arises: he was released in order to be rid of him, not only from the camp community, which officially is supposed to be part of the wider community, but which first has to undergo a process of improvement through forced labor, but also from the Soviet Union (Odessa being a port city and a place of transit). He is the only person in the book whose earlier release from the camp is recounted. This is remarkable in view of the reality of Russian camps in general, where there used to be a lot of movement, either because of general fluctuation or because of transports to other camps, a fact described in many memoirs (Toker 2000: 84–85).

Having finished, the barber finally asks Prikulitsch whether he is satisfied. This question is ambiguous, as is Prikulitsch's answer, when he says: "With my nose, yes" (Müller 2012: 37). The whole scene is so charged and very subtly allusive that reading it one can easily miss the possible implications. Is the *kapo* responding not only to the question concerning his treatment in the barber shop but also to the underlying question about his anti-Semitism (including concepts of body normativity and deviance) and his potential complicity with the Nazis? Does the fact that he deliberately limits the scope of meaning of his being satisfied to the treatment of his nose indicate that he tries to fend off any allegations concerning his responsibility for Lommer's fate, that of his family and of other Jews? How much does the barber, who potentially has known Prikulitsch from before the camps, know about his involvement in the genocide of the Jews in Eastern Europe? Is the fact that this potential Nazi serves as a mediator between German inmates and Russian camp authorities a hint at manifold transferences and relations between Nazism and Stalinism? To this last, very far-reaching and rather abstract question, *The Hunger Angel* definitely has no answer, nor does it really justify it. The novel widely refrains from explicit

21 The impossibility of release or return for Jews in the Nazi camp system is described as a central marker of difference between the camp systems.

political statements, but rather scrutinizes the microphysics of human behavior and relations in the context of totalitarian power. However, what can be seen in this episode is that this micro-perspective reveals not only similar phenomena, like the ambivalent figure of the *kapo*, who, although a prisoner, acts as a henchman of the system of repression. It also sheds light on the fluid and porous boundaries of the two systems and thus undermines their ideological rhetoric of distinction. If distinctions are implied by the text, it appears that they cannot simply be attributed to the different ideologies or to the fact that one system is less atrocious or inhuman than the other. Rather, it is the specific situation among the camp inmates and their behavior that actually enables us to see these differences.

To demonstrate this, let us look at yet another person in the camp, Katharina Seidel, called Planton-Kati, who has obviously gotten there "by mistake." This is at least what the narrator, in a somewhat naive fashion, assumes because she has a mental disability and is clearly "not suited to any type of work" (Müller 2012: 91). She is like a foreign body inside the world of a labor camp: she "didn't understand what a quota was, or a command, or a punishment" (2012: 91). Since she obviously cannot have been sent to the camp for the usual reasons, justifying the official version of the aim and meaning of camps, the narrator ponders over her being there – she had to replace someone on the list who paid to be exempted or was put on the list by a sadistic crook. Those considerations do not yield a clear answer but they alert the reader to this case, which obviously cannot easily be explained by reference to the official narrative of the Gulag. A mentally disabled person in a camp, however, evokes Nazi narratives and practices concerning "unworthy" life. Considering the fact that Lommer, a Jew, may have been sent to the camp not by accident, but because of the anti-Semitism of those in charge, it may also be speculated whether Kati had got there for similar reasons, because someone sympathized with fascist ideas. In any case, the fact that she is there shows that the ideological reasoning for the existence of the camps on the Russian side is not consistent or rather is much more complex in practice than it is on paper. That Kati survives five years of camp life is only indirectly attributed to the fact that this camp is not explicitly a death camp and that she is not in a group of people deliberately brought there to die. When at some point the Russian camp inspector calls her "fascist" because of her apparent stubbornness, therefore attributing to her a political category, it is clear that she is in immediate danger. If Kati survives, it is because her complete ignorance and helplessness together with her involuntary resistance to the camp order stirs the remaining vestiges of compassion in the other inmates. In her they can defend the rest of their own humanity: "we treat her as something that belongs to all of us. We make up for what we do to

one another by standing up for her. We're capable of many things, but as long as she is living among us, there's a limit to how far we actually go." (Müller 2012: 112) Remarkably, this impulse is not explained with reference to an abstract humanist ideal – which is utterly foreign to the camp: the protagonist has long transformed the books he brought with him into sheets of paper useful in everyday life in the camp. Rather, Kati is regarded as a kind of cherished possession in which each of the inmates sees what he himself needs most under the actual conditions: not reason and rationality, but her way of performing "the most basic tasks without thinking" (Müller 2012: 94) and her way of adjusting to the conditions without succumbing to the logic of its rules.

5 Camp memories: The impossibility of sharing

The fact that the story of the disappearance of a Jewish inmate is related in a chapter titled "A motley crew," referring to the ragtag society of inmates as the barber sees it, is surely no coincidence. Thus the idea of the inmates as some kind of (counter-)community is refuted here on two counts: first, because one member is excluded (or at least exempted) and second, naturally, because it appears absurd in conditions that destroy both communal and moral behavior. "Inside the camp, the we-form is singular" (Müller 2012: 251) is one of the quasi-conclusions of the narrator sharing his insights about the camp. In its abbreviated form it seems like a completely self-evident statement of utmost clarity, but for the reader it remains somewhat cryptic. Obviously, the common notions of individual and collective identity are disrupted here; the equation of "we" and the singular points at the breakdown of the individual, which in the plural can form a group or society. This also implies a confusion concerning the grammatical rules and conventions: singular and plural do not serve as linguistic classifications any more; as they collapse, the conventional possibilities of systematization, distinction and orientation appear fundamentally disrupted. The narrator demonstrates this when he points to the different conditions that privileged prisoners such as the barber live in compared with ordinary inmates. It infuriates him that the barber compares the camp to a hotel where people from different places come together. In an evocation of the camp as a gathering place for people of different origin and language there might be an implicit reference to Primo Levi's comparison of the Buna tower in Auschwitz with the Babel tower and the confusion of languages after its fall (Levi 1996: 36, 81).[22]

22 See also Toker (2000: 98).

This underlines the notion that in the camp any idea of communal identity in light of the totalitarian grip on people aimed at an effacement of their histories and particularities appears highly problematic. Neither can it rightfully become the point of reference for conceptions of another, morally justified, transnational community. Here Arendt's skepticism with respect to thinking of camp inmates as a community of victims to which moral or political ideas could be attributed comes to mind.

Thus, the cited chapter, with its faint intertextual references that do not work as concrete comparisons (with the heteroglossia of the Jews in Auschwitz coming together there in the immediacy of genocide), could be read as a commentary on the limits to which camp inmates as a group can be represented in any positive sense. Considering the large number of Gulag texts, and especially their reception by the samizdat, the exile communities and the West, critical of the Soviets, which in various ways have propagated a better counter-society with reference to the moral authority of camp survivors, Herta Müller's *The Hunger Angel* consequently defies attempts at such instrumentalizations of the victims. The text focuses on the question of what happens to the individual when confined in the concentration camp universe. Since he loses any hold on the systems of meaning and the certainty to think of himself as a member of the human race, any conception of a better world that is constructed in reference to his experience fails to take precisely this loss of faith in meaning (in both a religious and a secular sense) into account. After his return, Leo Auberg encounters a former fellow inmate, Trudi Pelikan, in the street of their hometown. Although they notice each other, they pretend not to and proceed without any sign of recognition: "For our own sakes we preferred to act as though we didn't know each other. There's nothing to understand about that." (Müller 2012: 267) That this limit of meaning and understanding is no sign of rudeness or indifference is made clear in the following comment, where Leo assures the reader: "how gladly I would have put my arms around her and had let her know that I agreed with her." (Müller 2012: 267) By not doing this he protects both Trudi and himself from being overpowered by traumatic memories, which cannot be dealt with and which – as clearly shown here – cannot be a basis for a community of victims or those who identify with them. This means that, likewise, they cannot be a reference point for a community of (shared) experience.

In fact, the term experience, which has so far also guided the deliberations in this chapter, is marked as problematic in the text. In one chapter ("Homesickness. That's the last thing I need") the narrator, then still a prisoner, singles it out as one of the words that "have me as a target, that seem created solely for my re-deportation" (Müller 2012: 221). Like several other words in the text, it is spelled out in capital letters, marking its status as a foreign body that blocks

reference rather than denoting something outside language. If EXPERIENCE is nothing that the camp survivor can easily relate to but that, on the contrary, implies the danger of an actualization of his suffering, it should be handled with great care (the same holds true for MEMORY, also spelled in capitals). This is a premise especially for those who try to remember camp experience as a central and at the same time unrelatable reality of this time. Like Primo Levi, Jean Améry or Varlam Shalamov, Herta Müller demonstrates in *The Hunger Angel* that there is nothing positive to be drawn from life in the camps. By not ending with the protagonist's liberation, the novel departs from the pattern most camp novels are structured around (Toker 2000: 93). The six chapters that deal with a period after the liberation, already hinted at in some proleptic episodes, show the narrator as distanced from the events, which in some cases span at least sixty years. The reality of the camp, however, has not receded into the past; rather, as a traumatic caesura, it persists in the present and haunts the narrator. When he talks about his marriage (which he had ended after eleven years) and the lack of steady relationships afterwards – "Wild animal crossings, nothing more" (2012: 279) – his words conjure up an association of his (homosexual) desire and sexual activity with the animal world, implying expulsion and exclusion from the normative human realm as he has experienced it from early on. Words evoke the story discussed earlier, where a hare doomed to be chased is compared with human beings subject to totalitarian hold – in fact, the hare is a central signifier that reappears in different contexts in the novel, thus marking its diffusion and a permanent possibility of its sudden (traumatic) reappearance. Long after the end of Nazi rule and the decline of the Soviet system the narrator's attempts to talk about himself are still deeply pervaded by foreign words and concepts estranging him from feelings, memories, and experiences that could consciously be reflected as his own. From this it follows that if there is a collective memory that can grow from this kind of EXPERIENCE and can preserve it for future generations, it has to find ways not to forget the insistence of what cannot be settled in representational modes of speaking.

In *The Hunger Angel* the protagonist, after first being upset about the camp being referred to as a "hotel," for a while comes to even embrace the idea, which so completely contradicts the reality of the camp that clinging to it in his (individual) phantasies can temporarily be understood as an act of mental resistance, at least near the beginning of his stay. Eventually, though, it becomes a "cursed word we couldn't inhabit," like so many others that have a meaning only within a world from which the inmates are radically cut off. The camp is not a transitory place, unlike a hotel, which in spatial or temporal terms can still be seen as an approximation of a "home." However, even after the release, it is insinuated at this early moment in the novel, there will be no

return home. Here, the momentous insight the narrator has about the fate of his Jewish fellow prisoner can also be read as a cue of what the camp experience will do to the narrator himself. While his own fate is quite different, in that after the release he can actually return to his home town and his family, it also bears similarities to the experience of the Jewish prisoner who cannot return because his home has been destroyed and his family murdered. The years of violence, starvation, and humiliation have left their indelible marks on him and in his family, there is no place for him any more: they had given up on him, not expecting he would be coming back. Thus, the birth of his baby brother appears to him like an act of replacement that only continues the processes of effacement of individuality and singularity, which characterized camp life.

In the text there is no question mark after his remark about David Lommer: "But where is he supposed to go." Syntactically, it is a question and at the same time it is not a question, since it is neither really directed at someone, meant to elicit an answer or communication in general, nor is it opening up a potential of meanings. The text does not take on the perspective of its Jewish character. It speaks for him without assuming or trying to identify with his position, and it points to parallels without erasing the differences.

In one of the last chapters Leo Auberg, after returning home and having been confronted with the incommunicability of his experiences "at home," buys a notebook in order to write down his memories. The first sentence is: "Will you understand me, question mark." (Müller 2012: 269) Here, the question mark, which is missing throughout the book, finally appears not as a conventional punctuation mark, but written out in words. The "you" is supposed to be the book, the narrator informs us. Where communication is interrupted, resorting to words as substitutes for punctuation that would form meaningful sentences appears as a possibility. In fact, words in the text often replace meaningful structures, or rather the abyss of meaninglessness, which revokes representation. In the extreme, this is visible even in the text's typeface, which at times dissolves into mere lists of words rupturing any syntactical coherence (e.g. Müller 2012: 146–147). "All you can do is lists" (Müller 2012: 81) is also one of the insights on the camp from the protagonist. On the one hand, making a list is a practice that reflects the tendency of totalitarian systems to transform individuals into items or pure numbers, thus subjecting them to the bureaucratic logic of exchangeability and control. Thus, by learning this lesson, the inmate-narrator has adapted to this logic, which is bound to estrange him from other ways of relating to the world. On the other hand, however, his lists appear as highly idiosyncratic inventories of words, phrases, and things, which cannot be subsumed to any order other than that of the poetic text.

Lists obviously hold at bay the "point zero," which is repeatedly described as the limit of representation: "Absolute zero is that which cannot be expressed" (Müller 2012: 271). At the same time it marks it as a void by foregrounding the disconnectedness of things, the impossibility of recollecting the meaning that words and things had for Leo Auberg as a prisoner in the camp. The gap between the two worlds – repeatedly the camp is described as a world in itself, with rules, significances and words of its own – cannot be bridged because the man who has experienced it is not identical with the man who is now trying to tell us about it: "The only way you can talk about something is by again becoming the person you're talking about." (Müller 2012: 258)

Memory is described here not as a process of recollection of past events, conditions, and sensations but as a practice of selecting, discarding, and repeating, which manifests itself in Leo's attempts at writing. Thus, he muses over something that his former camp inmates said about him during their long journey home: "Look how he's bawling, he's falling apart" (Müller 2012: 270).[23] The apparently intense feeling indicated by tears can only be noted by others; when Leo later tries to write his memoirs he cannot recall what he felt back then, but he remembers those (external) words that obviously describe and miss him at the same time. Trying to come to terms with this feeling of being torn between inadequate words of others and the void inside himself – later he speaks about "[m]y steep-sided hollowness [. . .] I fall apart by going inward" (Müller 2012: 283). His writing process resembles Freudian fort-da game, since it repeatedly alternates self-assertion with symbolization and rejection: "I thought about that sentence a lot. Then I wrote it down on an empty page. And the next day I scratched it out. The day after that I wrote it down again underneath. Scratched it out again, wrote it down again. When the page was full I tore it out." (Müller 2012: 270)

Writing a memoir appears difficult if not impossible not only because nobody asks and nobody wants to know, but because the split between the worlds has affected and will always have affected the narrating "I." This dilemma has been articulated in several canonical texts of camp literature, the best known probably in the foreword of Robert Antelme's *The Human Race*, where the author/narrator speaks of his "frantic desire to describe it such as it had been" (Antelme 1998: 3). And of the immediate insight "that it was impossible": "No sooner would we begin to tell our story that we would be choking over it. [. . .] even to us, what we had to tell, seemed *unimaginable*" (3). In the "narration-dream" in Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* the protagonist envisions a situation where he is back home telling the story about his life in the camp to his family.

23 In German: "Schau, wie der heult, dem läuft was über."

When he sees that they are not interested and do not listen, he is seized by intense pain. Afterwards, he realizes that this nightmarish dream does not express individual anxiety but is dreamt repeatedly by many of his fellow prisoners as well (Levi 1996: 58). Herta Müller's "heterofiction," which in the end describes the narrator as struggling with words and pages of notes that he continuously writes and rejects, evokes this nightmare while at the same time shifting the focus to the ways words and concepts connected to a totalitarian seizure of the individual are repeated and translated into different contexts in which they reveal their power, but can also be placed at a distance by poetic strategies. Here, these two strands of text meet: by focusing on a position "between the camps," which is affected by different hegemonic and totalitarian discourses, incidences of translation appear to reveal breaks and fissures in the respective ideologies, thus opening spaces of their poetic reflection and transformation. By employing a postmemorial, post-factual heterofiction, the topoi and genre characteristics of factographic and autobiographical camp narratives witnessing different historical and political contexts are cited and translated into a realm of cultural memory, thus registering a break with the ideas of community, tradition, collective identity, and communicable individual experience in a poetic form.

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