Herta Müller

The Hunger Angel

Atemschaukel

Presented by: Cristina Spinei

Given that the deportation of nearly 80.000 German citizens from Romania to forced work camps in the Soviet Union has long been a blank spot in the political and intellectual discourse, Herta Müller's latest novel *Atemschaukel* (engl. *The Hunger Angel*) can be read as a political manifesto, as it reflects precisely on what the agreements signed at the end of the Second World War and the ethnic cleansing campaigns came to signify. Published a couple of weeks before she was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 2009, it was originally intended to be written together with the avant-garde poet from Transylvania, Oskar Pastior. Indeed, the creative interchange between Müller and Pastior functions as a space of resonance between fictionalization and factuality, between the first-generation of the Gulag memory and the second generation of its post-memorial legacy. It prompts coherence to the deportation records and yields broader insight and understanding of the inter- and transgenerationally transmitted trauma.

Müller and Pastior's dealing with the history of displacement, with a view to redress the grievances which have shaped the fates of the previous generation, has been cemented by a prior journey through the former camps from Ukraine they made together in 2004. Along the way, the topography was rendered meaningful through Pastior's recollection and Müller's envisaging the physical aspects. Instead of zooming in on victimhood or innocence, arbitrariness or justice, which could have been voiced by the major character during his expulsion to the work camp or thereafter, Müller avoids a moralising or didactic orientation. The author sees her mission in producing meaning through her textual material. The way Müller maps the Romanian-Germans' trauma of the deportation years is at the same time evidence of her idiosyncratic writing and echoes the significant Shoah and Gulag novels. It is her poetic and analytical images that make *The Hunger Angel* widely recognized as a momentous creation rooted in the friendship and teamwork between two prominent poets akin in spirit, where the dark side of politics begets grand literature.

The novel is grounded in the fictionalization of surviving the Gulag, namely in the literary projection of Oskar Pastior's memories as deportee between 1945 and 1949. In a formula that fuses memory politics into poetic codes, Pastior's personal recollections are given larger significance through allusions to similar traumatic circumstances endured by the German minority from Romania, whose fates intertwined, including Müller's mother, a former prisoner herself. The novel ineluctably directs the spotlight onto a process of acknowledging this chapter of East-Central European political history by addressing the survivors' memories, making their unknown story known to the entire world and therefore including this narrative of the past in the wider frames of remembering. And this literary reconfiguration is all the more epoch-making as it pins down the by then insufficiently-discussed issue of the displacement experienced by the German population under Communist rule.

While counterbalancing the mother's unmitigated silence over her imprisonment in a labour camp

from Donbas by Pastior's willingness to reveal his story, which Müller could faithfully transcribe up to the poet's sudden death in 2006, the novel employs the backdrop of the Ukrainian Gulag to draw a metaphorical representation of surviving misery and terror. Müller's option to use a post-memorial research script is undeniably influenced by the author's biographical content, precisely as she has been confronted with the impossibility of recording the memory traits directly at the family level. Telescoped through Pastior's account, the overwhelming feeling of submission and fear that has already marked Müller's childhood at an age when she could scarcely fathom the idea of a camp or much less reconstruct it from the snippets of memory overheard in the familial context, is rendered materiality as to limn the surrounding political maze, as she states in the tailpiece.

The author resorts to a first-person narrative with the aid of the 17 years old Leopold Auberg who gives a voice to Pastior after having been deported to Ukraine together with over five hundred ethnic Germans in cattle trucks, after having spent there five years in heinous conditions, deprived of proper food, decent clothing or minimal hygiene and having fled to Austria in 1968. Only after 60 years does it become possible for him to look back at that dramatic period. From Auberg's recounting, reflected in 64 rather short chapters linked to one another by means of camp watchwords, camp inmates' names, and camp everyday occurrences, the reader can piece together an image of dire scarcity. The reader is also led through the individual culpability rooted in the collective guilt attributed to the German ethnic minority and gradually perceives the political background of the expulsion. Yet Auberg is an example of a continuous oscillation between two types of painful burden, not only of being German, but also of being homosexual. In this respect, the liberation could hardly be associated with genuine freedom, given the disdain, blackmail and imprisonment gay persons were facing in communist Romania.

The resistance or more precisely the attempts at resistance to acute hunger and dehumanization, however dysmorphic, are codified into language, often by converting paradoxical amalgams into poetic imagery, as in "Atemschaukel" - translated literally as "breath swing", thus accommodating a reference to the terrible threat seizing all the depicted characters, and concomitantly pointing to the distinction between death and loss that the author explains in *Gelber Mais und keine Zeit* (engl. *Yellow Corn and no Time*): "Mit dem Tod lässt sich nicht reden. Aber mit dem Verlust muss man es tun" (engl. "With death one cannot speak. But with loss one has to"). There are also apparent dissonances between simplicity and complexity (as in "Hungerengel" - engl. "hunger angel" or "Herzschaufel" - engl. "heart shovel", compounds stemming from Pastior, with the latter being solely a technicality borrowed from a specialist dictionary). The text is permeated with haunting images of ever-present hunger, death, appalling brutalization of both dominators and domineers, human degradation, endurance, pragmatism, but also playful creativity that are encapsulated in a linguistic universe characterized by figurativeness. Thereby, language becomes condensed and reifying, verbal constructs gain visibility, and abstract ideas appear transfigured as objects.

Unlike her other earlier novels, where she deals with the abuses and terror perpetuated by the secret police ('Securitate') under Communism, Müller focuses here on a different context of oppression which impacted millions of civilians in Europe after the Second World War. In light of this, literary critics have not failed to emphasize the growing awareness of the contested and also blurry practices of memory-making in the Romanian public sphere, to which Müller contributed significantly. Once the collaboration between Müller and Pastior came to the fore due to her Nobel prize winning, Pastior's partly buried past produced many reactions, specifically the revelation, made public four years after his death, that he acted as an informant for the Securitate between 1961 and 1968, even while being spied on and harassed by its agents. Some intellectuals asked the question of whether Pastior's involvement with the secret police should put a special imprint on the

novel's reception when discussing its political dimensions, since the issue was disseminated only after the novel was published. It is precisely on this integrity line that separates the internal complementariness between the two authors (especially as Müller points out most sharply the distress caused by the violation of private lives in a dictatorship) that most radical critique rests. Many voiced a strong defence of Pastior, however, seeing that a thorough investigation later revealed that the accusations lacked incriminating evidence, as the information he provided was ultimately deemed trivial. If otherwise unyielding, Pastior's struggle was internalized by Müller and ultimately inspired in her only compassion.

LANGUAGE: German / Deutsch

CENSORSHIP STATUS: