

LANGUAGE IS NOT HEIMAT ON THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE IN THE WORKS OF HERTA MÜLLER

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When *Heimat*¹ is lost and estranged, can language bring shelter? According to Herta Müller many German authors have claimed, “Sprache ist Heimat”² (language is *Heimat*). Thus, they believe language can compensate for the loss of *Heimat*, for the loss of their homeland and even substitute the latter. The Romanian-German author Herta Müller, however, is critical of this claim. In her view, it assumes that everyone can be at home in language, independent of the political situation in which they live (Müller 2009: 23-24). But can language, which is rooted in lived experience, be an apolitical haven?

In what follows, I will briefly introduce Herta Müller and outline the cultural background that has shaped her perspective. From this basis, I will offer an interpretation of her view on how language is politically entangled, with the aid of her essay *Heimat ist das was gesprochen wird* (Heimat Is What Is Spoken). The political dimension of language will be illustrated through examples from her literary works.

1. The Author: “Herta Who?”

When the Nobel Prize winner of 2009 was named, the public seemed baffled: “Herta Who?” (Sulzberger 2009) headlined the New York Times, alluding to the writer’s relative anonymity. Müller was previously on the radar of literary critics and scholars and not

¹ Heimat in this particular context can be understood as a synonym for ‘homeland’ but must not be restricted to this meaning generally. According to Boa and Palfreyman “[t]he core meaning of the word ‘Heimat’ [...] is ‘home’ in the sense of a place rather than a dwelling.” Boa and Palfreyman, *Heimat: A German Dream*, 1.

² Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Herta Müller’s works are my own.

a household name for a broad audience. Her works pivot for the most part around the Banat region located in the West of Romania. This diverse region is the home of a number of religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities such as Jews, Roma, Hungarians, Serbs and Germans. Here Herta Müller was born to German parents in 1953 and grew up in a small, isolated German-cultural village. Her first works *Niederungen (Nadirs)* and *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt (The Passport)*, engage critically with village life and the mindset of Banat Swabians, as this specific German minority is called. She only spoke the dialect of her home village for most of her early years and did not learn Romanian until she was a teenager in school. As an undergraduate, she came increasingly into the firing line of the Securitate, the Romanian secret police force of the communist regime. This development is reflected most clearly in her novel *Herztier (The Land of Green Plums)*. Eventually she was declared a dissident and harassed for refusing to collaborate with the Securitate. In 1987, two years before the Ceaușescu's regime was overthrown, she finally received her exit permit and left for Germany, where she has lived ever since.

Herta Müller's life is a story of dispossession that shines through her autofictional prose.¹ In both her life and her writings, themes surrounding language and *Heimat* run through like a golden thread.

2. Müller's Criticism of the Idea that Language Is *Heimat*

In her essay *Heimat ist das was gesprochen wird*, Müller explains her criticism of the idea that language is *Heimat*. According to Müller, many German writers

wiegen sich in dem Glauben, daß die Muttersprache wenns darauf ankäme, alles andere ersetzen könnte. Obwohl es bei ihnen nie darauf angekommen ist, sagen sie: Sprache ist Heimat. Autoren, deren Heimat unwidersprochen parat steht,

¹ Cf. Prize motivation stated by the Nobel Committee for Literature at the Swedish Academy: Müller "who, with the concentration of poetry and the frankness of prose, depicts the landscape of the dispossessed." Nobelprize.org. / Nobel Media AB. 2013, "Herta Müller – Prose."

denen zu Hause nichts Lebensbedrohliches zustößt, irritieren mich mit dieser Behauptung (Müller 2009, *Heimat*: 23-24)

(lull themselves into the belief that, if it came down to it, their native language could compensate for everything else. Although it never came down to it for them, they say: language is *Heimat*. Authors whose *Heimat* stands there unchallenged, who have nothing life threatening happening to them at home, irritate me with this claim.)

In her opinion, these writers do not consider the initial situation that shapes their standpoint, the fact they have “sicheren Boden unter den Füßen” (Müller 2009, (Müller 2009, *Heimat*: 24) (safe ground under their feet). For persecuted minority groups that are faced with a tragic political situation, however, the mother tongue acquires more of an existential meaning. It amounts to “einer bloßen Selbstvergewisserung. Es bedeutet lediglich: ‘Es gibt mich noch’” (Müller 2009, *Heimat*: 24) (nothing but self-assurance; it means nothing but: ‘I am still here’). Consequently, the simple equation language is *Heimat* cannot hold true for them. It seems almost ignorant to believe that these victims who had to emigrate to save their lives could simply “vom Zusammenbruch der Existenz, von der Einsamkeit und dem für immer zerbrochenen Selbstverständnis absehen [...], da die Muttersprache im Schädel als tragbare Heimat alles wieder gutmacht” (Müller 2009, *Heimat*: 25) (look over the ruin of their existence, over the loneliness and the forever broken self-conception [...], because the native language in their skulls, as a portable *Heimat*, will compensate for all that).

To illustrate her perspective, Müller points to the writers Paul Celan and Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt. Both Jewish writers suffered under the Nazi regime, which had instrumentalized their mother tongue and turned it against them. For Celan it became the language of his mother’s murderers, for Goldschmidt the reason to cease writing in German altogether. Until recently he wrote his works solely in French. In Müller’s opinion, this is clear evidence that Goldschmidt was deprived not only of his *Heimat* but also of his mother tongue for decades (Müller 2009, *Heimat*: 22-23). As a

result, she believes that one should not rely on one's native language blindly but must examine it more closely. Language, according to Müller, "ist [...] kein unpolitisches Gehege" (Müller 2009, *Heimat*: 42) (is [...] not an apolitical enclosure) it does not evolve in an apolitical vacuum but is located in the midst of a political situation.

3. Examples from Müller's Literary Works

Examples that illustrate Müller's standpoint can be detected throughout her literary works. I will use a few passages from the anthology of short stories *Niederungen*, the novella *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt* and the novel *Herztier* to illustrate Müller's standpoint on the political entanglement of language.

Niederungen depicts the everyday life of a Banat Swabian village from a female child's point of view. The Danube Swabian dialect takes center stage, forming a bond between the members of the German community. As the opening paragraph of the eponymic short story "Niederungen" suggests, this bond is upheld through the oppression of the individual by means of prohibition, threat and dictate: "Der Großvater, der sagte, vom Ringelgras wird man dumm, das darf man nicht essen. Und du willst doch nicht dumm werden" (Müller 2011, *Niederungen*: 17) (The grandfather said, marigold makes you stupid. You're not allowed to eat it. And you don't want to be stupid, right?). Shortly afterwards, when a bug crawls into the protagonist's ear her grandfather suddenly pours alcohol into her ear without a word of explanation. Helpless and terrified by the situation the protagonist recalls: "Ich weinte. In meinem Kopf wurde es heiß. Der Hof drehte sich, und Großvater stand riesengroß vor mir und drehte ich mit" (Müller 2011, *Niederungen*: 17) (I cried. It got hot in my head. The farm spun and grandfather stood there like a giant in front of me, spinning with it). Instead of sharing words of comfort with his granddaughter, he rudely underlines the necessity of his actions. Moreover, he even threatens her with an old wives' tale: "Das muss man tun, [...] sonst wird dir der Käfer in den Kopf kriechen, und dann wirst du dumm. Und du willst doch nicht dumm werden" (Müller 2011, *Niederungen*: 17) (You have to do it [...] or else the bug will crawl into your head. And then you'll be dumb. And you don't want to be dumb, right?).

In the course of the short story these scenes reoccur in different variations that follow the same pattern of prohibition and justification through dictates coupled with threats. Any disobedience, any individual impulse, is met with immediate physical punishment. Hence, language is instrumentalized both to bring and keep the protagonist in line with the norms and mindset of the German community. This strategy is also exemplified in the drunken father's statement later in the text, when he insists: „verdammst noch mal, wir sind eine glückliche Familie” (Müller 2011, *Niederungen*: 93) (damn it, we are a happy family). His exaggeration “das Glück beißt uns die Köpfe ab, verdammst noch mal, das Glück frisst uns das Leben” (Müller 2011, *Niederungen*: 93) (luck is biting our heads off, god damn it, luck is eating up our lives) marks a desperate attempt, not to keep the broken family together, but to maintain the image of a happy family. In order to keep up this false image he deploys language to dictate to his family the appropriate emotions. Compared with the examples cited above, language is not only employed to bring individuals action and behaviors in to line, but their emotional lives as well. As a consequence of this, all individual freedom and development is exterminated for the benefit of the collective.

This rough command language characterized by short orders with no opportunity for objections, used by male adult figures in *Niederungen*, reminds one of the military. Herein lies another dimension of the political entanglement of this German dialect that extends beyond the dictate of the collective. From the first short story of *Niederungen*, “Die Grabrede” (“The Funeral Sermon”), where the father is pictured in a SS uniform making a Hitler salute (Müller 2011, *Die Grabrede*: 7), combined with his eager performance of old Heimat songs in “*Niederungen*,” (Müller 2011, *Niederungen*: 93) we learn that he is a former Nazi soldier. Taking this into consideration, we can infer that the style of his language originates from this time. In this context, it can be further argued that the rigid notion of the collective is another vestige of Nazi culture. Slogans such as ‘Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer’ (one people, one empire, one leader) contain the same ideological message that the

Banat Swabians promote with every utterance: the collective is all. Therefore the individual is reduced to subordination and obedience.

Ironically, the ideology of the Banat Swabians, who seek to distance themselves from Romanians, aligns also with the ideology of the Ceaușescu regime, as a passage in *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt* reveals. Amalie Windisch, who prostitutes herself later in the text to acquire an exit permit for herself and her family, works as a kindergarten teacher. In her class, children learn the importance of the collective and the worthlessness of the individual from an early age. This is evidenced when Amalie explains the idea of the Communist state as an extended family:

Alle Kinder wohnen in Wohnblocks oder in Häusern. [...] Jedes Haus hat Zimmer. Alle Häuser bilden zusammen ein großes Haus. Dieses große Haus ist unser Land. Unser Vaterland. [...] Jedes Kind hat seine Eltern. So wie unser Vater im Haus, in dem wir wohnen, der Vater ist, ist Genosse Nicolae Ceaușescu der Vater unseres Landes. Und wie unsere Mutter im Haus, indem wir wohnen, unsere Mutter ist, ist Genossin Elena Ceaușescu die Mutter unseres Landes (Müller 2009, *Der Mensch*: 61-62). (All children live in apartments or houses. [...] Every house has rooms. All of the houses together make a big house. This big house is our country. Our fatherland. [...] Every child has parents. Just as our father is the father in our house, Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu is the father of our country. And like our mother is the mother in our house, Comrade Elena Ceaușescu is the mother of our country.)

Although it is unclear in this context if she communicates this communist idea of the greater fatherland family in German or Romanian, the gist of the ideology outlined parallels the idea of the Banat Swabian collective. In both cases language is employed to persuade the individual to submit to the will of the collective. As a result, the Romanian language and the Danube Swabian are metonyms for similar political views. In this regard, Müller's criticism seems valid. When the mother tongue not only functions repressively on its own but moreover allies with the likewise oppressive state language, it cannot be simply accepted as *Heimat*.

No language that serves to uphold totalitarian power mechanisms can bring shelter from them.

An attempt to escape and outsmart the Romanian totalitarian system with its own means, in this case language, is illustrated in *Hertzier*. The friends Edgar, Kurt, Georg and the protagonist – all of them of German descent – invent a coded language. As they part ways after the end of their studies, they want to keep each other updated through letters on the degree of their daily repression by the Securitate, which had classified them as dissidents. In doing so, they give new meanings to words: “Ein Satz mit Nagelschere für Verhör, sagte Kurt, für Durchsuchung einen Satz mit Schuhe, für Beschattung einen mit erkältet. Hinter die Anrede immer ein Ausrufezeichen, bei Todesdrohungen nur ein Komma” (Müller 2007: 90) (A sentence with nail scissors for interrogation, said Kurt, a sentence with shoes for them looking through your apartment, for tailing one with illness. After the salutation, always an exclamation point, but if there are death threats only a comma).

In comparison to the previous examples, the friends’ secret language might seem like a positive model for the use of language. On the surface, it serves as common denominator that creates a close proximity over the topographical distance between the friends and strengthens their friendship. However, behind this façade the opposite is the case: the common language leads to an increasingly restrictive mechanism of interdependence. It creates an assimilation pressure that corresponds to that of the fascist Banat Swabian and the communist fatherland collectives. In the course of this gradual development, the individuals not only suffer from the restraints of the fatherland family, but also from the self-imposed restraints of their dissident group. When the protagonist, for example, starts to become friends with a Romanian woman named Tereza, she is afraid of confessing her friendship to Edgar, Kurt and Georg (Müller 2007: 135). Her attempt to escape the isolation of the dissident collective could be regarded as a betrayal by the others. Any outsider is put under the general suspicion of being a spy against them. In this light, their letters resemble self-penned spy reports that serve as self-imposed espionage on themselves and against each other. As a consequence, their individualism ironically vanishes through their

own attempt to overcome it. For Kurt and Georg the attempt ends in suicide, while the protagonist and Edgar try to escape their past by leaving for Germany. In the end, as it becomes once again clear, no language can provide shelter in a political system that seeks to enforce conformity and subordinate language to fit its purpose. Language can only be *Heimat* to those who align with an oppressive system.

4. Müller's Conclusion: Heimat Is What Is Spoken

Herta Müller's point, that language cannot be simply accepted as *Heimat* because of its political entanglement, holds likewise true for democracies such as Germany, as an anecdote from her essay *Heimat ist das was gesprochen wird* illustrates: a friend of hers thought for years that a particular type of New Year's fireworks was called *Judofürze* (judo farts). Later he coincidentally learned that these fireworks were actually called *Judenfürze* (Jewish farts) (Müller 2009, *Heimat: 41-42*).¹ The fact that such an obviously offensive word is still in use, considering the German past, is surely outrageous. The behavior of the people around Müller's friend, moreover, seems no less condemnable. Neither the fireworks retailer nor his mother made his misunderstanding clear to him. Instead they reacted with a collective silence, which he also lacked the courage to break. He never dared to ask his mother how she was able to call these fireworks *Judenfürze* after Auschwitz (Müller 2009, *Heimat: 41-42*).

As this anecdote shows, even language in democracies is neither politically untangled nor free from vestiges of the past. They linger under the surface, maintained by those who remain silent to uphold the democratic façade – ironically, through language that subverts democracy. Therefore, Müller calls for a closer examination of the language we employ in order to conceive its intentions:

Man muß ihr [der Sprache] ablauschen, was sie mit den Menschen tut. In jedem Kontext trägt sie ihre Absichten vor

¹ Müller, *Heimat ist das was gesprochen wird*: 41-42.

The German words *Judofürze* and *Judenfürze* sound very alike as the phonetic transcription (IPA) shows: [ˈjuːdofʊʁtsə] vs. [ˈjuːdn̩fʊʁtsə].

sich her. Wenn man hinhört, kann sie nicht verbergen, was sie mit dem Menschen im Sinn hat. Und was sie mit dem Menschen tut, war und bleibt das einzige und für jeden von uns unabdingbare Kriterium, Sprache zu beurteilen (Müller 2009, *Heimat*: 42). (One has to listen carefully to what it [language] does to people. In each context it carries its intentions along. If one listens in, it cannot hide what it has in mind for people. And what it does with people, was and remains the only absolute criteria for each of us to judge language.)

On that account she pleads that language is not *Heimat* but – as the title of her essay states – *Heimat* is what is spoken. (Müller 2009, *Heimat*: 42).

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