Unpacking the Suitcases: Autofiction and Metaphor in Herta Müller's *Atemschaukel*

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Packing his improvised suitcase – made out of a gramophone case – seventeen-year-old Leo, the protagonist of Herta Müller's *Atemschaukel*, takes several books with him to a Soviet labour camp in the Ukrainian steppe. Among these, there are "[k]eine Romane, denn die liest man nur einmal und nie wieder" (13). Contrary to the narrator's conviction, by analysing the genre, Müller's writing technique, and the work's inherent controversy, which stems from its ambiguous relation vis-à-vis fiction and reality, I have found *Atemschaukel* to be certainly worth reading more than once. Each new reading can be seen as a metaphorical unpacking of Leo's suitcase that may reveal an entirely different vision of the work. It is not just the newly discovered relationship of the work to the real and fictional worlds, but also a new state of things, that can be perceived through careful analysis of the novel's language.

Given the potential heterogeneity of meaning, in my analysis of the text, I set out to problematize the claims of some reviewers about the documentary precision of Müller's novel, while simultaneously presenting a coherent vision of the work's poetics through interpretation of its key conceptual metaphors. The thesis of this essay is that precision and unambiguousness are essential – yet foreign and parasitic – elements in the otherwise highly poetic autofictional work. The autofictional text serves the purpose of self-preservation for the protagonist and develops a key trope for creative writing (*breathswing*) as a form of resistance to oppression. However, the novel does not comply with the classical notion of autofiction as requiring that the author's personal life be fictionalized: this has led some critics to claim that the problem with the narration in *Atemschaukel* lies in its inauthenticity (e.g. Radisch).

Herta Müller was awarded the 2009 Nobel Prize in Literature. *Atemschaukel*, published several months before, was immediately proclaimed one of Müller's major works (Gauss). It was lauded for its meticulousness and precision on the one hand and for its rich metaphorical imagery on the other. Some critics went so far as to claim that Müller's first-person narrative novel told the true story of the Romanian poet Oskar Pastior, here reimagined as the fictional Leo Auberg (Jung). It is true that, beginning in 2001, Pastior shared his experience of living in the labour camp in the Soviet Ukraine with Müller. They even planned

to write a book together and agreed on the title. But in 2006 Pastior died, and after a long period of reflection, Müller decided to write *Atemschaukel*.

The novel's background and the larger context of critical analysis on Müller's oeuvre greatly influenced the work's immediate interpretation and appreciation. Upon its publication in 2009, it was not uncommon to speak about the novel's *Genauigkeit* and *Präzision*. *Atemschaukel* was said to demonstrate "sachgebannte Genauigkeit" (Naumann) and "wortgenaue Sprache" (Braun), because what the novel was considered to tell its reader was allegedly "alles wahr, ist alles so gewesen, ob nun das Wort Roman auf dem Buch steht oder nicht" (Jung).

Having employed Pastior as a main witness and her mother's silence as an inspiration (Müller, "Es war"), Müller achieves a semblance of testimony. To highlight its strong claims to reality, the novel was often identified as a report (Borchert), as a document, and even as "protokollarische Poesie" (Naumann). This view can be supported by the fact that a lot of the details and important images in the novel do come from Pastior, and both Pastior and Müller visited the former labour camp in Ukraine. In her notes for the novel, Müller made a meticulous outline of the situation in the camps, and Pastior provided her with a detailed schematic of the Stalinist labour camp ("Herta Müller"). In an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Müller speaks of "die fast monströse Genauigkeit der Lagerbilder" ("Akte") in Pastior's memories, of which she has carefully taken note. As one of the critics put it, Pastior's voice could be recognized in that of the novel's protagonist: "Im Wesentlichen dürfte seine Stimme im Roman die Leos sein" (Borchert). The documentary nature of the novel refers the reader primarily to the deportation of Romanian Germans to labour camps in the Soviet Union in order to rebuild the post-war country, which took place in the winter of 1945. Müller's mother was among those who survived the camps after five years of forced labour (Müller, "Es war"). The majority of Germans had been unfamiliar with this historical event before the publication of the novel.

The difference between *Atemschaukel* and Müller's other novels lies in the fact that the documentary quality of the work relies on somebody else's memories and not her own. Already in 2009, many critics agreed on the highly poetic nature of the novel and stressed the obvious facts that the novel could not be regarded as a *Schlüsselroman* (Gauss) and that what the reader came to witness in the novel was fiction. This ambiguous understanding of the novel as a historical account and as a work of fiction permeated every interpretation. Müller's other novels similarly deal with this tension between the "truth" (precision, discipline, often persecution or rigid norm) and fiction. In her essay "Die Anwendung der dünnen Straßen," Müller writes, "Loyalität dem Wirklichen gegenüber und Versessenheit aufs Flirren gehören im Satz zusammen. Das eine kommt ohne das andere nicht in Gang." Thus, the dichotomy between truth and fiction is at the core of Müller's poetics.

In my essay, I will explore the essential ambiguity of *Atemschaukel* and the perceived inauthenticity of the novel's metaphors because of the use of another's

personal experience, and I will argue that Müller's latest work is an *autofictional* novel that manifests masterful use of metaphor and language to artfully construct a fictional reality and to unfold the subjective perception and fluctuating identity of the protagonist. The autofictionality of the novel is distinct from that in Müller's earlier works, as the author uses someone else's biographical details to create a literary work. In my critical analysis of the genre, I rely on Alex Hughes's discussion of *autofiction* – a term first introduced by Serge Doubrovsky with reference to his novel *Fils* (1977) – and consider it to be a mode of writing that allows biographical elements to be woven within the coherent fabric of the fictional world and to serve as starting points for the author's creative work. Hughes defines autofiction as "a narrative modality that inhabits the referential space likewise colonized by autobiography proper, but, at the same time, offers a patently enriched and treated, hence fictionalized, and metamorphotic, version of the life-story of the *autofictionneur*" (567). For Doubrovsky, autofiction meant above all the "adventure of language" in his literary works (see Raynaud 696), and the autofictional dimension of *Atemschaukel* can be recognized precisely in the author's fascination with language and the text itself. I intend to show that by accepting the term *autofiction* for describing the novel ("Es war"), Müller focuses on language and its aesthetics, which makes her work highly poetic. As a result, she irrevocably undermines any efforts to claim biographical legitimacy. The opposite contention – which this essay is intended to problematize – is put forward by Bettina Bannasch, who argues that the author of the novel assumes responsibility for the biographical precision of the text (134).

Fiction – like any conceptual activity, according to George Lakoff – often relies on metaphors, and inevitably on artificially constructed embodied reality; there is no shortcut that would lead the reader from fiction to the truth in its entirety and universality. By conceptualizing authorial subjectivity in autofiction as fragmented and split between the fictional and the real (Hughes 571), one cuts to the core problem of the novel, that is, its monstrous nature of domesticating the abominable reality in fiction. The text is the ultimate product, and Müller cannot reach out to the reality of suffering; she can only attempt to express it metaphorically within the fabric of the literary work. The themes of contrived perception and metaphorical expression of various forms of suffering are also central in Müller's earlier works (see *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel*).

As the theme of the expressibility of the violent past and its influence on art is one of the major issues of this essay, I draw on the thought of Theodor Adorno, whose research on working through past oppression and dealing with the consequences of violence in the realm of art may help us understand the reception of Müller's fiction and place her novel in the larger context of Gulag literature. The issue of expressibility will lead my argument from the genre of the novel and its theoretical ramifications to the writing technique and language in the novel, which involves studying Müller's exceptional mastery of metaphor. The autofictionality of the novel is achieved through metaphor, which helps the narrator fictionalize his personal experience and make it accessible to the reader.

Lakoff's conceptual metaphor theory will lend the framework for studying the role of language in the novel.

Approaching the text with the expectation that its primary value is documentary, one might be tempted to dismiss the metaphors in the text as distracting lyrical digressions that prevent the reader from focusing on the actual textual events. It is my aim to refute this misconception and prove Lakoff and Turner's (215) contention that poetic metaphor is not a mere embellishment that serves the purpose of aestheticizing the narration. Rather, it addresses essential problems in the text, as metaphor is a foundational part of the human conceptual system and plays an important role in our reasoning. It is hoped that this interpretation will help explain the novel's *Eindeutigkeit* and precision, as I will argue that these features are a result of the alienation of the protagonist, whereas the fictional dimension of the novel unfolds through personification, metaphor, and metonymy, which become essential means of narration and of subsequent self-preservation for the protagonist. In the analysis of the novel two recent articles by Bettina Bannasch and Sarah Schmidt will be my reference points as polar opposite views on *Atemschaukel*'s relation to truth and reality. While Bannasch advances the priority of documentary precision and ethical responsibility, Schmidt stresses the unreliable relations between things and words in the novel and emphasizes the fictional nature of the work. I believe that the dichotomy of the fictional and documentary dimensions in the novel cannot be resolved, yet the fictional dimension prevails from the point of view of literature.

The 2010 news about Pastior's collaboration with the Romanian *Securitate* (Schlesak) has driven a new wedge between the biographical and fictional elements in *Atemschaukel*. (A thorough documentary account of how the controversy over Pastior impacted on the critical reception of *Atemschaukel* is given by Sophia Gabrielli.) The newly discovered facts of Pastior's biography distanced him from the protagonist of the novel and the fictional account of life in the labour camp. If the author had known about Pastior's collaboration, she would probably have written a different novel.

While this essay explores the fictional dimension of the novel and establishes that its nature is primarily literary and poetic, I do not mean to say that writing misinterprets reality. And autofiction is certainly true as a work of art, since – as Claudine Raynaud argues in her study of the genre of autofiction – "[o]nly fictional writing can attempt to tell the unspeakable" (696). The fictional nature of the novel allows the reader to empathize with the protagonist and may give a voice to those who had the real experience of suffering.

In one of her interviews about *Atemschaukel*, Müller says that it was important for her to distinguish between Pastior and the narrator in order to create autofictional narration, because trauma tends to isolate the victim, and the victim is unable to have a close relationship with the other to share his memories of suffering:

> Und dieser Teufelskreis, einfach darauf angewiesen sein, wenn man am nötigsten auf die Beziehung angewiesen ist, hat man keine Möglichkeit mehr, diese

> Beziehung aufrecht zu erhalten, dass das eine das andere nicht mehr zulässt, und darum ging es mir. ("Es war")

The author distances her protagonist from Pastior, recognizes her inability to express Pastior's experience, and at the same time attempts to metaphorically express the suffering in the labour camp, establishing a fragile relationship between Leo and the reader. The genre of autofiction allows Müller to fictionalize reality in order to express Leo's subjective perception of the labour camp. Müller's use of autofiction in her earlier works as well as her latest novel appears to contribute to the discussion and definition of autofiction as a literary genre. Both Bannasch (133) and Schmidt (121) point out that Müller herself identifies her novels as autofictional; but while for Bannasch's argument about the reliability, universality, general validity, responsibility, and intellectual precision of the novel, this identification is unpropitious and undermines its premises, Schmidt, in my opinion, is justified in relying on the author's judgement and strongly arguing for the fragility of the alliance between things and words in *Atemschaukel*.

Unpacking the suitcases that the novel has presented to the reader necessitates at least partial understanding of the genre of this writing and its fictional nature. If the central point of the novel is "the legitimacy of storytelling after Auschwitz" (Bannasch 116), then the autofictionality of *Atemschaukel* problematizes the ethical dimension of such storytelling. Marianne Hirsch's notion of "postmemory" could be useful for understanding the nature of narration in *Atemschaukel*. While the author does not have her own memories of the labour camp, she relies on those of Pastior and other victims, including her mother. I believe that postmemory is successfully transformed in the novel "into action and resistance" (Hirsch 104). Müller's "erschaffene fiktive Realität" (Bauer 263) mythologizes the history of oppression, and the narrator's precision could be regarded not only as a reflection of the monstrous accuracy of Pastior's memory but also as an expression of "the objectivity of the ruling mind" (Adorno, "Essay" 19), in which case precision and accuracy are certainly monstrous features of the novel that stand for the oppression and subjugation of the protagonist as a human being in the labour camp.

Precision and accuracy become oppressive features of language in the novel because they come from the cast-iron logic of the camp, and thus words and memories turn into the protagonist Leo's enemies when they keep haunting him: "Es gibt Wörter, die machen mit mir, was sie wollen. Sie sind ganz anders als ich und denken anders, als sie sind" (232). Precision and accuracy invade the novel and become key symptoms of the terrible contortion of literary narration as a result of the alienation and psychological fragmentation of the narrator's subjectivity. Thus, those readers who, above all, appreciate precision and accuracy in *Atemschaukel* effectively endorse the most alien and parasitic elements of the text.

Yet the subjective nature of a literary work does not allow such objectivity and precision. There can be no argument about the fact that it was Herta Müller

who created the novel, penning it in her recognizable style. If the general validity of the claim about the objectivity of the novel appears to be contestable from the outset, the description of Müller's mode of writing as autofiction appears to be symptomatic and is an important point of departure for the examination of the novel. According to the established view on Müller's literary works, "Eindeutigkeit ist kein Merkmal von Herta Müllers Texten" (Bauer 260), which raises questions about the general legitimacy of her works of fiction that – although they give a voice to the dispossessed – admit no definite interpretation, mythologize the tragic history of violence, and lose their validity, confirming Adorno's bold statement that "[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" ("Essay" 33). While some critics struggle to prove the novel's "claim to universality beyond the narrow context of its subject-matter" (Bannasch 124) and its ethical validity, others reprimand Müller for her latest work due to it being "kraftlos und schal, ja in manchen Passagen von peinigender Parfümiertheit" (Radisch).

The language of oppression in the camp is clear-cut, precise, universal, and unequivocal, just like some elements of the writing technique of the author, whose protagonist is part of the system and – being its victim – can never relinquish some of the key strategies of his own alienation. In other respects, the language of the novel is that of resistance and struggle against radical dehumanization and subjugation. The language is not only an enemy to the narrator but primarily a rescue tool and a means for self-preservation. The resisting protagonist is characterized not by reliability but, on the contrary, by the ineffable nebulousness and fragmentation of his language. Thus, the novel is not just a narrative on the functioning of subjective perception and the nature of the fictionalized experience in the labour camp but also a "Reflexion über Sprache, denn der Umgang mit den Dingen und der Umgang mit den Worten sind aufeinander angewiesen und funktionieren dennoch nicht im Gleichschritt" (Schmidt 115).

Atemschaukel investigates the distorted relationship of human beings with words, things, and each other, as well as a tremendous disparity between things and words in the subjective perception of a totally alienated human being. As Schmidt shows in her study, this is a project that Müller has pursued for a long time. The language of oppression constructs a one-dimensional relation to reality, when the human being is reduced to a non-entity and the things around the protagonist are in definitive relations with each other: "Die beständigen Dinge vergeuden sich nicht, sie brauchen nichts als eine einzige, ewig gleiche Beziehung zur Welt" (198). The metaphors in the text, which appear to precisely describe the terrible reality, are but an abortive attempt by the protagonist to secure his own identity and the identity of his conceptual world, which is constantly threatened by the disruptive power of the labour camp: "Die Dinge fallen aus ihrem pragmatischen Kontext heraus und werden zu Protagonisten mit einem opaken Eigenleben, einem 'Schatten', bis die Grenzen zwischen Traum und Realität verschwimmen" (Schmidt 116). As a result, things and words lose their identity and interchangeably stand one for another. The human identity,

which is driven to the brink of annihilation, becomes a flickering light that can be extinguished at any moment.

In this context, autofiction can be viewed as a saving technique, redeeming a literary work and preventing it from becoming a report. As facing the reality would mean a destructive collision of the protagonist with his traumatic past, the narrator has to come up with a euphemistic or, at least, entirely discreet version of it. This technique is characteristic of Müller's writing when, because of the impossibility of perceiving reality, she invents an alternative reality: "Da die Wirklichkeit nicht wahrgenommen werden darf, wird eine andere Wirklichkeit erfunden" (Bauer 266). Müller herself acknowledges the importance of transforming reality into fiction:

> Die Tragweite entsteht aus dem Festhalten des Gewesenen, das sich im Satz erst dann gültig behauptet, wenn ihm das Eins-zu-Eins entzogen worden ist, wenn es mit Erfundenem vermischt, eine völlig künstliche, weil mit Tricks gebaute Intimität annimmt und beim Lesen wieder frei gibt. ("Anwendung")

Contrived, fictional reality is what *erfundene Wahrnehmung* provides for the author. The new order of things can be constructed, and traumatic experiences can be recounted in innocuous metaphors. Consequently, when one unpacks this virtual reality, one discovers the monstrosity and trauma behind the subjective perception of the world. When readers truly achieve this end, what they are left with is silence. The contrived perception is the essence of autofiction, and it is impossible to escape its subjectivity. The readers do not have direct access to the suffering of the protagonist, and all they are left with is empathy and fiction as it is: a literary narrative without the pretence of a report. The poetically constructed subjectivity is fleshed out through metaphor, and readers are able to conceptualize the protagonist's subjective experience thanks to the metaphorical fictionalization of reality in the novel.

Autofiction, in Hughes's (566) reading, is a mode of writing that is able to integrate external discursive elements, and this integration opens the possibility for metaphorical expression. The writer is free to use external concepts in order to express what the individual subject has experienced and perceived. And as the nature of such experience and perception is also metaphorical, fiction is able to present the contrived perception of the protagonist to the reader. It is the narrative form of *Atemschaukel* that assists the author in constructing the fictional reality, and that simultaneously complicates the novel's interpretation, because autofiction is "a 'monstrous' production, weakening generic borders and boundaries and eroding 'natural' narrative divisions" (Hughes 567). Hence, autofiction relates to autobiography and transcends this genre. After all, autofiction is not only a fictionalized autobiography but also a fictional subjective perception of reality, where the author both unfolds his vision of the world and delves into the depths of his subjectivity. Thus, autofiction can be viewed not as a literary genre but as a writing technique. And hence the text in focus is autofictional in that the

author uses her style and technique to construct and invent subjective perception of reality, treating Pastior's biographical accounts and Müller's own postmemory – her autobiographical post-traumatic memories of her mother – as points of departure. If earlier texts by Müller included autobiographical elements, and this fact justified their identification as autofiction, *Atemschaukel* is autofictional primarily in its poetics: it reveals Müller's particular mode of writing and her use of extended metaphors in order to construct the protagonist's subjectivity.

Atemschaukel is exquisitely poetic, and the very quality of the writing entails a high risk of embellishing the harsh reality. Müller manages to solve this problem by dissociating fiction from reality and placing her work within the "monstrous" form of autofiction, where language is the main protagonist. The fictional nature of the text is one of the key features of autofictional writing. Autofiction does not claim to represent reality; it can only fictionalize the real. There is still "a potential for manipulation" (Hughes 568), and this potential puts the ethical question in the limelight. Gérard Genette criticized Doubrovsky's term *autofiction* for being unethical and deceptive (Hughes 568), and this criticism reverberates in some of the analyses of *Atemschaukel*. In Radisch's analysis, dishonesty and mythologizing appear to be the dangers of beautifying Müller's novel with metaphors. In contrast, for example, to the matter-of-fact language of Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the experience of Soviet camps is aesthetically reworked in *Atemschaukel*. Alexander Galich and Vladimir Vysotsky also wrote about life in the camps without any personal experience or memories, but their works were inspired by the phenomenon, which had a major influence on the public in the Soviet Union and was impossible to conceal. Müller manages to evoke the experience of the camps in the imagination of those who are largely unaware of the deportation of Romanian Germans, and to draw the attention of the international community to these injustices, which had long been passed over in silence. Richard Stern – in his *New York Times* review of the English translation of *Atemschaukel* – calls the novel "one of the few contributions to the imaginative literature of the concentration camp" and attributes its success to the talent and discipline of the author, that is, the combination of imaginative fiction and peculiar attention to detail. While this approach is not unique in the literature of the camp, it definitely stands out among works on Soviet oppression. The ethical problem of autofiction re-emerges in Müller's texts, where the borders between fiction and reality are blurred for those who are still looking for an objective portrayal of universal problems. The dichotomy of talent and discipline, fiction and documentary writing, is at the heart of Müller's autofiction.

Autofiction becomes a mode of writing that attests to the ambiguity and fracture of the subject (Hughes 567); *Atemschaukel*, as well as other novels by Müller, is marked by fragmentation and dismemberment of the narrator's perception. Destabilizing and destroying human identity and perception, the labour camp does not tolerate abnormality and human subjectivity; the protagonist has to commit himself to silence when the reality cannot be unpacked in words and metaphors: "Ich habe mich so tief und so lang ins Schweigen gepackt, ich kann

mich in Worten nie auspacken. Ich packe mich nur anders ein, wenn ich rede" (9). Conversely, it is words and metaphors that give Leo strength to go on, while simultaneously posing a danger of starvation and loss of identity. Unpacking the suitcases becomes a metaphor for self-expression that entails self-recognition, and at the same time it stands for letting the past overcome the protagonist and fracture his identity.

The *Hungerengel* and *Herzschaufel* are antagonists in Leo's mind; metaphors appear to be at war with each other. Words and things become unreliable yet are still the only means of salvation. The alliance between things and words is saved by silence (Schmidt 117). Unfortunately, silence does not produce a narrative, and unpacking the suitcases requires metaphorical imagery in fictional narration, which is the new language that Leo must learn in order to tell us his story. "Das Gepäck aus Dingen und Worten" (Schmidt 123) must be unpacked through radically fictionalized reality, which resonates with the oppressive, alienating reality of the camp in its language. This new metaphorical language does not provide a solution; it creates a work of art and commits to reality subjective memory, whose "monstrous" nature allows the oppressive and liberating dimensions of language to interact.

In spite of our appreciation of resistance and the voice of the oppressed in the novel, the protagonist does not believe that narration provides a cure or a therapy: "Man kann sich nicht schützen, weder durchs Schweigen noch durchs Erzählen. Man übertreibt im Einen wie im Anderen, aber DA WAR ICH gibt es in beidem nicht. Und es gibt auch kein richtiges Maß" (294). Autofiction does not lay exceptional claim to representing reality, but the language of *Atemschaukel* is marked by the duality of its function of representation and fictionalization, and the constant risk of relapsing into silence because of the inexpressibility of subjective experience. *Atemschaukel* brings together an autobiographical account of Pastior and fictionalized reality, and disavows constructing a biographical narrative through the poetically constructed perception of the hero and the ambiguity of autofiction as a mode of writing. This allows the author to deploy the trope of metaphor to open the possibility of evoking the reader's empathy and understanding. Thus, the articulation of personal fate through complex metaphors becomes not only psychologically intense but also tangible for the reader.

Having studied the specific genre of the novel and its ramifications, it is appropriate to review the writing technique and extended metaphors the author uses to construct autofictional reality. I will focus on the metaphors of the *Nullpunkt* and *Atemschaukel* as keys to the relationship between the genre and writing technique, and treat them as coherent poetic tropes. There is a plethora of other metaphors in the novel, such as the *Herzschaufel* and *Hungerengel*, but the short form of the essay limits my analysis to the tropes that facilitate interpretation of the work's poetic nature. While *The Hunger Angel* became the title of the English translation of the book (for a discussion of the English translation, see Wilson), it is important to demonstrate why *Atemschaukel* is key to deciphering the poetics of the novel. At the meta-textual level, the *Hungerengel* is another

manifestation of the inexpressible in the novel, and its highlighting in the English translation shifts the focus of the text and draws the reader's attention to the suffering in the labour camp; whereas *Atemschaukel* as the title of the novel underlines the creative process of expressing the inexpressible and metaphorically relates to the reader the protagonist's subjective experience of oppression. Both metaphors interact with each other and form an important conceptual basis for understanding the novel and unravelling the narrator's discourse.

Analysing the metaphors in the texts, it is helpful to follow Lakoff in his terminology and distinguish between target and source domains, where the source domain is a concrete concept that may not be similar to the less comprehensible concept of the target domain but that makes the latter meaningful. In this framework, the fictional metaphors stand for feelings, perception, and actual reality:

> [P]oetic metaphor, far from being ornamentation, deals with central and indispensable aspects of our conceptual systems. Through the masterful use of metaphorical processes on which our conceptual systems are based, poets address the most vital issues in our lives and help us illuminate those issues, through the extension, composition, and criticism of the basic metaphoric tools through which we comprehend much of reality. (Lakoff and Turner 215)

Interpreting Müller's novel, I bear in mind that she is not only a prose stylist but also a poet who creates poetic collages. Moreover, Pastior's influence should not be disregarded; his poetic genius certainly enriched the novel with such key metaphors as the *Hungerengel*, *Herzschaufel*, and *Atemschaukel*. Therefore, I find George Lakoff and Mark Turner's thought about the importance of poetic metaphor, in addition to Lakoff's theory of conceptual metaphor, to be an important tool with which to interpret the text. In the text, Leo's subjective perception provides him with vivid metaphors that the readers are able to conceive and thereby empathize with the protagonist. This relation between perception and conception is well grounded in cognitive science:

> In an embodied mind, it is conceivable that the same neural system engaged in *per*ception (or in bodily movement) plays a central role in *con*ception. That is, the very mechanisms responsible for perception, movements, and object manipulation could be responsible for conceptualization and reasoning. (Lakoff and Johnson 37–38)

Thus, in the novel, the reality-to-be-conceived is a target domain, conceptualized in terms of the source domain of fiction, which is grounded in the protagonist's subjective perception of his suffering in the labour camp.

The reality of past suffering both haunts the protagonist and escapes his attempts to express it. At times, even metaphors fail to convey the protagonist's experience, and they always stand at several removes from the real world and from the past. As a result, narration in the novel comes to a halt and reflects on the impossibility of both its legitimation and its power to express the

"Unsagbare" (249). The silence that is the consequence of this impossibility takes the reader as close as possible to the traumatic experience of the protagonist: the discourse on silence and its metaphorical expression in Müller's texts represents this traumatic "Riß" (Marven 400). Through the silence, lack, rupture, and blank space in the discourse, one comes to witness the moment of fragile identity between fiction and reality. Nevertheless, the author has to fictionalize silence to talk about the zero point *drumherum*:

> Der Nullpunkt ist das Unsagbare. Wir sind uns einig, der Nullpunkt und ich, dass man über ihn nicht sprechen kann, höchstens drumherum. Das aufgesperrte Maul der Null kann essen, nicht reden. Die Null schließt dich ein in ihre würgende Zärtlichkeit. Der Rettungstausch duldet keine Vergleiche. Er ist zwingend und direkt wie: 1 Schaufelhub = 1 Gramm Brot. (249)

The *Nullpunkt* is mentioned only once in the novel, but its significance for the work can hardly be overstated. The zero point as silence is one of the cornerstone metaphors that help the protagonist struggle against the inexpressibility of his experience.

Because of its inexpressibility, the moment of silence has to be conveyed via metaphor. There is nothing direct about it in narration. The zero point is a metaphor for silence. It is an empty set that cannot be clearly presented, but it maps very well the nature of silence. Something that cannot be said is the gaping mouth of the zero point, which is brilliantly visualized by Bannasch (119). The zero point as a source domain comes to define not only silence but also the memory of the experience of hunger (Bannasch 128–29) and oppression, the memory of losing one's own identity when the subject was dissolved in the labour camp and reduced to a piece of flesh that was denied even its biological nature:

> *Atemschaukel* does not pose the question whether this memory of the zero, of the loss of identity and social reliability, can be reintegrated into the construction of a socially acceptable "I." [. . .] [T]he damage done to the "I" remains. (Bannasch 132)

And as the damage remains, so do the loss of reliability and the fragility of Leo's identity. His narration is fictional inasmuch as his identity was crushed and distorted in the camp. The zero point acquires multiple meanings in the novel, and no single description would be definite. Leo admits that there is "kein richtiges Maß" (294); that is, no metaphor can be good enough to stand for silence. Lyn Marven points out that trauma afflicts memory and distorts the victim's body image (398), in which case I think that embodied reasoning is certainly impaired; the metaphors that are constructed by the narrator rest on malfunctioning and fragmented perception. Thus, I strongly disagree with Bannasch, who argues that metaphors are equations in the novel (129). There can be no equations, since all those seemingly literal definitions, such as the detailed description of *Hungerengel*

(144), are based on the contorted psychological and social reality of the labour camp.

Knowing about Pastior's collaboration, one can give a new interpretation to the silence in the novel and its different avatars. The protagonist speaks of several different kinds of silence that he experiences:

> Neben dem Seitenaltar auf einer Säule stand der Heilige im grauen Mantel und trug als Mantelkragen ein Schaf im Nacken. Dieses Schaf im Nacken ist das Schweigen. Es gibt Dinge, über die man nicht spricht. Aber ich weiß, wovon ich rede, wenn ich sage, das Schweigen im Nacken ist etwas anderes als das Schweigen im Mund. (10)

Silence is split and experienced not as a mere antithesis to speech – "das Schweigen im Mund" – but as a duality of the constant domination of indescribability and the simultaneous deliberate suppression of the past memory and responsibility – "das Schweigen im Nacken." Pastior packed his secrets so well that he could never come to unpack them himself. If homosexuality was something about which he could speak freely later in his life, his cooperation with the *Securitate* remained secret until his last breath. Nevertheless, Leo manages to unpack his experience and to share with us his memories. The novel tells the reader about a fictional narrator who can only partially be identified with Pastior. It is Leo who is the protagonist of the novel. In this painful process of representing and fictionalizing a subjective experience, Leo as a human subject is split, and his identity is almost lost. He can speak of his experience only with "mitigating expressions and euphemistic circumlocutions," which Adorno ("Meaning" 90) identified as the victims' choice in their "reminiscences of deportation and mass murder," another option being "a hollow space [. . .] in the discourse." Through this careful crafting of silence and fragmentation, Müller manages to recover – at least in fiction – a part of the dissolved identity and haunting memory of the protagonist through the extended metaphors of the *Nullpunkt* and *Atemschaukel*. The narration in *Atemschaukel* can be regarded as a kind of "psychoanalytical scenario of a talking cure" (Bannasch 116), and silence is the moment when it fails to work. Writing becomes an important defensive strategy in many of Müller's texts: "Schreiben wurde zur Überlebensstrategie eines gespaltenen Bewußtseins, das zwischen dem Bedürfnis nach individueller Freiheit und kollektiver Geborgenheit hin und her geworfen ist" (Bauer 262). In the novel, there is neither individual freedom nor "kollektive Geborgenheit," but rather the dehumanization of the labour camp, where there is no possibility for a human subject to prevent alienation from his most essential self. Consequently, silence symbolizes the impossibility of resistance and the protagonist's desperation.

Conversely, the "dissociation, the experience of the self as other" (Marven 396), which is present in *Atemschaukel*, as well as in Müller's earlier works, could be overcome only at the moment of silence when the narrator breathes in. Speaking is always breathing out. The dislocation of identity takes Leo's breath

away. Victims of totalitarian oppression "can preserve themselves only if they renounce their self" (Adorno, "Meaning" 98), and silence is the watershed moment when the victim's identity may be finally crushed and obliterated or can put up resistance. The zero point is the point where Leo's subjective experience does not lend itself to external empathy, because reliving the experience of hunger and subjugation would threaten the reader's identity. Writing round about the zero point, the narrator is struggling to grasp those moments where his identity was questioned. Silence is a breathtaking moment of narration, when the protagonist stands up for conveying his trauma and securing his identity. He is able to achieve it only through the constant *Schaukeln* of his psyche between his starving body and the intact objects of the real world.

Paul Celan – in his famous Büchner Preis speech – compared poetry to an *Atemwende*: "Poetry is perhaps this: an *Atemwende*, a turning of our breath. Who knows, perhaps poetry goes its way – the way of art – for the sake of just such a turn?" (47). Here *Poiesis* takes place "in one brief moment" (47), whereas in *Atemschaukel* it is a repetitive process of identification of the self with other objects. *Atemschaukel*, or breathing in and out, emphasizes the search for self-identity for the sake of self-preservation. At the meta-narrative level, it may probably stand for the permanent struggle to express the inexpressible. One has every reason to pose an existential question about the nature of such a metaphor: Why should poets and writers be fascinated with breathing? Why did Celan compare poetry to the turn of one's breath? The answer to this question is most obvious if we turn to the etymology of the word *breath* in Ancient Greek. *Psyche* (*ψυχή*) is both breath and soul in Ancient Greek, and for poets "the existential dimension of breathing" cannot be underestimated as it is "a necessity of life" (Bannasch 118) and a permanent companion for writers. Poets write as they breathe. Every line of the poem may correspond to an *Atemstoß*, and every new line is necessarily a new breath with an *Atemzug* in between. The moment of breathing in is the moment of silence and self-identity – that is why Celan states that poems ostensibly demonstrate "a strong tendency towards silence" (47). Because Leo cannot afford self-identity, both his breath and his soul oscillate around him and the world.

Dum spiro spero could be one of Leo's survival mottos. His dislocating the *psyche* and placing it in foreign objects secures his identity. Leo identifies himself with objects around him; this enables the *Rettungstausch*, when Leo becomes the only thing left intact that keeps its identity and fulfils its function:

> Nach dem Abendessen ging ich zur Nachtschicht in den Keller. Am Himmel war eine Aufhellung. Vom Russendorf flog eine Vogelschar wie eine graue Halskette aufs Lager zu. Ich weiß nicht, ob die Vögel oben in der Aufhellung quietschten oder in meinem Mund am Gaumensegel. Ich weiß auch nicht, ob sie mit den Schnäbeln quietschten oder die Füße aneinanderrieben oder an den Flügeln alte Knochen ohne Knorpel hatten.

> Auf einmal war von der Halskette ein Stückchen abgerissen, es teilte sich in Schnurrbärte. Drei davon flogen dem Soldaten vom hinteren Wachturm unterhalb der Mütze in die Stirn. Sie blieben lange dort. Erst als ich mich drüben am Fabriktor noch einmal umdrehte, flogen sie unterhalb der Mütze aus seinem Hinterkopf heraus. Sein Gewehr wackelte, der Wachsoldat blieb starr. Ich dachte, er ist aus Holz gebaut und das Gewehr aus Fleisch.
>
> Mit dem Wachsoldaten auf dem Turm wollte ich nicht tauschen, auch nicht mit der Vogelkette. Auch der Schlackearbeiter, der jeden Abend dieselben 64 Stufen hinunter in den Keller geht, wollte ich nicht sein. Aber tauschen wollte ich. Ich wollte, glaube ich, das Gewehr sein. (227)

The only intact thing in this scene is not the soldier, for he is alienated from human nature. The soldier appears to Leo as a meaningless piece of wood. Neither is it the other camp inmate, who has to walk sixty-four steps down to the cellar every evening. Nor is it the flock of birds, which are absolutely alien to the camp. Leo identifies himself with the soldier's rifle. It is the only thing that fulfils its natural function, and that is why it is of flesh and blood; it is more alive than either Leo or the soldier. The *Rettungstausch* helps Leo keep his identity intact, or, rather, it provides Leo with an opportunity for self-delusion.

Exchanging his piece of bread for another's, Leo thus exchanges his injured *psyche* and hopes to obtain a less diminished one. The frantic exchange of bread in the camp is also a phenomenon of the *Atemschaukel* salvation strategy: "Abends vor der Krautsuppe wird Brot getauscht, denn das Eigenbrot scheint immer kleiner als das Brot der anderen" (120). After the first exchange, Leo's own "weggegebenes" bread appears to him larger, and the bread that he receives in exchange shrinks:

> Nach dem Tausch, in der Hand des anderen, ist mein weggegebenes Brot größer, als es in meiner Hand war. Und was ich bekommen habe, ist in meiner Hand geschrumpft. Wie schnell sich der andere wegdreht, er hat bessere Augen als ich, er hat profitiert. Ich muss wieder tauschen. Aber dem anderen geht es genauso, er glaubt, ich habe profitiert und ist auch beim Zweittausch. Und wieder schrumpft das Brot in meiner Hand. Ich suche mir einen Dritten und tausche. Andere essen schon. Wenn der Hunger es noch eine Weile aushält, kommt es zum Vierttausch, zum Fünfttausch. Und wenn gar nichts mehr hilft, dann kommt es zum Rücktausch. Dann habe ich wieder mein Eigenbrot.
>
> Brottauschen ist immer nötig. [. . .] Aus der Optik des Trocknens kommt das Gefühl, dass dein Brot dich betrügt. Dieses Gefühl haben alle, auch wenn sie nicht tauschen. Und beim Tauschen wird das Gefühl stimuliert. Man wechselt von einer optischen Täuschung zur anderen. Danach ist man immer noch betrogen, aber müde. (120–21)

The *Rettungstausch* turns out to be a necessary self-deception, and its salubrious quality is questioned. The withered identity of the protagonist cannot be

recuperated through this exchange, but it manages to grapple with oppression and subjugation. The *Rettungstausch* is one of the mirror images of *Atemschaukel*, and its metaphorical power stems from the need for social interaction that is denied in the labour camp. By identifying himself with other objects and impersonating the world around him, the protagonist engages in the social interaction that is a prerequisite for human existence.

The key metaphor of the novel simultaneously serves several interconnected and well-orchestrated ends. *Atemschaukel* is the metaphor for the protagonist's living to and fro, trying to be here and there. It is the form of activity resulting from his communication with the world, and the saving exchange with things around him. Leo identifies himself with objects and animates the perceived world. Thanks to this creative exchange of identity, Leo secures his self:

> [G]iving life to the undead serves the preservation of human life or its conversion into an enduring (undead) existence, and not its termination; and this outcome is not a final and irreversible state of affairs, but a provisional way of coping with circumstances. (Bannasch 115)

This exchange can take place only for a brief moment, and then it is time for a new abortive attempt. The constant pendulum movement of the protagonist's identity promises to become a road towards survival. However, the dislocation of the self, as a survival technique, has the unfortunate consequence of damaging the self. *Dum spiro spero* is only one side of the coin. Leo confesses that "[m]anchmal überfallen mich die Gegenstände" (34) that used to be his personal belongings in the camp. The concept of personal belongings is problematized in the novel, as the protagonist admits at the very outset that nothing in the camp belonged to him: "Das Meinige war es nicht. Es war entweder zweckentfremdet oder von jemand anderem" (7). These objects had nothing to do with Leo, but now they are looking for him:

> Gegenstände, die vielleicht nichts mit mir zu tun hatten, suchen mich. Sie wollen mich nachts deportieren, ins Lager heimholen, wollen sie mich. Weil sie im Rudel kommen, bleiben sie nicht nur im Kopf. Ich hab ein Magendrücken, das in den Gaumen steigt. Die Atemschaukel überschlägt sich, ich muss hecheln. (34)

When the self is alienated, it becomes reified. After sixty years, reification of the self continues to haunt the protagonist. *Atemschaukel* becomes a painful experience of reliving the memory of the identity loss that leads to losing one's breath. *Schaukeln* now describes the process of recollecting the oppressive past, and memories return to the protagonist through memorable objects that used to save him through the *Rettungstausch*. Memories take the hero back into the past and make him relive his subjugation again and again. Leo's *psyche* had been relocated so often in the camp that now – just like a limb that has been twisted out of joint too many times – it becomes unstable. *Atemschaukel* is experienced as a

delirium: "Die Atemschaukel ist ein Delirium und was für eins" (87). It is an incredible suffering when death is already welcomed: "Nach dem letzten Atemzug ist der Tod für uns ein Gewinn" (122). The protagonist's *breathswing* as extrapolation of his *psyche* is not only a salvation strategy but also painful reification and dissolution of his self. Ultimately, the narrator's *Atemschaukel* could be considered a metaphor for creative writing as resistance to oppression in general, and for autofictional writing as an attempt at self-preservation in particular.

Conclusion

In his discussion of working through the totalitarian past, Adorno warned that "the organizational power of totalitarian systems imposes some of its own nature upon its adversaries" ("Meaning" 94). A focus on detail and precision in language has always been characteristic of Herta Müller's works, and this is nowhere more apparent than in her collages, where concrete objects and their fragments disconcertingly dominate the white sheet. I have argued that precision and exactitude in *Atemschaukel* (as well as in Müller's oeuvre in general) are in fact features inherent to totalitarian order, where precision and the totality of reason lead to horrendous atrocities such as concentration camps, mass deportations, and murders. Hence, these features do not contradict the absurd nature of oppression, and although Müller's novel may be infected with the precision of totalitarian domination, *Atemschaukel* also embodies a struggle against this very domination and a resistance to oppression. Consequently, Schmidt's argument about the fragility of the alliance between things and words appears to be much more pertinent for the critical analysis of the novel than Bannasch's contention about the novel's precision.

As a result of the above exploration of the novel's genre, it can be argued that *Atemschaukel* is autofictional in its writing technique but that some of its formal features do not comply with this literary tradition, since the protagonist of the novel is not the fictionalized alter ego of the author, does not bear her name, and does not resemble her. Yet the novel incorporates autofictional poetics, and Müller's writing technique is consonant with autofiction, as she delves into the inner world of the protagonist and fictionalizes the personal experience of Pastior through the ingenious use of complex metaphors. Studying the genre specificity of the novel, I have treated it as autofiction, outlining the benefits and risks of such identification. In its use of autofictional narration and exquisite metaphor to help the reader relate to the author's postmemory, *Atemschaukel* makes an important contribution to Gulag literature.

Atemschaukel belongs to fiction and not to historical narrative based on somebody's personal experience. While it may be true in its masterful unfolding of the individual metaphorical perception before the reader, it cannot lay claim to general validity and universality (see Bannasch). Subjectivity is presented in its oppressed and fragmented form, which is certainly characteristic of the "monstrous" genre of autofiction. Autofiction here becomes a mode of writing "that attests to dismemberment, fracture, hiatus, surplus, an occupation of diverse places" (Hughes 567).

In this framework, Oskar Pastior as a real-life model for Leo should not be unequivocally discarded, as his account of past experience also informed the author about the experience of suffering, and the text is imbued with his personal perspective, which does not directly relate to the ethical dimension of Pastior's later collaboration with the *Securitate*.

The metaphorical unpacking of the suitcases is a necessary step towards a better understanding of the novel. The author uses metaphors to vividly present the fictional narration and to enable us to empathize with the protagonist. Leo uses metaphor as a salvation strategy that allows for dislocation and preservation of his identity. The moments when this dislocation does not take place, when the self is both at home and most subjugated, are the moments of silence. Silence in the novel is also "das Schweigen aus Angst" (215), to which Pastior commits himself in resolving never to tell anybody about his contacts with the secret police. As a matter of fact, the news about Pastior's possible collaboration provides a different perspective on what Leo fails to express to the reader. Ultimately, even the author does not know the narrator so well that she could safely place him within fictional discourse. The autofictional element remains within the fabric of the text, where the ambivalence between fiction and reality persists through time.

In her Nobel Prize lecture, Müller speaks of a vicious circle of words ("Every Word"). I believe that *Atemschaukel* is a metaphor for such a vicious circle – described by *Psyche*'s to and fro movement – which attests to the constant danger of Leo's terminal alienation and reification. It is explicated in language, and the language of the novel reflects this instability and irrational fluctuation of identity. The duality of *Atemschaukel*'s nature cannot be avoided, and it becomes both a route to survival and a source of trauma for the protagonist. Finally, the readers do not have direct access either to Pastior's experience in the labour camp in the Ukrainian steppe or to Müller's postmemory of her mother's silence; but they can empathize with the protagonist of the novel and understand his emotional and psychological state through metaphors, which help the narrator express his suffering, recollect his past, and put up resistance to the oppression in the labour camp.

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