CROSSING BORDERS –HERTA MÜLLER AND ASPECTS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract: The complexities of German literatures have been subject to various literary investigations, theories and approaches in the last few decades. Herta Müller, a significant representative of the last generation of Romanian-born German writers who have established themselves in the contemporary German literature, writes about the South-East European imaginary, estrangement, dissolution and forming of identity, oppression of the individual, consequences of the National Socialist past, the perils of rigid ethnocentrism, cruelties of the communist regime, transiting borders and time. The proposed research paper attempts to investigate Herta Müller's literary achievement having in view among others concepts of the third space, transculturalism, periphery-centre, cultural hibridity, trying to elucidate aspects of her contribution to the diversity of the literary palette of contemporary German literature.

Keywords: Herta Müller, literature, estrangement, periphery-centre, third space, hibridity, identity, transculturalism

The historical heritage of the last century has profoundly shaped the cultural and ethnic landscape of today's Europe: the two World Wars, the Shoah, the mass-deportations, the decades-long establishment of totalitarian regimes and their fall, several vawes of migration have resulted ethnically mingled societies, which accentuated the question of identity. Literature and language play an essential role in forming cultural identity in the era of globalization, marked though by processes of particularization at the same time.

The present paper proposes an investigation of the question of identity regarding Herta Müller as a writer and her literary creation having in view notions of transculturalism, third space, hybridity, center-periphery, displacement, and foreigness, without the aim of creating a comprehensive and very detailed panorama.

Literature considered an essential medium of the formation of cultural identity has been widely approached in the colonial, postcolonial and inter-, multi- and transcultural discourses, where among others, concepts of centre and margin, diaspora, migration, displacement, identity, otherness, borders, globalization and particularization, hybridity are key notions.

The neologism "transculturation" was coined by the Cuban ethnologist Fernando de Ortiz, who investigated the essence and formation of a hybrid AfroCuban culture in the 1940s. In opposition to the terms of "acculturation" or "deculturation", Ortiz rejected the idea of loss of culture and considered the phenomenon of cultural contact rather a complex transformation process, where both the dominant culture and the dominated one are changing. The dynamics of transculturation is characterised by three steps: "a partial loss of culture by the immigrant groups […], the concurrent assimilation of cultural elements from other cultures, and thus the creation of a new […] culture with elements of all cultures" (Hawley, 2001: 342). In 1991 Mary Louise Pratt borrowed Ortiz's term in order to discuss the encounter between different cultures and refers to the spaces where these cultures influence each other as „contact zones", which are not limited to colonies but also characteristic of

cosmopolitan culture and globalization (Pratt, 1991: 36). Overcoming the restrictive approach of geographical borders, these contact zones are to be approached as spaces of interaction, co-presence and mutual understanding.

Wolfgang Welsch (1999) sets out to contrast "interculturality", "multiculturality" and "transculturality". "The concept of interculturality reacts to the fact that a conception of cultures as spheres necessarily leads to intercultural conflicts. Cultures constituted as spheres or islands can, according with the logic of this conception, do nothing other than collide with one another"; the term incorporates the separatist character of cultures and highlights the idea of tension, clash among cultures. Welsh finds the concept of multiculturality similar to that of interculturality, which considers cultures as "clearly distinguished, in themselves homogenous cultures - the only difference now being that these differences exist within one and the same state community". The preferred term in order to refer to the dimension where different cultures interact with each other, the altered cultural constitution is "transculturality", where cultures have overcome their form of homogeneity and separateness, being deeply interconnected, entangled with each other: "Transculturality is, in the first place, a consequence of the *inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures",* it is conceived as an exchange across cultures. Welsh also emphasizes the idea that transculturality has been gaining ground both on macro- and microcultural level, on the level of entire cultures and in the formation of the individual, the multiple cultural connections lead to a process of hybridization, we all posess „cross-cutting identities. […] Today's writers, for example, emphasize that they're shaped not by a single homeland, but by differing reference countries" (Welsh, 1999). The concept of transculturality combines the essence of globalization and particularization, diversity is produced through the constant crossing of different borders. The cultural identity Welsh refers to is also determined the individual's national, ethnic identity.

The cross-cultural phenomena of the postcolonial world have been addressed by Homi K. Bhabha too. In his view there is a new space created by the hybrid subjects, denoted as the "third space", which functions as a dimension of passage between fixed identities, similar to a bridge. The third space is a "contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation" (Bhabha, 1994: 37) where all cultural statements and systems are constructed, a space where contradictions, ambiguities, conflicts and resolutions co-exist.

> The binary construct centre-periphery, an essential construct of colonial discourse, is according to Edward Said, a system that has organized the colonial and postcolonial world: According to this neat division, the colonizing center is home to science, order, and modernity, it is the location of power and value, while the colonized periphery harbours superstition, chaos, and backwardness. Following this logic, the colonizing centre must control these negative aspects of the periphery in order to protect both the centre and the periphery from itself" (Hawley, 2001: 85).

The centre-margin concept refers not only to geographically determined borders, but also to political or cultural realities. Bhabha approaches the notions of stereotypes and ambiguity, which are particularly relevant to the dichotomy of centre-periphery: "a stereotype recognizes and denies difference at the same time, thus rendering the colonized subject both Other and completely knowable" (Hawley, 2001: 85).

The third space escapes the centre-periphery polarity, the writers who construct a hyphenated identity are border crossers, they are in the state of in-betweenness, where cultures, languages, identities intermingle, cultural hybridity comes to birth.

The emerging of new transnational literatures as a result of globalization, migration, cultural hybridity has lead to a paradigm shift in the field of German studies, the discipline of Germanistik, which is, according to some critics, heading in a transnational and transcultural direction.

Herta Müller appears to occupy an interesting position on the cross-cultural stage, the investigation of the author and her literary creation as well prove to be suitable for a transcultural approach, for the investigation of cultural identity formation. Müller was born in 1953 in a Swabian village in Romania, where the mother tongue of the community was a dialect of German, the Banat- Swabian dialect. Living, studying and working in Romania as a member of a minority community have issued a multicultural formation of the author. Müller's literary carrier started under the dictatorship of Ceauşescu, but due to the persecutions of the Securitate she found no other alternative than immigrating to Germany. Leaving Romania in 1987 with her husband, Richard Wagner, an active author himself too, they objected to the status of the home-returning ethnic Germans and wanted to be accepted as political refugees, thus confusing the German immigration authorities and the German critics too, who were not completely familiar with the Romanian realities. Although settling in Germany, the mother-country, has offered her new ways and opportunities to become a widely recognized successful author of contemporary literature, Müller has never completely felt at home there, she didn't return to the „Heimat" but arrived to another foreign place – but she has created a hybrid, transcultural space in her fiction through her unique poetic language.

> Leaving Romania for Germany Müller left a community in which she was a member of a linguistic minority and entered a state in which her mother tongue was the common language. She thereby constitutes a counterpoint to the classic model of exile; her case exposes the limitations of the figure of the exile as outsider by reminding us that notions of belonging are elusive and often lose their consistency on closer scrutiny. Her ambivalent status as a critic of the conservative community of her birth, an exile from a country in which as a member of a linguistic minority and a victim of state persecution she was arguably never at home, and a cultural foreigner in her adopted country of Germany foregrounds the notion of the author in exile as a value-laden concept that borrows from and reinforces often competing narratives of belonging. Her work is a reminder that the conception of exile as a traumatic rupture from a unitary culture is to some extent a narrative that rests for its force on the construction (and thereby fictionalization) of this unitary culture, a process that separation enables (Cooper, 2009: 475).

Due to her German heritage and ethnical and cultural roots, life and work under the Romanian communist regime, and her status as new-comer in West Germany, Müller occupies an almost unique position in contemporary Romanian and German culture. She published her first collection of short stories while living in Romania and was close to a literary society called Aktionsgruppe Banat, founded by German-speaking authors of the Banat Swabian minority in the Romanian Banat. She was considered to be a contributor to the Romanian-German literature, the elusive term reflecting the minority status in Romania and the outsider status in connection with West German literature. It is also important to take

into account the fact that the term Romanian-German, "minoritate germană în România", "Rumäniendeutsch" was introduced as a result of politicohistorical changes, as the region of Banat became part of Romania only after the collapse of Austro-Hungarian Empire, when Transylvania, Banat and Bukovina, territories densely populated by Germans, formed a union with Romania. The term generally refers to the different German-speaking minority groups in Romania, without making any distinctions among the Saxons, Swabians or the Bukovina-Germans, although these communities had a specific and differenced identity (Motzan, 1980: 10).

The German publicist Gerhadt Csejka considers that the Romanian-German literature is not a regional but a minority literature, which manifests its typical minority character in a twofold way: due to the language and the literary form it strives to become part of the mainstream German literary tradition, but regarding the addressed subjects, literary themes – the Securitate, the experiences under a communist regime, the question of identity and freedom –, it is closely connected to Romanian literature. Csejka introduces the concepts of margin and centre to highlight the ambiguous character of this literature. The place at the margin, "Ort am Rande", refers to the scene of minority history, and the main characteristic of this kind of literature is its heightened dependence on the centre. The language of creation, the vehicle of literature is German, and Romanian-German literature has developed certain relations to the German literature. This way it appears as a phenomenon of periphery, which is indebted to a distant German cultural centre. Its periphery status becomes even more emphasized as the themes covered by the Romanian-German literature are deeply rooted in the Romanian history; moreover, this literature depended on the interventions and the decisions of the Romanian state (Motzan, 1997: 98-100). From the German point of view, which made an attempt to outline the multilayered aspect of German literature, the notion of the fifth German literature (next to the literature of the German Federal Republic, that of the German Democratic Republic, Switzerland and Austria) was widely used in the last century. This concept clearly emphasizes the German intention of incorporating Romanian-German literature written in German language starting with 1919 by the representatives of the German minority in Romania. It is a perspective of the diaspora being connected to the mother country.

Nevertheless the classification of this literature is not completely elucidated. The importance of the Romanian-German literature and the world references are changing, the national cultures as entities of reference don't play as a central role as they used to half a century ago. According to the present tendencies the status of a literature as being national, regional or that of a minority is not authoritative (Ardelean, 2011) Being a highly controversial literature which is difficult to be classified, its reception and the interpretation undoubtedly needs a multicultural, or preferably a transcultural approach.[1]

After immigrating to Germany, Herta Müller continued to write novels and essays on Romanian topics, maintaining the distance from the contemporary German reality. She has become an important actor on the stage of contemporary German literature; the new literary and cultural context has raised questions regarding the classification of her work. Is it German literature that she is writing, minority literature or literature of migration? Establishing

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[1] for a more detailed approach see NAGY-SZILVESZTER, 2011

national and cultural identifications for the transnational, transcultural or migrant writers who are born in one country and then choose, or are forced to choose to live in another is a much debated issue. Considering Herta Müller simply a writer of contemporary German literature seems to be a restrictive approach which does not take into account her Banat-Swabian roots and the cultural bounds to Romania. Acknowledging her solely as a Romanian-German writer is nevertheless an ambiguous intendment, as it highlights mainly the Romania-bounded aspect of her cultural identity, emphasizes the minority literature character and disregards Müller's active role in the formation of contemporary German literature. On the other hand seeing her as a Romanian writer of German expression proves to be completely inadequate, this label would force Müller into the dimension of Romanian literature, where the only distinctive characteristic is the different language of writing, denying her Swabian cultural heritage and position in today's German literature. Several critics consider Herta Müller in terms of literature of migration or literature of exile, which incorporates an opening to transcultural approach, suggesting a bound to the place of origin and the new location; it is a literature of displacement and mobility.

Applying Bhabha's term of third space seems to be an adequate alternative when trying to elucidate Herta Müller's position in the contemporary literary landscape. She is a border-crosser writer with a complex background of cultural heritage. When discussing her work, one has to take undoubtedly into account the transculturality of her creation, the Germanness of this literature is deeply rooted in an East-European cultural and historical context:

> "Language is not a linguistic, but rather a cultural barrier; people in Germany express Western realities, which remotely correspond to those in Romania. Processing new information through the filter of the familiar Romanian experiences is part of the transitional period of adjusting to German society. The language is familiar, yet foreign. The Romanian HINTERSINN (deeper meaning) constitutes the deeper layer of Müller's cultural identity, which positioned her in a specific historical and political Romanian context. To understand Herta Müller's work, critics must accept and acknowledge all aspects of her cultural identity, because her uniqueness lies in the juncture of the Banat-Swabian, Romanian, and German presence and the style in which she imagines and gives expression to them" (Glajar, 2004: 152).

Müller has created a unique world of creation where various aspects of Banat-Swabian, Romanian and German cultural identity co-exist and intermingle. It is a hybrid space where issues of identity, persecution, homelessness, freedom, dignity occupy an essential place; it is a space of in-betweenness where the author transposes the ultimate questions of repression and freedom of the individual into universal dimensions. The elaborated topics are characteristically rooted in the East-European historical reality: the island-like, frozen Swabian community, marked by rigid ethnocentrism and a desperate clinging to the past, the confrontation with the Nationalsocialist history, the terrors under the totalitarian regime of Ceauşescu, the persecutions, the constant state of being hunted and followed, the Securitate, the experience of homelessness and immigration, the deportation of minority Germans to labour camps.

As a reaction to the themes of her short stories and novels, her constant turn to the past, Müller has been confronted with the demand of elaborating contemporary German issues, and has also been accused of exhausting and over dwelling on life under dictatorship.

But in Herta Müller's distinct space of creation the individual authorial identity is deeply marked by the personal experiences in the past, the authorial choice of themes strongly reflects her own cultural and historical heritage; in fact when writing, the theme chooses her and not the other way round:

> "Well, I think that the heavy weight ... that literature goes to where the weight is. And I lived under this dictatorship for over thirty years and that is where the injuries and the theme are... I did not choose this theme, the theme always seeks me out. This theme I shall not ... I am still not rid of this theme. And one has to write about the things that occupy one incessantly" (Müller, 2010: 7).

Müller filters the past experiences through a unique poetical writing; she creates a space of literature where autobiographical, historical elements are transposed into fiction, where the vehicle of creative intention is a highly metaphorical and coded language, a language of German where the Romanian one writes along. Transposing autobiographical elements into fiction results in a recreated universe, where the borders of factual reality have been overstridden. Müller herself objects to the reception of her work as being autobiographical, she borrows the term of autofictionality (Autofiktionalität) from Jorge Semprun and Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt to draw attention to the primacy of fiction. Philipp Müller considers the autofictional approach to writing embodied in the "erfundene Wahrnehmung" – imagined awareness of perception, imagined perception – an aesthetic strategy of protest against the restrictive, crippling power constellations of reality (Müller, 2002:50). The imagined perception is a specific approach to authentic and non authentic, it is a subjective, poetically deviated view of reality. Factual occurrence and imagination are intertwined, their borders fade. This generated interlacement of the real and the imaginary is a major characteristic of Müller's authorial space.

The concept of the alien gaze, „der fremde Blick" is another particularity of Herta Müller's way of writing. It should not be mistaken for a stylistic-literary peculiarity; it is a way of perceiving the self and the objects, elements of nature, of life not in their natural implicitness, but from an outer, foreign perspective. Müller identifies the origin of this way of perception in the fear, constant state of being under surveillance in the Romanian communist society, an experience which turns one into an observer too:

> Weil der Verfolger nicht nur körperlich anwesend, sondern auch aus den intimsten Dingen heraus, die ihn personifizieren, beobachten kann, fühlt sich der Bedrohte, was immer er in seiner Wohnung mit soch und seinen Gegenständen tut, mit dem Verfolger Aug in Auge und beobachtet sich und ihn gleichzeitig (Müller, 2008: 138).

Müller explores the paradigms of transcultural identity not only by addressing themes of the south-east European past in her works and the individual methods of writing literature, but also through the language of her work. She writes in German, but at the same time the Romanian language, which she acquired at the age of fifteen, also writes with the author:

> I realised just how rich Romanian is in imagery, what marvellous metaphors there are, the common metaphors that people use every day, in superstitions or ... in expressions, many things are contradictory, or the names of plants, that they are called something completely different than in German. That is then a different look at the same thing ... I have always seen

that there are two stations, the one is the station on my language for something, and the other is this other station. It is not only a different word, it is a different view. Language has different eyes. In my case Romanian always writes with me, also when I am not writing in Romanian, because I have it in my head. And I have two views from the other language, they are always there. I frequently don't know which one it is from which I am writing (Müller, 2010: 11).

Herta Müller's poetical language is a uniquely hybrid one, German and Romanian language interblend to such an extent that the identification and delimitation of the individual languages becomes often impossible. On the other hand Müller consciously resorts to the Romanian considered by her as a highly beautiful, sensual and poetic language and transposes it into the German, creating metaphors, images which might challenge the receptivity of the readers. Her lyrical language is that of a passage between fixed linguistic identities, it is a language that the author herself often contemplates on in her novels and essays.

As one of the numerous instances which exemplify the author's language forging approach one can notice in the novel entitled *Herztier* the reference to the Romanian language, where the palate is referred to as Mundhöhle and Mundhimmel, the latter being translated from the Romanian „cerul gurii" (the sky of the mouth"): Ich hob die Zungenspitze. Zur Mundhöhle sagte man in seiner Sprache Mundhimmel" (Müller 2009: 196). Another example for the constant liaison of the two languages offers the following fragment from *Reisende auf einem Bein: "*In dem anderen Land gibt es zwei verschiedene Wörter für Blätter. Ein Wort für Laub und ein Wort für papier. Dort muß man nicht entscheiden, was man meint. [...] Ja, dort spricht man eine andere Sprache. Wieso vergleichst du immer. Es ist doch nicht deine Muttersprache" (Müller, 1995: 92). The German word " Blätter" is contrasted to the Romanian „foi" and „frunze". Müller's particular fusion of Romanian and German culture is illustrated in the following intertextual excerpts too, where she actually translates and inserts Romanian texts (verses of a song entitled „Canarul" by the Romanian music band Phoenix and verses by Gellu Naum):

Gelber Kanarienvogel
gelb wie das Eigelb
mit weichen Federn
und abwesenden Augen (Müller 2009: 68)

     jeder hatte einen Freund in jedem Stückchen Wolke
     so ist das halt mit Freunden wo die Welt voll Schrecken ist
     auch meine Mutter sagte das ist ganz normal
     Freunde kommen nicht in Frage
     denk an seriösere Dinge
             Gellu Naum[2] (Müller 2009: 5)

Herta Müller's work in its entirety proves to be suitable for a transcultural approach. The themes addressed, the innovative poetics of the language, the artistic way of writing are all elements of the Müllerian „third space", where a unique hybrid cultural identity is being formed.

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[2] versurile au fost traduse în limba germană de către Oskar Pastior (Glajar 2004: 159)

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