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## The Staircase Wit

or, The Poetic Idiomaticity of Herta Müller's Prose

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**ABSTRACT:** 'The Staircase Wit; or, The Poetic Idiomaticity of Herta Müller's Prose' explores idioms and *Sprachbilder* as poetic views of the mother tongue. This exploration involves a special focus on Müller's Nobel lecture, considered as both a compendium and an enactment of her meditations on language, on the nature of writing, and on the creative process. While Müller frequently employs idioms in her articles, lectures, and novel titles, she never uses them in a superficial way or as a mere reproduction of common or daily speech. Rather, as this essay argues, idioms in Müller's prose are indicative of her attitude toward language and toward the mother tongue in general. In the Nobel lecture as well as elsewhere, idioms serve a dual, occasionally conflicting purpose, combining the need for the 'singularity' of aesthetic experience with the search for a new kind of 'conventionality'.

**KEYWORDS:** Herta Müller; Nobel lecture; idioms; poetry; mother tongue; singularity; conventionality

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Herta Müller was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 2009 for depicting, 'with the concentration of poetry and the frankness of prose, [...] the landscape of the dispossessed'.<sup>1</sup> In response to the Prize motivation thus worded by the Swedish Academy, on 7 December of the same year she gave a lecture, entitled 'Every Word Knows Something of a Vicious Circle',<sup>2</sup> in which she reflects upon the role of language — and especially the language of literature — in a context of human deprivation. The speech lends itself to be read as both a general reflection on language ('*Every Word Knows Something*') and a personal statement of poetics, as it also stages a primal scene of writing ('But the writing began in silence, there on the stairs, where I had to come

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1 The Nobel Foundation, *Les Prix Nobel: 2009* (Stockholm: The Nobel Foundation, 2010), pp. 361–73. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2021, 'Herta Müller — Facts' <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2009/muller/facts/>> [accessed 10 February 2021].

2 Herta Müller, 'Jedes Wort weiß etwas vom Teufelskreis', Nobel Lecture, online video recording, NobelPrize.org, 7 December 2009 <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2009/muller/lecture/>> [accessed 10 February 2021]; in English as 'Every Word Knows Something of a Vicious Circle', trans. by Philip Boehm <[https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/muller-lecture\\_en.pdf](https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/muller-lecture_en.pdf)> [accessed 20 February 2023]; in print as 'Jedes Wort weiß etwas vom Teufelskreis', in Müller, *Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel* (Munich: Hanser, 2011), pp. 7–21.

to terms with more than could be said.’)<sup>3</sup> In line with most of her essayistic production, Müller combines narrative with meta-narrative strategies. The autobiographical account — or the ‘auto-fiction’, as she prefers to call it — naturally gives rise to the linguistic annotations that are central to her argumentation, as well as to comment and broader analysis. Like a map used for orientation, the Nobel lecture connects a multitude of Müller’s territories and can help find a way through them. The peculiar origin of this text allows for reading it as a compendium — and an *enactment* at the same time — of her meditations on the creative process and the very space of literature, resulting in a self-portrait of the artist in the making of her own work.

The Nobel Lecture was written and delivered before the Swedish Academy in German, Müller’s mother tongue and the language of all her published works, with the original title: ‘Jedes Wort weiß etwas vom Teufelskreis.’ Although elsewhere in her *oeuvre* Müller discusses more directly and extensively her relationship with her mother tongue, this text provides valuable hints to frame the issue in a broader context and, eventually, to open up new perspectives on it — even beyond her own words. Beyond her own words, indeed, for the Nobel lecture *shows* more than it says, or to put it more precisely, it reveals Müller’s attitude to her native language less in specific assertions than in her word choice and use.

#### IDIOMS AND *SPRACHBILDER*; OR, THE MOTHER TONGUE SEEN THROUGH THE LENS OF POETRY

An interesting case is represented by idioms that occur in relevant positions of the text. A closer look at them is solicited by Müller’s frequent mentioning of idioms in her essays and lectures, as well as by her use of them in the titles of her novels. The way in which she employs them, though, is never trivial, nor is it simply a way of reproducing everyday or colloquial speech. Rather, as I would like to claim here, it is symptomatic of a more general attitude of hers towards language and the mother tongue. In the Nobel lecture as elsewhere, idioms perform a twofold, and partly contradictory, function. On the one hand, they stand for the specificity of a language and evoke familiar constellations

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3 Müller, ‘Every Word’, p. 7.

of meanings and images; on the other, they undergo a process of *displacement*, which eventually leads to a redefinition of the original terms and, as a consequence, of the way they structure experience.

Defined by the *OED* as ‘form[s] of expression [...] used in a distinctive way in a particular language’, idioms are indeed a hallmark of the mother tongue(s).<sup>4</sup> Categorized as formulaic expressions, they encode a mostly figurative and non-compositional meaning, i.e., a meaning that is ‘not deducible from the meanings of the individual words’, although in some cases, as some scholars contend, the literal meaning may play a role in the comprehension process. Whereas ‘idiom’ is a fuzzy category, it is possible to identify some properties that contribute to defining prototypical examples of idioms. Among them, Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow mention: conventionality, inflexibility, figuration, proverbiality, informality, and affect. (‘[I]dioms are typically used to imply a certain evaluation or affective stance toward the things they denote.’) They explain ‘Conventionality’ as follows:

a relation among a linguistic regularity, a situation of use, and a population that has implicitly agreed to conform to that regularity in that situation out of a preference for general uniformity.<sup>5</sup>

This feature is strictly connected to the ‘proverbiality’ that is supposed to characterize prototypical idioms: ‘Idioms are typically used to describe — and, implicitly, to explain — a recurrent situation of particular social interest.’<sup>6</sup> Newmark, who considers idiom as an ‘extended metaphor’, identifies two main functions of idioms: the pragmatic and the referential. Although controversial in its definition, the latter is more interesting in relation to the concerns of this essay, as it pertains to the aesthetic domain and invokes the concentration of form, a concept that is also mentioned as a feature of Müller’s writing in the statement of the Nobel committee. Indeed, as Newmark puts it, the referential function is used ‘to describe a mental process or state,

4 ‘Idiom, n,’ in *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/91031>> [accessed 15 December 2021].

5 Geoffrey Nunberg, Ivan A. Sag, and Thomas Wasow, ‘Idioms’, *Language*, 3 (1994), pp. 491–538 (p. 492).

6 *Ibid.*, p. 493.

a concept, a person, an object, a quality or an action more *comprehensively and concisely* than is possible in literal or physical language.<sup>7</sup> Idioms have also attracted considerable interest among cognitive linguists, who have made a significant contribution to our understanding of idioms, beginning with the seminal works of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson on conceptual metaphors and continuing with more recent studies, which extend into several directions.<sup>8</sup> In particular, it has been shown that many elements of idioms are tied to productive grammatical patterns and schemes of human thought.<sup>9</sup> Raymond Gibbs, among others, mentions this aspect in order to emphasize the role of idioms as instances of the creativity of natural language. On this point the linguist's gaze coincides with that of the poet.

Asked to what extent the language acquired as a child in her native village of the Banat had affected her as a writer, Müller replied that every language is rich with metaphors and that literariness itself (*das Literarische*), far from being a unique quality of the works of writers and poets, is a quality inherent in many cultural artefacts, such as folklore, proverbs, idioms, and images of superstition.<sup>10</sup> Although she does not provide further explanation, Müller seems less interested in the narratives that these forms potentially entail than in the proliferation of images that are produced by popular culture by the means — and through the mediation — of language. Thus, the mother tongue is not only a medium for everyday communication or writing, it is also a collective archive in which the products of linguistic creativity of many anonymous speakers are recorded. At the same time, Müller is aware that in the common perception the poetic quality of many 'verbal images' (*Sprachbilder*) is concealed by habit.<sup>11</sup> To let this quality

7 Peter Newmark, *A Textbook of Translation* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1988), p. 104; my emphasis.

8 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, 'Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 8 (1980), pp. 453–86.

9 Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., 'Idioms and Formulaic Language', in *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*, ed. by Dirk Geeraerts and Hubert Cuyckens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 697–725.

10 Herta Müller, *Mein Vaterland war ein Apfelkern. Ein Gespräch mit Angelika Klammer* (Munich: Hanser, 2014), pp. 89–90.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 90: 'Tausende Sprachbilder, die wir aus Gewohnheit benutzen, ohne darauf zu achten, dass sie poetisch sind' ('Thousands of verbal images that we use out of habit, without paying attention to the fact that they are poetic').

emerge, a different gaze upon language is necessary. In this light, the sentence with which Müller, almost incidentally, switches her focus and reconstructs a hypothetical origin of idioms becomes particularly meaningful:

I imagine that at some point each of our verbal images was uttered by someone, by accident or on purpose. Someone else has then adopted it countless times and it has prevailed.<sup>12</sup>

This move is important exactly because it allows for a return to a point of absolute singularity, where idioms are *not yet* conventionalized but can instead be seen in their originality, as individual creations, utterances capable, by a singular twist of language, to disclose new ways of perceiving, and consequently naming or addressing, objects, experiences, and emotions. Such a gaze on language, which temporarily brackets usage conventions, is similar to the naive gaze of a child. Indeed, in Müller's recollection, proper idioms do not differ from pregnant expressions that she heard as a child from her grandparents and that caught her imagination. No matter if her grandpa drew the maxim 'When flags flutter, reason slips into the trumpet' from somewhere else or if it was a product of his mind: it is greeted by the child as if coined in that very moment. The same effect is produced by the familiar warning of her grandmother: 'Don't think there, where you must not.'<sup>13</sup> It stuck in her mind because it was 'poetic' (poetisch). And she could recognize it as such, though still unaware of the very existence of literature, because it 'stirred something' inside her ('Dieser Satz hatte mich aufgewühlt'). The verb *aufwühlen* — similarly to the English 'to stir' — belongs indeed to the same semantic field of terms that Müller used to refer to the effects of true art, and especially of any 'rigorous' piece of literature, be it in prose or in poetry. For her, it is indeed a prerogative of such works to give rise to an 'invented perception' (erfundene Wahrnehmung), as she calls it, that induces a state

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12 Ibid.: 'Ich stelle mir vor, jedes unserer Sprachbilder hat irgendwann mal jemand zufällig oder absichtlich gesagt. Und jemand anders hat es unzählige Male übernommen und es hat sich durchgesetzt' (my translation; if not declared otherwise, all translations from Müller's texts, with the exception of the Nobel lecture, 'Every Word', are mine.)

13 Müller, *Mein Vaterland*, p. 90.

of disturbance, perturbation, ‘errancy’ (Irrlauf), ‘unrest’ (Unruhe).<sup>14</sup> I shall come back later again to this. For now, it may be enough to single out some additional points.

First, Müller envisions an affinity between idiomatic expressions and poetry. Second, it is possible to start outlining a sort of chiasmic relationship between the two of them: on the one hand, idioms — and by extension the mother tongue — are looked at and judged from the angle of poetry; on the other, every poetic expression is seen as inherently having the potential to become idiomatic.<sup>15</sup> A third point is worth mentioning, yet it requires some specification. I am referring to my previous claim: Müller looks at idioms and verbal images with a gaze that is specifically aimed at capturing singularity in the linguistic event and presupposes a momentary abstraction from conventionality. This does not entail denying the role played by these forms of expression in the system of language as a whole, nor does it mean considering the semantic stratification brought in by collective usage as irrelevant. On the contrary, the poetic reading and use of idioms is in most cases implicitly played against the expectations produced in readers and listeners by habit and conventions. A similar dialectics involving singularity and collectiveness is at work in Müller’s lecture on poetry ‘In jeder Sprache sitzen andere Augen.’<sup>16</sup> As the title suggests, in this text Müller explores the thesis that different languages embody quite different ways of experiencing reality. She does so by means of examples taken from everyday Banat Swabian as well as from standard

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14 All these terms occur many times throughout Müller’s essays and lectures. For a more comprehensive view on their interrelations, see Herta Müller, *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1991), and especially Herta Müller, ‘Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet’, in *Ibid.*, pp. 9–32, and ‘Wie Erfundenes sich im Rückblick wahrnimmt’, in *Ibid.*, pp. 33–56.

15 Müller elaborates on this more thoroughly in her essay ‘So ein großer Körper und so ein kleiner Motor’, in *Immer derselbe Schnee*, pp. 84–95. In this text, written on the occasion of Müller’s being awarded the Walter Hasenclever Literature Prize, she actually does not mention idioms. Instead, she uses the expression ‘erring’ or ‘wandering comment’ (wandernder Kommentar) to refer to phrases such as that in the title of her speech: ‘Such a big body and such a small motor.’ Phrases like that, once used literally to denote a physical state or object (in this case, her father’s truck), can by virtue of their evocative quality serve, if used metaphorically, or ‘idiomatically’, to both evaluate and describe different situations.

16 Herta Müller, ‘In jeder Sprache sitzen andere Augen’, in *Der König verneigt sich und tötet* (Munich: Hanser, 2003), pp. 7–39.

German and Romanian. Müller personifies language by saying that each language has different eyes. Her standpoint is a poetic one; her aim is clearly not to engage in a theoretical discussion. Yet the underlying thesis has a long history and is still debated by philosophers and linguists. Known as the ‘Sapir-Whorf hypothesis’ or more generically as the ‘linguistic relativity hypothesis’, it has found differing formulations, which agree at least on the basic assumption that ‘different languages carve the world up in different ways, and that as a result their speakers think about it differently.’<sup>17</sup> After affirming a strong connection between the distinctive forms of a language and the patterns of conceptualization and perception, though, Müller restrains from proposing an overall and unifying view. Rather, in the same lecture, she insists that language ‘lives in singular instances [im Einzelfall],’<sup>18</sup> and concludes that ‘you have to learn *every time anew* what it has in mind by carefully listening to it [ablauschen].’<sup>19</sup> In this case, her insistence on an approach to linguistic events freed from former prejudices and assumptions is geared less towards unveiling the hidden poetic quality of certain expressions than interpreting them properly. The verb *ablauschen*, which is used by Müller, deserves a brief annotation. While it might be translated as ‘to learn by listening carefully’, it more properly means ‘to learn by eavesdropping’. This second connotation evokes the detestable surveillance practices of the secret police of authoritarian states. If this holds true, then by embracing the term as a key point in the process of understanding Müller applies to it the same process that she tries to explain: she assigns a new value to the term and asks the reader to acknowledge it *as if* it were coined anew.

#### THE NOBEL LECTURE: CIRCLING AROUND IDIOMS

Like many other titles of Müller’s works, the title of the Nobel lecture is quite enigmatic and opaque. One would expect the reading of the text to make its meaning more transparent, but that is the case only

17 Chris Swoyer, ‘The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis: Supplement to “Relativism”’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2003) <<https://stanford.library.sydney.edu.au/archives/spr2015/entries/relativism/supplement2.html>> [accessed 17 July 2020].

18 Müller, ‘In jeder Sprache’, p. 39.

19 Ibid.; my emphasis.



to a certain extent. Before analysing the structure and content of the lecture, it might be worth reflecting on the expectations raised by the title in the reader/listener. As studies in semiology and reception theory have widely demonstrated, titles, along with para-textual and textual elements such as the opening words, contribute in large part to orienting the reading process. In this case, the title 'Every Word Knows Something of a Vicious Circle' evokes a somewhat mysterious atmosphere surrounding the life and functioning of words, implicitly promising to reveal the secret that is alluded to by the expression 'every word *knows something*'. The implicit personification of 'word' suggests that, in what follows, language will be treated not as an inert object of study, but rather as something living or inherently entangled with life. The main focus of the title, though, is on its last part, with the 'vicious circle' directly predicating a property of words. In light of what I discussed above, it might be interesting to note that 'vicious circle' is itself an idiomatic expression. It derives from the Latin *circulus vitiosus* and would probably be classified among the cross-cultural idioms, since it is common among speakers of different languages and cultures, with only slight variation. In German, the concept is expressed by a partially different form, which retains the idea of circularity but is neither a mere calque nor a literal transposition from the equivalent Latin expression. The characterization changes: where the Latin-based forms have a 'vicious', i.e., a 'faulty' circularity, the German *Teufelskreis* has a devilish one: 'a circle (*Kreis*) of the Devil (*Teufel*)'.

The issue of translation, especially in relation to idioms, will resurface later. Yet the brief notes above already suggest that here resides another point of affinity between idioms and poetry. In the case of both poetry and idioms, translation is a hard task, sometimes verging on the extreme of impossibility. As we have seen, even when it is possible to identify a close match between idioms belonging to different languages, a small difference of form may be sufficient to produce different chains of metaphorical and culturally bound associations, which translation would necessarily leave behind.<sup>20</sup> In any case, many schol-

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20 See, among others, Mona Baker, *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 72: 'An idiom [...] may have a similar counterpart in the target language, but its context of use may be different; the two expressions may have different connotations, for instance, or they may not be pragmatically transferable.'

ars maintain that idioms are stored in memory and processed by the brain as phrases and that many of them are no longer perceived as metaphorical or containing other kinds of figuration. If this is true, both the German *Teufelskreis* and the English ‘vicious circle’ in the title, at this point, are likely to be intended in almost the same way, as referring to the realm of logic or rhetoric, and as leading to some kind of paradox. According to the dictionaries, they denote a ‘fallacious mode of reasoning’ or arguing in which premises and conclusions refer to one another, and are supposed to be each other’s cause;<sup>21</sup> or, by extension, they denote a dead end brought about by a never-ending series of unpleasant, interdependent events or factors.<sup>22</sup> It remains to verify whether and to what extent these expectations will be fulfilled, contradicted, or modified by the text itself.

#### ‘DO YOU HAVE A HANDKERCHIEF’: TOWARD A POETIC IDIOMATICITY

The Nobel lecture can be roughly divided into three parts. The first, and the longest one, is in turn composed of a series of independent tableaux or scenes, describing different situations (or ‘stations’) in

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Baker mentions four strategies to translate idioms: finding an idiom of similar meaning and similar form in the target language; finding an idiom of similar meaning and different form; paraphrasing; literally transposing. While the last of these strategies is the one that presents the highest coefficient of foreignization and is, according to Larson, the most dangerous, paraphrasing is the extreme attempt to convey a content at the expense of form, in the absence of an expression with an equivalent function.

- 21 The *OED* registers ‘vicious circle’ under both the entries ‘vicious, adj. 9’ and ‘circle, n. 19’. The latter entry gives the following definition: ‘A fallacious mode of reasoning, wherein a proposition is used to establish a conclusion, and afterwards proved by means of the conclusion which it has been employed to establish; so that, as in a circle, there is really no starting-point.’ See *OED Online* <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/33187>> [accessed 20 July 2021]. At ‘vicious, adj. 9a’, ‘vicious circle’ is mentioned as pertaining to both logic and pathology. For the latter sense, the *OED* provides (9b) the following definition: ‘A morbid process consisting in the reciprocal continuation and aggravation of one disorder by another.’ Also mentioned (9c) is a generic meaning that keeps similar negative connotations: ‘A situation in which action and reaction intensify each other; a self-perpetuating process of aggravation’ (*OED Online* <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223179>> [accessed 20 July 2021]).
- 22 The German Dictionary *Duden* defines ‘Teufelskreis’ as follows: ‘ausweglos scheinende Lage, die durch eine nicht endende Folge unangenehmer, einander bedingender Geschehnisse, Faktoren herbeigeführt wird’. See ‘Teufelskreis’, *Duden Online* (Berlin: Bibliographisches Institut, 2021) <<https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Teufelskreis>> [accessed 20 July 2021].

the author's life and connected only by the recurrence of the same expression. The second part is more reflective in tone and leads to a meditation on language and writing. It also contains what I have called a 'primal scene of writing'. The third part is the conclusive one. It is introduced by another autobiographical scene of writing, which prompts a final thought on the salvific potential of words for 'those whom dictatorships deprive of dignity every day' and, more generally, for 'the acute solitude of a human being'.<sup>23</sup>

DO YOU HAVE A HANDKERCHIEF was the question my mother asked me every morning, standing by the gate to our house, before I went out onto the street. I didn't have a handkerchief. And because I didn't, I would go back inside and get one. I never had a handkerchief because I would always wait for her question. The handkerchief was proof that my mother was looking after me in the morning. [...] The question DO YOU HAVE A HANDKERCHIEF was an indirect display of affection.<sup>24</sup>

This is the opening paragraph of the lecture, with the question 'Do you have a handkerchief' marking its very beginning. The same question will recur many times afterwards throughout the text. The use of capital letters, in which it is written, makes its repetition stand out graphically in the pages of the lecture text, thus preparing the reader to receive it as something more than a mere rhetorical motif. By pointing at the 'circularity' announced by the title, repetition will prove to be in itself a constitutive part of the meaning of the text. While the phrase is repeated in identical form, it nevertheless needs to be situated — and carefully listened to, or 'eavesdropped on' — every time anew, in order to fully reveal its meaning. From the very beginning, in fact, in excess of its literal meaning, the question is charged with a lateral meaning that addresses what cannot be expressed in speech. If it is not (yet) a matter of figurality in any strict sense, it is certainly a case of a signification process that counts 'indirectness' and 'disguise' among its most salient features.

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23 Müller, 'Every Word', p. 10.

24 Ibid. p. 1.

Anything more direct would have been embarrassing and not something the farmers practiced. Love disguised itself as a question. That was the only way it could be spoken: matter-of-factly, in the tone of a command, or the deft maneuvers used for work. The brusqueness of the voice even emphasized the tenderness.<sup>25</sup>

If every word needs a context to be correctly interpreted, in this case the context is to be understood in a broader sense than the restricted conversational setting. The phrase ‘Do you have a handkerchief’ (the absence of the question mark mimics the ambiguous status of a question ‘in the tone of a command’) is so deeply rooted in the language and culture in which it is produced that outside of them it would probably be intended in its literal sense only. The language and culture at issue are those of a small village of farmers belonging to the German-speaking community settled in the Romanian region called Banat. It does not matter that much, at this point, to specify that the language is a variant of the Swabian dialect or to emphasize that it is the language of a minority. What is more important to note is that it is — to put it in Wittgenstein’s terms — a ‘form of life’ (*Lebensform*), with its own rules, its own ‘language-games’, and its own interdicts.<sup>26</sup> In Müller’s recollection, the question ‘Do you have a handkerchief’, produced within that specific form of life, actually behaves in the same way as an idiom, as a ‘form of expression [...] used in a distinctive way in a particular language’.

But what does it mean ‘to have a handkerchief’ in *that* particular language, which is a form of life and a world (Wittgenstein)? And what is the meaning of the handkerchief within the compass of the lecture? ‘No other object in the house, including ourselves, was ever as important to us as the handkerchief.’ The importance of the object is also conveyed by the fact that ‘we had a handkerchief drawer at home’ and that its organization complied with strict criteria: it ‘was always partitioned into two rows, with three stacks apiece.’<sup>27</sup> Position, size,

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25 Ibid.

26 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, ed. by Hacker and Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 15 (§ 23).

27 Müller, ‘Every Word’, pp. 3–4.

and ornamentation of the handkerchiefs turn the drawer into 'a family portrait in handkerchief format', with its power hierarchies and gender differences objectified and reproduced in smaller scale: the men's handkerchiefs, for father and grandfather, positioned on the left, 'were the biggest, with dark stripes along the edges in brown, grey or Bordeaux'. The women's handkerchiefs were on the right, had light blue, red, or green edges, and were smaller. The children's handkerchiefs 'were the smallest: borderless white squares painted with flowers or animals'. They lie in the middle, between the men's and women's stacks. The further partition of each of the three types into two rows followed the calendar division between weekdays and Sundays.

'Objects [Gegenstände] have always been important to me.' Thus Müller declares in her essay 'In jeder Sprache sitzen andere Augen.'<sup>28</sup> Indeed, they have a prominent role in her aesthetics. In a 2007 lecture on poetics presented at the University of Zurich, she describes the act of writing as a process that involves two conversations. The first one is precisely a conversation of the 'linguistic gaze' (sprachlicher Blick) with 'the real objects of life', while the second one occurs between 'the conditions negotiated in that first conversation and the paper, that is, their turning into sentences.'<sup>29</sup> In a shattered image of the world such as Müller's, fragments and fractures, under the pressure of fear and trauma, prevail over any totalizing, unitary, all-embracing view, while details are enlarged at the expense of the whole. In this world, objects are the ultimate bearer of meaning. Yet, their meaning is neither stable nor transparent. They are proof not that the world is as it is, but rather that it reveals itself insofar as it undergoes transformations. Objects do not even seem to have a meaning on their own, for themselves. Like linguistic signs, they point beyond themselves in quite an arbitrary way. They are signifiers of something unknown or to come. On the one hand, objects are linked with identity, namely the identity of those who own them:

Their appearance was part of the image of the persons who owned them, like the persons themselves. They were always

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28 Müller, 'In jeder Sprache', p. 15.

29 Herta Müller, 'Gelber Mais und keine Zeit', in *Immer derselbe Schnee*, pp. 125–45 (p. 135).

inseparable from what and how a person was. They are the outermost part of the person, lifted off the skin.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, the purport of that linkage is opaque, just as that of the object itself. Handkerchiefs act like other objects of real life that travel through Müller's texts. In these instances, an object is charged with a meaning that often remains hidden and reveals itself only after the same — or almost the same — object has occurred in different contexts. The presence of a handkerchief punctuates the entire lecture, sewing together different events of the author's life as well as the narrative that retells them. In fact, each of the auto-fictional tableaux of the first part revolves around a different use of the handkerchief in a particular situation of life. Which is tantamount to saying that each revolves around a different meaning of 'handkerchief', if — to put it with Wittgenstein — 'the meaning of a word is its use.'<sup>31</sup> Station after station, from one occurrence to the next, what actually remains unchanged is the word designating the object: this word guarantees the possibility for an object to be both the same and to differ from itself; it also triggers, along with the wandering of the object throughout the text, the wandering of meanings in unpredictable directions towards unpredictable aims.<sup>32</sup>

Compared with other objects, the handkerchief has a peculiarity, which lies at the basis of the handkerchief's utmost importance in everyday life: 'Its uses were *universal*.' Müller singles some of them out: 'sniffles; nosebleeds; hurt hand, elbow or knee; crying, or biting into it to suppress the crying.'<sup>33</sup> The list goes on at length, including examples in which the handkerchief, properly used or adapted to a specific aim, may work as relief against headache, pain, heat, or rain, or may help remember things, and may even help take care of the dead.

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30 Müller, 'In jeder Sprache', p. 15: 'Ihr Aussehen gehörte zum Bild der Menschen, die sie besaßen, wie die Menschen selbst. Sie gehörten immer zu dem, was und wie ein Mensch war, untrennbar dazu. Sie sind der äußerste von der Haut weggehobene Teil der Person.'

31 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 43.

32 Müller, 'In jeder Sprache', p. 18: 'The objects recur time and again. Alexandru Vona writes: "There is a pressing presence of things, whose aim is unknown to me."' (Die Gegenstände wiederholen sich immer wieder. Alexandru Vona schreibt: 'Es gibt eine bedrängende Gegenwart der Dinge, deren Zweck ich nicht kenne.')

33 Müller, 'Every Word', p. 4.

If poverty and deprivations are the material ground where people's resourcefulness breeds and the manifold uses of the handkerchief are rooted, on a narrative and linguistic level the *universality* of its uses transforms the handkerchief into a kind of universal signifier, ready to receive the seeds of figurality and make them bear fruit. This is what happens in one of the Nobel lecture's first auto-fictional scenes, which tells of the harassment Müller had to endure in the workplace for refusing to collaborate with the Romanian secret police. After finding all doors closed, having no other place to stay and yet not being willing to resign or indulge her persecutors, she sits on a handkerchief in the stairway, with the handkerchief *becoming* her office. 'I was a staircase wit and my office was a handkerchief', she writes in a central and densely meaningful passage.<sup>34</sup> At the same time real and metaphorical, the handkerchief *is* indeed the only place — a free place, a place of her own, not subjected to the authority of others — where she can keep doing her work, namely her technical translations, for the factory. Yet, it also stands for a space of resistance and dignity, a shelter against abuse of power and oppression. In another auto-fictional story told in the lecture, the handkerchief is not a real object but features only as a mental image, working as a vehicle within a metaphor. The story is that of Uncle Matz, who in the 1930s had first become a fanatic Nazi and then an SS-officer, to the consternation of his father, Müller's grandfather, who 'owed his entire fortune to the credit advanced by Jewish business friends'. Uncle Matz had asked to be sent to the front and soon afterwards had found his death on a mine. A picture of his remains was sent back to his family.

The death photo is hand-sized: in the middle of a black field a little grey heap of human remains can be seen resting on a white cloth. Against the black, the white cloth lies as small as a children's handkerchief, a white square with a strange design painted in the middle.<sup>35</sup>

The comparison between the white 'cloth' (Tuch) with the uncle's remains and the children's 'handkerchief' (Taschentuch), prompted by the word assonance along with the visual resemblance, exceeds the

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34 Ibid., p. 3.

35 Ibid., p. 6.

merely denotative dimension to which the sentence, if taken alone, would confine it. The ghostly apparition of the handkerchief, as a return after many other appearances, conjures up a crowd of associated meanings and heterogeneous reverberations. In particular, it recalls scenes of the lecture that are linked to the narrator's childhood, such as the description of the 'handkerchief's drawer', or that are centred around the concept of 'care', whether it be the care for the dead (Müller tells how handkerchiefs were used to keep the dead person's mouth closed, before composing the corpse, or to cover their face, in the case of someone collapsing out in the street) or the care of a mother for her child, such as in the opening scene of the text. The comparison, as if picturing the object at the threshold of its metamorphosis, introduces a change of perception in the scene, which alters the plain neutrality of description. This is an instance of the process Müller calls 'invented perception', by which writing, insofar as it alters reality, seizes its truth more deeply. In this case, the altered perception of the death cloth as a child handkerchief objectifies the careful gaze of the mother:

For my grandmother this photo was a combination [...]: on the white handkerchief was a dead Nazi, in her memory was a living son. [...] She prayed every day, and her prayers almost certainly had double meanings as well. Acknowledging the break from beloved son to fanatic Nazi, they probably beseeched God to perform the balancing act of loving the son and forgiving the Nazi.<sup>36</sup>

New layers of significance open up when the 'handkerchief' (both the object and the word designating it) is read within the pattern of repetitions that started at the very beginning of the text with the question: 'Do you have a handkerchief.' This very question, intended in its idiomatic sense of an 'indirect display of affection', provides the keystone for both the structure of the lecture as a whole and the interpretation of the single occurrences (reincarnations) of the 'handkerchief'.

This is a key point and needs to be understood correctly. The phrase 'Do you have a handkerchief' is not registered as an idiom in any dictionary, and yet it behaves as such, after being defined as such

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36 Ibid.



in the opening paragraph of the text. As seen above, its meaning — not being literal — is ‘figurative’ in a peculiar way and is strictly dependent on the language (intended as a ‘form of life’) within the limits and borders of which it is originally produced. The other features proper to ‘prototypical idioms’ — inflexibility, informality, and affect — can also be attached to this phrase, as it implies an evaluation and an affective stance toward the thing it denotes.<sup>37</sup> ‘Do you have a handkerchief’ also has the characteristic of ‘proverbiality’ insofar as it ‘describe[s] — and, implicitly, [...] explain[s] — a recurrent situation’, although in our case the process is somehow reversed.<sup>38</sup> It is the reference to the idiom (the phrase ‘Do you have a handkerchief’), via the repetition of the same expression (‘the handkerchief’), that sheds light on the different — and apparently unrelated — scenes of life and connotes them as having hidden, deep, common roots and traits. But the point that I find crucial here is that the recurrent reference to the idiomatic phrase ‘Do you have a handkerchief’ establishes a new conventionality, not among the population of speakers of a specific language, as is the case with proper idioms, but among the readers of the lecture within the confined space of the text. This is what I suggest calling ‘poetic idiomaticity’: a feature of Müller’s prose by which certain expressions are redefined with regard to their meaning and use according to a dynamic set of rules and internal relations that the text negotiates with its addressee in the very process of its own constitution as a text. Within this frame, Müller’s peculiar attitude towards her mother tongue becomes evident. The mother tongue is necessary, but only in order to be overcome and superseded. It is the first and ‘most familiar’ (*vertrauteste*) access point to the world of signification and yet it is useful insofar as it allows a new language, the language of the work, the language of poetry, to take place.<sup>39</sup> In this regard, the mother tongue is not unlike Wittgenstein’s ‘ladder’, which must be thrown away after having climbed up on it. One must surmount it; then one sees the world correctly. This could be claimed of the mother tongue

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37 Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow, ‘Idioms’, p. 492.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 493.

39 Müller, ‘In jeder Sprache’, p. 26.

by applying to it what the philosopher claims at the end of his *Tractatus* about the very propositions that have led the reader up to that point.<sup>40</sup>

#### THE DEVIL'S CIRCLE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE

The poetic idiomaticity of the phrase 'Do you have a handkerchief', established by the lecture, is just an example of a more general quality of words: namely, their power to connect things, to establish relations among disparate situations and experiential domains, and, in so doing, to make new sense of them. This additional state of comprehension of life and reality, to which language gives access, can only be brought about by writing, as Müller suggests in a passage of the lecture that makes the first explicit reference to the title:

Can we say that it is precisely the smallest objects — be they trumpets, accordions, or handkerchiefs — which connect the most disparate things in life? That the objects are in orbit and that their deviations reveal a pattern of repetition — a vicious circle [Teufelskreis], or what we call in German a devil's circle. We can believe this, but not say it. Still, what can't be said can be written. Because writing is a silent act, a labor from the head to the hand.<sup>41</sup>

Defined in direct opposition to speech, writing represents the space or the medium in which 'the real objects of life' and the words designating them arrange themselves in such a way as to signify differently than they ordinarily do and consequently to open up new paths of sense-making. This move not only subverts the Platonic view according to which the spoken word would inherently be more apt to address truth, but, as I shall show in the next section, also undermines the myth of the mother tongue in one of its pillars, namely immediacy. What starts to be outlined here is the picture of a mother tongue governed by a different temporality and a different logic, a mother tongue 'as writing' and 'labour' that contradicts the principle of a language providing an immediate access to meaning thanks to its closeness to the speaking subject, its constant being 'at hand' (*parat stehen*).<sup>42</sup>

40 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by F. P. Ramsey and C. K. Ogden, intro. by Bertrand Russell (London: Kegan Paul, 1922), p. 90 (§ 6.54).

41 Müller, 'Every Word', p. 7.

42 Müller, 'In jeder Sprache', p. 28.

The different logic of words that writing makes possible is represented in the Nobel lecture by the figure of the ‘vicious circle’. Remarkably, the German term *Teufelskreis* from the source text is rendered with an expanded translation that provides both the corresponding English idiom — ‘vicious circle’, in fact — and the literal meaning, ‘what we call in German a devil’s circle’. The translator’s choice is motivated by the intrinsic ambiguity of the expression, which, as any idiom, may signify differently according to whether it is understood as a stock unit (i.e., a phrase) or is analysed compositionally, i.e., by taking into account the meanings of the single words composing the idiom. Both possibilities are latently active here, and Müller clearly plays on the oscillation between these two options. She presupposes the conventional meaning of the idiom as a unit but at the same time, by (mis)placing the expression into a context that makes it sound inappropriate, she obliterates it. Indeed, at the point of the lecture where it occurs first, the compound word *Teufelskreis* sounds odd and forces the reader to revise her/his own expectations as well as to question its meaning. None of the meanings assigned by dictionaries, listed above, to the idiom ‘vicious circle’ easily applies to the narrative of the Nobel lecture.<sup>43</sup> Neither a fallacious, circular argument nor a pathological and ‘self-perpetuating process of aggravation’ is an apt descriptor of the ‘pattern of repetition’ of the objects or words connecting the different life-scenes in the Nobel lecture. Nor is a wholly negative, claustrophobic situation with no way out. No relation of cause and effect, nor any of action and reaction link these events. Above all, their circularity exceeds a simplistic, negative characterization. On the contrary, the unforeseen connections that repetition establishes among the unpleasant events narrated (the harassment suffered in the workplace, the uncle’s death, Oskar Pastior’s deportation, and others) contribute to a new understanding of them.

Nothing but the whirl of words [Wortwirbel] could grasp my condition. It spelled out what the mouth could not pronounce. I chased after the events [Gelebten], caught up in the words

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43 See notes 21 and 22.

and their devilish circling [im Teufelskreis], until something emerged I had never known before.<sup>44</sup>

The mis/dis-placement of the expression *Teufelskreis* suggests a redefinition from 'vicious' to 'devil's circle.' As if it had never been used before, the expression calls for a (re)interpretation that starts from the words that compose it and recombines them into a new figuration, halfway between an event of magic, which involves the evocation of spirits, and a psychoanalytic session. The image of the *Teufelskreis* gives tangible shape to the immaterial and chaotic process of literary creation, especially with regard to auto-fictional or autobiographical accounts, with its combination of control and dispossession, abandonment to the unconscious paths of memory, as well as to the impersonal power of language. In the scene depicted above, the creative subject is almost completely passive, with her role being only that of a scene-setter and a conjurer who is herself possessed by the summoned spirits, while all agency resides in words and language.

Parallel to the reality, the pantomime of words stepped into action, without respect for any real dimensions, shrinking what was most important and stretching the minor matters. As it *rushes madly* ahead, this *devilish* circle [Teufelskreis] of words imposes a kind of *bewitched* [verwunschene] logic on what has been lived.<sup>45</sup>

Carried by the whirlwind of words, the writing subject cannot help but attend passively the mute show by which language alters reality and reinterprets — and even reinvents — past experiences. As if they were under a spell, words animate themselves and enact a 'representation' that mirrors back a deformed image of the past. A couple of lines below, the passage reads as follows: 'The words are what takes possession of me.' By subtly weaving the threads of the metaphors of 'bewitchment' and 'magic' in this passage, Müller unfolds a meditation on auto-fictionality that develops throughout all of her work. Traces of it are already found in 1991, in a book tellingly called *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel* (The Devil Sits in the Mirror),<sup>46</sup> and later in her 1996 book *In*

44 Müller, 'Every Word', p. 7.

45 Ibid.; translation modified, my emphasis.

46 Müller, *Der Teufel*.

*der Falle*. In the latter text, a reference to Jorge Semprún becomes crucial, as she cites him to assert that literary invention is indispensable for the truth of memory to be conveyed: ‘The truth of written memories must be invented.’<sup>47</sup> The importance of the reference lies in the context from which it is taken, since Semprún’s meditation concerns the experience of the Nazi concentration camps as well as the possibility of capturing the ‘substance’ of such a dense event and, by extension, of ‘all great historical experiences.’ To ‘shape [one’s] evidence into an artistic object, a space of creation. Or of re-creation.’<sup>48</sup> For Semprún, this is the only way ‘of conveying some of the truth of such testimony.’ On one hand, Müller’s citation of Semprún implicitly compares the experience of the *Lager* with that of the Romanian authoritarian state (or perhaps with the density of any traumatic event?). On the other hand, it reverses Semprún’s call for a gesture of — I dare say, masculine — authorial resolve (the ‘artifice of a masterly narrative’) into an articulated process that is governed by the autonomy of language as well as by a kind of wisdom or intelligence of words:

The words dictate what has to happen, you follow their sound, an exact mathematics up to the surprise attack brought to the real objects by the metaphor. The invented words take a deep breath, you don’t know what they allow, you try. They grab what they need. And what they do not allow, they reject. For them nothing is indifferent. Words are keen-eared, intuition makes them clever.<sup>49</sup>

This passage from her 2007 lecture on poetics well describes the creative process as a process of dispossession or, at least, of tentative negotiation, in which the author, far from being in control of her subject and means, finds in language both a dictator and an ultimate judge. This process, triggered by the devil’s circle of words, is even radicalized in the Nobel lecture. Here, the loss of control over the way lived experiences are reshaped by language is embodied in the pantomime, since this is the place where a complete reversal of roles is performed between the writing I and the personified words, with the latter taking

47 Herta Müller, *In der Falle* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1996), pp. 21–22.

48 Jorge Semprún, *Literature or Life*, trans. by Linda Coverdale (London: Viking, 1997), p. 13.

49 Müller, ‘Gelber Mais’, p. 136.

on human affects, actions, and volition, and the former being subjected to them. This can lead to extreme consequences when it comes to the treatment of sensitive arguments or, to put it in Semprún's terms, of particularly dense experiences, such as dictatorship is for Müller. Not unlike what happens in the case of trauma, dictatorship, being (one of) the main source(s) of her anguish and cares, as well as what she often mentions as lying at the origin of her need to write, cannot be deliberately thematized. Rather, even if present, it remains hidden, while language chooses its own way to show without saying, in the essential deferment of fiction.

Their pantomime is ruthless and restive [rabiät und bleibt ängstlich], always craving more but instantly jaded. The subject of dictatorship is necessarily present, because nothing can ever again be a matter of course once we have been robbed of nearly all ability to take anything for granted. The subject is there implicitly, but the words are what take possession of me. They coax the subject anywhere they want. Nothing corresponds anymore [nichts mehr stimmt] and everything is true [wahr].<sup>50</sup>

Another reversal is at work here. In a general sense, in fact, one could maintain that dictatorship is what triggers the vicious, devil's circle of words, insofar as every word can be intentionally misinterpreted and thus leads to 'excruciating consequences', while silence can become tantamount to connivance with the authoritarian power. Yet, at this point, it should be definitely clear that *Teufelskreis* does not attain to words as a logical or a rhetorical attribute, but that it rather denotes a symbolic space as well as a peculiar condition of possibility in which words fully unfold their power to reshape experience. It is an inherently ambiguous condition, both perturbing and enlightening, at the same time powerful and full of pain, which takes on the character of magic insofar as it addresses the nexus linking (literary) creation and perception by evoking a sort of external and impersonal faculty, which works according to its own laws, independent of reason or will.

In this sense, the expression *Teufelskreis* (devil's circle) seems to recall the image of the 'magic circle', *Zauberkreis*, as preserved in medieval iconography as well as in superstition or in exoteric praxis. The

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50 Müller, 'Every Word', p. 7; translation modified.

entry for *Zauberkreis* in the German dictionary of Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm renders all the ambivalence of the term, which designates both a spatial domain and a magic power confined into ‘a circle that is mostly visibly drawn on the earth.’<sup>51</sup> While the circle protects against evil and is a space inside of which the magician can ‘conjure up the spirits’ or even ‘banish the devil’ (as well as ‘the evil spirit’), it is also a space in which the magician can ‘fall under the spell of magical beings’. This very ambiguity is, I suppose, the deep essence of the *Teufelskreis* in its attribution to words.

If one moves a step further and, in line with what Müller herself authorizes elsewhere, uses this expression as an ‘errant comment’,<sup>52</sup> abstracting it from the specific meaning assigned to it in the Nobel lecture, the figure of the *Teufelskreis* can moreover help reconcile her apparently contradictory statements concerning the mother tongue and language in general. Müller oscillates between the two poles of a complete distrust of language and an acknowledgement of its boundless power.

Indeed, in a conversation with Michael Lentz, Müller admits that words have something like a ‘magic quality’ because ‘they potentially have and can do everything’, they are ‘latently capable of anything’.<sup>53</sup> Yet elsewhere she maintains that ‘it is not true that there are words for everything’, and, in particular, that no language has words capable of reproducing either thought in its non-verbal manifestations or what moves inside us, in our ‘inner districts’ (inneren Bereiche). In general, says Müller, language fails precisely when it comes to expressing what

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51 ‘Zauberkreis, m.’, in *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm*, digital version, part of the *Wörterbuchnetz of the Trier Center for the Digital Humanities* <<http://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB?lemid=Z01853/>> [accessed 11 February 2021]. In the dictionary of the Brothers Grimm, the ‘magic circle’ or *Zauberkreis* is defined as a magic ‘Bann’. In the same dictionary, the German term *Bann* is only marginally attested with reference to magic. In fact, sense (1) records the meaning of ‘the power and jurisdiction of a spiritual or secular judge’ while, according to sense (2), *Bann* is the region upon which that power is exerted, often in relation with obligations or prohibitions. Sense (3) is that of a *dictum* or *interdictum* (‘Bann, m.’, in *Deutsches Wörterbuch* <<https://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB?lemid=B00667/>> [accessed 11 February 2021]).

52 See note 15 above.

53 Herta Müller, *Lebensangst und Worthunger: im Gespräch mit Michael Lentz: Leipziger Poetikvorlesung 2009* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), p. 51.

is 'crucial' (das Entscheidende), vital, or essential.<sup>54</sup> She is also sceptical of the Western faith in talking and discourse to unravel 'confusion' (Wirrnis).<sup>55</sup> In addition, while she is fascinated by the power of words, she is afraid of it. 'I don't trust language' (Ich traue der Sprache nicht), she restates, because falsification, disguise, and deceit are inherent in its way of signifying.<sup>56</sup> And yet, nothing else but 'trust' (Vertrauen) literally lies at the roots of her intimacy (Vertrautheit), her 'effortless love' (unangestrenzte Liebe) for her mother tongue: 'I have never loved my mother tongue because it is the better language, but because it is the most intimate' (die vertrauteste).<sup>57</sup>

TREPPENWITZ; OR, THE MOTHER TONGUE AS WRITING

In the *Teufelskreis*, that is, in the in-between time-space of creation, of the 'labor from the head to the hand' preluding to writing, words abstracted from their ordinary context of use enter into new relations with other words and with new contexts. In the same way as in poetry, these connections are mainly governed by form, especially sound, as well as by the images evoked by the combinations of words and sounds. In doing so, words, in their unexpected connections, modify — or reinvent — perception and produce a renewed understanding of reality.

It is in this light that one should read young Herta's attempts to rename flowers according to their qualities so as to enter into communication with them, or later, after being banned from her office, her consultations of the dictionary for the words (and the metaphoric) pertinent to her new 'environment' in the factory, namely the 'stairs' (Treppen).<sup>58</sup> She runs through and collects the terms *Antritt*

54 Müller, 'In jeder Sprache', p. 14: 'Es ist nicht wahr, daß es für alles Worte gibt. Auch daß man immer in Worten denkt, ist nicht wahr. Bis heute denke ich vieles nicht in Worten, habe keine gefunden, nicht im Dorfdeutschen, nicht im Stadtdeutschen, nicht im Rumänischen, nicht im Ost- oder Westdeutschen. Und in keinem Buch. Die inneren Bereiche decken sich nicht mit der Sprache, sie zerren einen dorthin, wo sich Wörter nicht aufhalten können. Oft ist es das Entscheidende, über das nichts mehr gesagt werden kann.'

55 Ibid., p. 15.

56 Herta Müller, 'Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel', in *Immer derselbe Schnee*, pp. 96–109 (p. 98).

57 Müller, 'In jeder Sprache', p. 26: 'Ich habe meine Muttersprache nie geliebt, weil sie die bessere ist, sondern die vertrauteste.'

58 Müller, 'Jedes Wort', p. 11.



(literally, entrance) and *Austritt* (exit) for the first and the last step of a staircase, and *Treppenwangen* (stairs' cheeks) and *Treppenaugen* (stairs' eyes) for the lateral support structure of the staircase and the free rooms between the steps;<sup>59</sup> she also collects *Treppenzins* (literally, stair interests), which comes from economical jargon, and *Treppenwitz* (staircase wit), which flows from literature into ordinary language.<sup>60</sup> All this is clearly possible only within the system of a specific language, in this case German, and thanks to the 'intimacy' the writer has with respect to her own mother tongue.

Indeed, in the case mentioned above, the compass of the 'devilish circle of words' coincides with the perimeter of the mother tongue, with both its power and limits, both of them eventually converging into the extreme horizon line of untranslatability. 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.'<sup>61</sup> Paraphrasing Wittgenstein's well-known assertion, one could affirm that there are two kinds of limits of the mother tongue. The first limit concerns the way each language carves up the world or structures both perception and conceptualization. The second limit, which is common to every language or to language *per se*, concerns the confrontation with the 'inexpressible' (das Unausprechliche), with that 'whereof one cannot speak.'<sup>62</sup> While formally keeping itself within the system of her mother tongue, Müller's language reveals itself as constantly striving to strain both types of limits. Müller pursues this aim precisely by seizing on the peculiarities of writing as a medium or, one could also say, by reshaping her mother tongue as writing.

In the Nobel lecture, as in other essays of hers that do not claim theoretical coherence, Müller's argumentation proceeds less in a strictly structured sequence of assertions than by images colliding with one

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59 In the English version of this passage (Müller, 'Every Word', p. 3), the translator has introduced some changes in order to keep the correspondence between technical terms denoting parts of the staircase and names of body parts. 'Treppenwangen' (stair stringers) and 'Treppenaugen' have not been translated. Instead of them, two other terms, namely 'hand' and 'nosing', have been introduced. These changes affect the sentence that follows in the same page: 'HAND and NOSING — so the stair has a body', where the German original, instead of 'a body', has 'ein Gesicht' (a face).

60 Müller, 'Every Word', pp. 3 and 8.

61 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, § 5.6.

62 *Ibid.*, § 6.522 and § 7.

another. ‘Verbal images’ (Sprachbilder) that arise from metaphors, idioms, or unusual combinations of words take it upon themselves to transpose into the linearity of prose the simultaneous presence of several planes of perception inherent in author’s non-verbal thought (‘it is not true that one always thinks in words’).<sup>63</sup> That was the case first with the *Taschentuch*, the handkerchief, and then with the *Teufelskreis*, the vicious/devil’s circle of invention, which in turn comes along as part of a broader scene — ‘a primal scene of writing’ — that has its figurative centre in the ‘stairs’ (Treppen). Indeed, in the Nobel lecture Müller links the very origin of her writing to the period in which she, after refusing to collaborate as an informer for the *Securitate*, the Romanian secret police, was excluded from her office. After this expulsion she would take refuge on a handkerchief smoothed down on a step in the staircase.<sup>64</sup> ‘[T]he writing began in silence, there on the stairs.’<sup>65</sup> Yet these stairs, I would claim, are not a mere denotative element in a realistic autobiographical account, but rather an image that, as if in a dream, must be metaphorically explored to fully disclose its meaning in relation to writing. First and foremost, stairs are a space of transit: they refer to the actual precariousness of the author’s situation, but also to a more essential quality of writing, or of a language that would conform with writing, namely its being off-place, homeless and Heimat-less, stateless. ‘Basically, my *Heimat* is not my mother tongue [...] but that which is spoken’, she writes — once again in the wake of Jorge Semprún — in *Heimat ist das, was gesprochen wird*.<sup>66</sup>

Central to the primal scene of writing described in the Nobel lecture is the verbal image ‘staircase wit’ (Treppenwitz), which anaphorically punctuates the entire scene by occurring four times in the space of just a few pages, always in the same semi-formulaic sequence: ‘When I was a staircase wit.’<sup>67</sup> Apparently unfitting for the context of the pages that host it, the expression stands out also because of its opaqueness, or rather its ambivalence. As with *Teufelskreis*, in fact,

63 Müller, ‘In jeder Sprache’, p. 14.

64 In other places in her *oeuvre*, Müller links it with her father’s death.

65 Müller, ‘Every Word’, p. 7.

66 Herta Müller, *Heimat ist das, was gesprochen wird. Rede an die Abiturienten des Jahrgangs 2001* (Blieskastel: Gollenstein, 2001).

67 Müller, ‘Every Word’, pp. 3, 7, and 8.

*Treppenwitz* also corresponds to an idiom that oscillates between a literal and a figurative meaning. Indeed, a literal interpretation makes sense of it as an epithet for the author herself, who is subject to both sarcastic comments about her situation and malicious rumours (she is believed to be exactly what she refused to become, i.e., an informant). Yet, another interpretation, which would restore the figurative meaning of the idiom, would be not only possible but much more revealing, especially if considered in relation to writing. *Treppenwitz*, in fact, just like the English ‘staircase wit’, is originally a translation from the French *esprit d’escalier*. This expression was used for the first time by Denis Diderot around 1770–80, in his *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, to describe a situation in which the right reply to a remark received comes to his mind only too late, ‘at the bottom of stairs’, that is, after having left the gathering.<sup>68</sup> Rather than fitting the author herself, ‘staircase wit’ seems to be a proper attribute of writing’s ‘afterwardness’, a way of depicting its peculiar epiphany, its mode of belated understanding or its tendency to retroactively attribute meaning to lived experiences. Hence emerges the peculiar temporality of a mother tongue that is forged on the model of writing and in the duration of labour. In fact, stairs are a space not of a full and stable presence, but rather of transience and deferral — an interstitial domain connecting past and future, experience and virtualities.

Since *now* I really had to make sure I came to work, but *no longer had an office*, [...] I stood in the stairwell, unable to decide what to do. I climbed up and down the stairs a few times and suddenly I was again my mother’s child, because I HAD A HANDKERCHIEF. I placed it on one of the stairs *between the second and third floor*, carefully smoothed it out and sat down. I rested my thick dictionaries on my knee and translated the descriptions of hydraulic machines.<sup>69</sup>

It is no coincidence that the stairs are also the space of translation, a metaphorical space in between languages. Indeed, the language of Müller’s writing dwells in that intermediate space. Müller makes the

68 Denis Diderot, *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, in Diderot, *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, ed. by Jules Assézat and Maurice Tourneux, 20 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1875–77), VIII (1875), pp. 361–423, (p. 383).

69 Müller, ‘Every Word’, p. 3; my emphasis.

mother tongue strain against its limits precisely insofar as she does not claim for it either purity or a unique and absolute access to the world of meanings. The mother tongue does not define itself in an exclusive opposition to other languages. Rather, being — as Müller acknowledges — ‘momentary and unconditional like one’s own skin’, and ‘vulnerable just like this’,<sup>70</sup> it is exposed to the other languages’ gaze and relativized by it.

From one language to another there occur metamorphoses. The view of the mother tongue confronts what is seen differently in the foreign language. One has one’s mother tongue without doing anything. It is a dowry that arises unnoticed. It is judged by a language that, in addition, comes later and comes along differently. The mother tongue is no longer the only station of things. Yes, of course, the mother tongue remains immovably what it is. On the whole, one believes its measure, even if this is relativized by the gaze of the language that comes later.<sup>71</sup>

Müller’s observation is not an abstract or merely theoretical one. It relies on her experience of being born in a multilingual and multi-ethnic region, the German-speaking Banat in Romania. There, the Swabian dialect, spoken in her home village (*Dorfsprache*), was confronted first with ‘standard German’ (*Hochdeutsch*), learned at school, and later with the Romanian spoken in the city, which was for her not only the beloved language of folk songs and popular culture, but also the hated bureaucratic language of party meetings and propaganda, as well as of the secret questionings by the *Securitate*. What Müller conceives with her writing is a language that acknowledges the otherness of the other language and hosts it without either assimilating it or completely yielding to its fascination. That is the case with Romanian, which she feels — in ways similar to Kafka’s experience with regard to Czech — is closer to the senses and more akin to her sensitivity than German is. In 2003 she wrote about this: ‘I haven’t written a single sentence in Romanian in my books yet. But of course Romanian always writes with me [mitschreibt] because it grew into my gaze.’<sup>72</sup> And indeed, the

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70 Müller, ‘In jeder Sprache’, p. 28.

71 Ibid., pp. 25–26.

72 Ibid., p. 27.

alien gaze of the foreign language, which is embodied and yet not fully domesticated, stirs the mother tongue from the inside and forces it to run against its limits, to question them and to enter into unexplored domains of perception. This is what happens, for instance, with the literal translation of idioms that have no correspondence in the target language, as in the case of the title of her novel *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt* (Humans are a big pheasant in the world),<sup>73</sup> which reproduces a Romanian saying into German and plays on the different connotations that the bird metaphorically assumes in the two languages, namely a boastful person in German and an awkward one in Romanian. A similar process is also induced by the confrontation between words that denote the same object in the two languages yet have different genders, as is the case with 'lily' or 'rose', which are feminine in German and masculine in Romanian. In each case, the confrontation resolves itself into the establishing of both a new hybrid linguistic space and a corresponding queer or androgynous figure.<sup>74</sup>

One last point needs mentioning. As already seen with the passage on the *Teufelskreis* and the pantomime of words, one of the main features Müller ascribes to writing is its being a silent act. This, for her, is such an important characteristic that she makes the very possibility of a writing that deals with 'the inexpressible' dependent on it: 'But the writing began in silence, there on the stairs, where I had to come to terms with more than could be said. What was happening could no longer be expressed in speech.' Also, a few lines before, she had affirmed: 'Still, what can't be said can be written. Because writing is a silent act.'<sup>75</sup> This seems to be an annotation to the famous final proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.'<sup>76</sup> If this indeed is a possible subtext, Müller takes it both seriously and literally, and adds a postil that paradoxically contradicts it by confirming it. A language that would conform with writing (as a silent act) — a language *as* writing — can indeed aspire to addressing 'the inexpressible' (das Unsagbare), 'what is crucial' (das

73 Herta Müller, *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Verlag, 2009).

74 Müller, *Heimat ist das*, pp. 16–17.

75 Müller, 'Every Word', p. 7.

76 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §7.

Entscheidende), or, to put it with Wittgenstein again, the ‘problems of life’ that would not be touched at all ‘even if all possible scientific questions [were] answered.’<sup>77</sup> It would not be a language purified by formal logic, but rather a language that knows something of vicious circles, i.e., of the alternative, bewitched logic of poetry. Silence does not mean that language has become unnecessary, as she experienced with the ‘language of the village’ (Dorfsprache), where the perfect correspondence between words and things as well as the fatigue of fieldwork set the rule: ‘What you do doesn’t need to be doubled in words.’<sup>78</sup> In the case of writing, silence is tantamount not to the absence of language, but rather to the possibility for it to be, and especially to be forged anew in such a way as to run against the walls of its own cage.<sup>79</sup> It is a space of possibility and ‘gestation’, free from the constraints of use, in which language may experience a new relation to reality, which rests no longer on the denomination of things and states of being but rather on the reinvention of perception (erfundene Wahrnehmung) and destabilization of thought (what she calls ‘Irrlauf im Kopf’). Unusual metaphors, unexpected combinations of words, new verbal images can take reality by surprise, says Müller, and thus reveal unknown aspects of it. They in fact contribute to that ‘density’ — or pregnancy, as one could say — of language that allows for a state of ‘errancy of thought’ (Irrlauf) that leads it beyond words, towards the inexpressible, ‘where no words can dwell’ (wo sich keine Worte aufhalten können).<sup>80</sup>

Finally, silence also has a political meaning. Unlike ‘talking’, which ‘led to excruciating consequences’,<sup>81</sup> it eludes control and surveillance, it cannot be eavesdropped on. The unspoken language that begins in silence, the mother tongue as writing, is a space of freedom and resistance. Müller was aware of both the ‘vulnerability’ of one’s mother tongue and the violence perpetrated in the name of any ethnocentrism.<sup>82</sup> She

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77 Ibid., § 6.52.

78 Müller, ‘In jeder Sprache’, p. 8: ‘Was man tut, muss im Wort nicht verdoppelt werden.’

79 This expression paraphrases the concluding sentence of Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘A Lecture on Ethics’, in Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions: 1912–1951*, ed. by James Klagge and Alfred Normann (Cambridge: Hackett, 1992), pp. 37–44.

80 Müller, ‘In jeder Sprache’, p. 14.

81 Müller, ‘Every Word’, p. 7.

82 Müller reflects on this point in many essays and interviews, but see especially Müller, *Mein Vaterland*, and Müller, ‘In jeder Sprache’.

recognizes the former, for instance, in the brutalization of German inherent in war songs sung by her father as well as in the dull Romanian of dictatorship, and the latter, ethnocentric violence, in the deportation of her mother to a Soviet detention camp simply for being German or, conversely, in the obtuse defence of a purity of tradition on the part of the German community of the Banat. Strongly believing in the inseparability of language from the use one makes of it, Müller downsizes the role of the mother tongue in defining one's belonging when she privileges a common agreement about contents over a commonality of language: '*Heimat* is not language, but rather what is said.'<sup>83</sup> Yet, the Nobel lecture — as I have tried to show in this essay — seems to suggest a more complex relation. Far from being unique or irreplaceable, or even the closest language to one's way of feeling, for Müller the mother tongue is the more trusted key to establish a new conventionality, a poetic idiomaticity of a language to come.

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83 Müller, 'In jeder Sprache', p. 36. See also Müller, *Heimat ist das*.

Antonio Castore, 'The Staircase Wit: or, The Poetic Idiomaticity of Herta Müller's Prose', in *Untying the Mother Tongue*, ed. by Antonio Castore and Federico Dal Bo, Cultural Inquiry, 26 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 181–210 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-26\\_9](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-26_9)>

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