

Paper prepared for the
Fifth Euroacademia International Conference
Re-Inventing Eastern Europe

Riga, 29 – 30 January 2016

This paper is a draft

Please do not cite or circulate

The *Punctum* of Lived Experience or an Autobiographic Reading of Herta Muller's *The Appointment* (1997)

Szidonia Haragos

Zayed University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

In his classic study on photography, *Camera Lucida* (1980), Roland Barthes memorably describes the *punctum*, that detail in a photograph which, in Barthes' view, ultimately determines the viewer's perception of what the particular photo is about. The *punctum* is a "detail" that attracts, "its mere presence" transforming what Barthes refers to as the "reading" of the photograph, yet the *punctum* never coincides with the main referent of a picture. One of the examples Barthes uses to illustrate the concept is a 1921 photograph by Andre Kertesz, showing a blind Gypsy violinist led by a boy. In this picture, the *punctum* for Barthes is the dirt road, "its texture," he writes, "gives me the certainty of being in Central Europe; I perceive the referent, I recognize, with my whole body, the straggling villages I passed through on my long-ago travels in Hungary and Rumania" (45). Barthes works through memory here, and the *punctum* that "pricks" him, coloring his aesthetic pleasure with a tinge of pain, gains definition through what the self remembers. Significantly, Barthes remembers with his "whole body," his is a bodily memory, and his pleasure is juxtaposed with suffering, reaching an intensity he records at the very moment of perception: "What you are seeing here and what makes you suffer..." (7). Because seeing for him leads to memory, and memory records loss, the act of remembering is situated at the very core of understanding and interpretation.

Barthes's reference to his "long ago travels" in Hungary and Romania define for me not the coordinates of travel in the European exotic but the very parameters of my own self. Born and raised in Transylvania, Romania, I have acquired a sense of myself as both Hungarian and Romanian, bilingual and citizen of both countries in the new European Union. This duality of the self is something I need to acknowledge always, hence the space of the in-between, of the faultlines and the border between the two nations and Transylvania as the cauldron mixing both cultures are my real origins. With its doubtful power of iconicity in popular culture, Transylvania is defined by Samuel P. Huntington in his much debated *Clash of Civilizations* as the very borderline between western and eastern "cultures" within Europe, between Roman Catholicism and Greek Orthodoxy.

A recipient of the 2009 Nobel Prize for Literature, Herta Muller was born member of the ethnic German minority in Transylvania. Her writings thus carry a very different potential for pleasure and pain for me, an ethnic Hungarian from Transylvania, than for any other audience around the globe. The fact that I lived through communism myself is yet another factor to acknowledge as most likely influencing my reading for *punctum* in her novels. Such an autobiographic reading is defined for me, therefore, both by a shared, though quintessentially

different, experience of totalitarian communism and of an essential rootedness in minority discourse determining a complex relationship to Romanian, the official language acquired by Muller at the age of 15. In my own case, Romanian, as a language embedded in the texture of everyday life, was acquired much earlier, yet the virulent chauvinism of the communist regime inflicted such a discriminatory rage against Hungarians that in my own case, fear of speaking for being betrayed by language perpetuated a lifelong inhibition: I speak Romanian with an intermittent accent that comes and goes, depending upon the situation.

Thus, defining my position as an autobiographic reader of *The Appointment*, I read the text for *punctum*, resonating somewhat with Edward Said's *contrapuntal reading* in *Culture and Imperialism*, a reading that holds on simultaneously to two frames of reference: both the one defined by the dominant hegemonic discourse and the one initiated by resistance to that very same domination and discourse. I am obeying what Susan Rubin Suleiman refers to as an "autobiographic imperative" that compels one to read stories that "could have been one's own" (204), thus "not only writing about one's life but ... reading about it; reading for it, reading perhaps in order to write about it." Suleiman calls this "'strong' autobiographical reading," a "prelude or accompaniment to autobiographical writing" (206). Within this mutuality of reading and writing under the sign of the autobiographic, I read *The Appointment* for details that would "prick" me through recollections of my own memories of communist Romania. I am also reading for moments when I recognize the referent as autobiographic, as pertaining to Muller's own life under communism. One could say I am on a double watch-out for the invasions of the real, of a past I recognize not only as Muller's, but also, as my own.

The Appointment evokes Muller's own personal experience of being surveilled and persecuted by the Romanian secret service, the infamous Securitatea. She lost her job for refusing to spy on others at the factory she worked at as a translator and was forced into emigration to Germany in 1987, two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Yet, because her novel is nevertheless not a self-avowed autobiography as such, but relies on the embedding of experiences that resonate with her own life within a fictional story, it qualifies as *autofiction* defined as "Fiction, of events and facts strictly real" (Doubrovsky). It is perhaps equally important to note the very act of resistance or avoidance inherent in the narrative gesture of writing an autofictional account and significantly not an autobiography. "Autobiography is a resisting genre, a site of resistance," writes Claudine Raynaud thinking in terms of the genre itself, life writing as still a relative newcomer within the literary field, still relegated to the margins. But if one turns away from autobiography and resists entering its very locus as par excellence a "site of resistance," choosing to write *autofiction* instead, the act of resistance is also transferred onto the level of the narrative where moments of autobiographical truth acquire the intensity of a *punctum* in Barthes's understanding. Perhaps writing autofiction instead of autobiography is a narrative gesture akin to that "*cordon sanitaire*" Primo Levi defines as a kind of self-defense because, as he notes, "It is easier to deny entry to a memory than to free oneself from it after it has been recorded" (*The Memory of the Offense*, 31). In *The Appointment*, such

a *cordon sanitaire* of the narrative itself actively assists the narrator in delaying trauma, in postponing its registration so that survival becomes possible when survival is a challenge: “I had stopped asking myself questions before going to sleep, questions about how to get through the days, since I didn’t know the answer” (126). She registers the debilitating fear, the intimidation, the humiliation: “The worst thing is feeling that my brain is slipping down into my face. It’s humiliating, there is no other word for it, when your whole body feels like it’s barefoot. But what if there aren’t any words at all, what if even the best word isn’t enough”(4).

The conscious effort to stop “asking...questions” is reflected upon the surface level of the text through the total absence of question and exclamation marks. Not that the text is void of questions or exclamations, of the narrative intent to probe into meaning or deliver an order saturated with emotions, good or bad. Conversely, what this autobiographic fiction reflects is the gradual stifling of individual will in the world inhabited by its anonymous female narrator: communist Romania in the years of the regime of Nicolae Ceausescu (1965-1989). Hence what the conspicuous absence of question and exclamation marks signal is the restrictive force of an authoritarian regime imposing its limitations on the individual’s mental space, on his or her attempt to influence reality, the unfolding of events defining one’s life. Life lived in the shadow of dictatorship is life restrained and stripped of its very essence: of the potential to assert its uniqueness. Simultaneously, such a lack also signals a certain re-calibration of the past, the stripping off of that potential for liberation that the past might have held: the questions of the past are closed down by the memory that recalls them. In a defensive move, the infinite variation of answers the questions would trigger is curtailed by the motion implicit in affirmative sentences encapsulating finite thoughts and the limited range of one, single response.

Though the main line of the narrative follows the protagonist’s ubiquitous tram ride through an anonymous city, and though she registers the various incidents related to passengers getting on and off the tram, what really preoccupies her is remembering. As if to ward off the imminent future and the interrogation that it brings with itself, her tram ride leads her back into the past, but a past equally disturbing and difficult as the present or the foreboding future. It is not thus facile escapism that drives the remembering; the stream of consciousness elicits the past because, when both present and future are frightening to access, the past is at least that cul-de-sac where terror is already known and survived, hence, in retrospect, easier to handle. Through her repeated returns to the past, she eliminates all its questions; the text is replete with interrogative sentences that all pose questions while they end with a full stop. As if, in a novel about surveillance and torturous investigation, the victim subjected to the constant interrogation would want to take revenge on the past rendered relatively innocuous by distance. The past becomes the victim of the victim, of an instinct rendered impotent by terror that turns upon itself and its only space for action, the one preserved in memory. She recalls one evening before one of her many appointments with the secret police. It’s an evening she spends together with her lover, Paul, both paralyzed by fear, the exchange between them boiled down to a series of affirmative interrogatives: “What’s that. Sausage, I said. And that. Tomato. And what on earth is that. Bread.

And what's that. Salt and a knife. The other thing is a fork. As he chewed, Paul looked across of me, as if he had to find me...If I'm arrested anytime soon...or if you're...His chewed-up food dragged the words into his throat." The oppressive vignette closes with the remark: "We should clean up in case we have an unexpected visitor today" (130). The "visitor" is obviously a code name for a Securitate agent. The narrator starts to be "summoned" through finite, controlled affirmations registered as orders. The summons come in retaliation to her attempt to become a "dissident," hence to go against the Party's ideology, to formulate her own version of reality and provide a different scenario for her own life. She does this by hiding little bits of paper in the pockets of suits she is sewing at the local factory where she works. The camouflaged messages are addressed to Italian men who would buy these suits and might respond to her marriage proposals that would help her out of the country. No one responds, and she is reported for sabotage and soon fired with a record at the Securitate and an endless series of appointments with Major Albu.

If we consider Hanna Arendt's assertion that totalitarianism seeks the "total domination" of human beings, we see in Muller's *The Appointment* the workings of an individual consciousness undergoing the very process of being ground down, of being assaulted from all directions by the system that seeks to annihilate it. For Arendt, in her essay "On the Nature of Totalitarianism," the ultimate action performed by "totalitarian terror" upon individual consciousness is aimed at "stabilizing" people, "to make them static, in order to prevent any unforeseen, free or spontaneous acts that might hinder freely racing terror" (341). Within the context of terror, stagnation is induced in order to facilitate control. Totalitarianism, in Arendt's view, distinguishes itself thus through relentless pressure, gradually restricting formative personal space and movement: "it simply and mercilessly presses men such as they are, against each other so that the very space of free action ... disappears" (342-43). The idea of forced immobility, of being fixed, if not "formulated...pinned and wriggling on the wall," echoing T.S. Eliot's Prufrock, is also a point frequently stressed in trauma theory and in definitions of trauma as such. Writers and practicing psychologists often remark that "a feeling of helplessness, of physical or emotional paralysis is fundamental in making an experience traumatic. Such "psychological and physical immobilization" prevents "the appropriate categorization of experience," hence the normal meaning-making process of the mind is halted, leading to the "hyperamnesia and dissociation" that characterizes the behavior of traumatized individuals who block the traumatic experience at the moment of its occurrence. (Freud would call this repression and latency or a delayed response.) Because in its enormity or monstrosity, it does not fit the previous paradigms of meaning making, such experiences are not integrated into people's memories, they are kept as so called "traumatic memories," set apart from "narrative memories," memories that can be narrated precisely because they are not traumatic, hence they can be accessed (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart).

The inherent moral stance in much of Muller's fiction resides in the very transitioning from traumatic to narrative memories, in her continuous attempt at writing the fear imposed by

surveillance and persecution. In his brilliant analysis of Proust's famous madeleine-evocation in *A La Recherche*, Serge Doubrovsky talks about "the passage from voluntary to involuntary memory," and there is a significance here attached to volition within the act of remembrance that one would like to invoke in reference to Muller's fiction as well. Thus, similarly to Doubrovsky's assertion that in Proust, this transitioning from voluntary to involuntary memory is where "the essential experience of the book is situated, the experience which produces the book," (108), Muller's insistence on articulating traumatic memory is a formative conflict that genders her works. Significantly, this narrative task is accomplished by the very act of writing, a gesture she pointedly distinguished in her Nobel Lecture, from the oral articulation of traumatic experience. In Muller's view, things that "can't be said can be written. Because writing is a silent act, labor from the head to the hand. The mouth is skipped over." Such a transparency accorded to writing does not, nevertheless, make the very act of *writing trauma*, *writing fear* any less difficult since language itself becomes an unruly tool that creates a world of its own, one that remains "parallel to reality." Thus, the lived dimension, the autobiographic origins of the writing evoke a "vicious circle of words" which "imposes a kind of cursed logic on what has been lived." Far from providing a sense of healing, the writing turns into a "pantomime of words" that is "ruthless and restive, always craving more but instantly jaded." Disquieting and turbulent, Muller's language, her surreal textual universe revolves around one single fixed entity that seems to be anchored: the subject of dictatorship, "because nothing can ever again be a matter of course once we have been robbed of nearly all ability to take anything for granted" (Nobel Lecture 21-22).

"I've been summoned. Thursday, at ten sharp." This is the very first line of *The Appointment*, and from this introductory moment onwards, everything the narrator relates occurs under the sign of her imminent appointment (9). The feeling of being watched grows gradually more and more pervasive, reflected in Major Albu, the sinister interrogator, whose presence grows larger than life in his victim's imagination. She projects "Albu's mouth looming on the ceiling, gigantic, the pink tip of his tongue tucked behind his lower teeth, and ... his sneering voice" (5). Her ongoing ordeal epitomizes what Arendt referred to as the "arbitrariness of terror" and the absolute denial of innocence. Writes Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, about "the arbitrariness by which victims are chosen, and for this it is decisive that they are objectively innocent, that they are chosen regardless of what they may or may not have done" (6). Arbitrariness as the defining feature of a totalitarian regime is what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn describes at length in *The Gulag Archipelago* while talking about "the mechanics of epidemic arrests" in Stalin's Soviet Union. He refers to "the Organs" having "no profound reasons for the choice of whom to arrest and whom not to arrest. They merely had over-all assignments, quotas for a specific number of arrests." Thus, among their victims were people "guilty of nothing," sharing an "universal innocence," which, failed, nevertheless, to save them from years in prison or on the Gulag. Innocence as such stopped functioning as a viable moral category because given the victims' absolute submission to the system, individual actions or thoughts were meant to be completely obliterated.

Amidst her growing fear and terrified anticipation of her next appointment, Muller's narrator boards a tram towards the place of interrogation. The opening scene of the novel is set at the tramway station with her waiting for the tram to pick her up and transport her through the unidentified city at the early hours of the morning. She has put on a green blouse, one she "inherited from Lilli" and which she calls "the blouse that grows" (15). Dressed in her green blouse that grows, she gains a degree of strength that bolsters her up in the course of her meeting with Major Albu: "At the interrogation I sit at the small table, twisting the button in my fingers and answer calmly, even though every one of my nerves is jangling" (20). Her recurring ordeal becomes bearable through the props she devises in order to maintain a degree of composure and through a connection with the enigmatic Lilli. As her narrative unfolds, it gradually reveals Lilli's identity. The narrator recalls her as a stunningly beautiful friend of hers who fell victim to the regime because she dared to defy it: Lilli was shot dead by the border guard on the Romanian-Hungarian border while trying to flee the country and escape to the West. While still alive, Lilli is different: she stands out in the monochrome world of the regime through her sheer physical beauty, a beauty that assaults the senses, providing a profoundly disorienting aesthetic pleasure: "Lilli's beauty was a given, what your eyes saw wasn't to blame for dazzling them so. Her nose, the curve of her neck, her ear, her knee, in your amazement you wanted to protect them, cover them with your hand, you were afraid for them, and your thoughts turned to death" (35). Lilli is the orphaned daughter of a German soldier who died during WWII when his wife was still pregnant with Lilli. As a grown-up, Lilli carries in her wallet the photo of her father in uniform, a portrait on which "the collar insignia and the front of his cap had been inked over," uneasy tokens of a guilty past (83). The blatancy of Lilli's naive gesture meant to camouflage the past arrests the reading here, this is the *punctum* I identify at this narrative moment because this episode connects to Muller's life: her own struggle with the notion that her father served as an SS soldier during WWII. He did what many other ethnic Germans in Europe, living outside the Wehrmacht did during the war: they joined the National Socialists.

At the end of the war, in 1945, they were made to pay a catastrophic price, while deported into Soviet labor and concentration camps, mostly in the Ukraine. All German men between seventeen and forty-five and all German women between eighteen and thirty were to be hauled into cattle trains and deported to forced-labor camps in the USSR. It was a silent ethnic cleansing that swept through Europe; the Nazi atrocities seemed to call for and justify such vindictive gestures and the "German war reparations" demanded by Stalin. It is estimated that between 75,000 to 100,000 Germans were taken to the USSR from Transylvania alone in 1945; by the early 1950s, out of the 298,000 Siebenburgen Germans in 1941 in Transylvania, 50,000 disappeared, mostly dying in the camps, while working in mines or on construction sites. In 1951, the communist regime of Ceausescu followed this up with the forced relocation of 45,000 Swab Germans from the Banat into the Baragan, an arid area of Romania, where they were taken overnight and left to build huts out of mud covered with straw or reed. No history book would contain any reference to such post-war developments in Romania; only the post-communist years would lift the silence and allow the memories to resurface. Muller's mother was among those

deported in 1945 who made it back home. She spent five years in the lager and returned home never to talk about the experience. As Muller notes, “My childhood was accompanied by such stealthy conversations; at the time I didn’t understand their content, but I did sense the fear.” Can one inherit fear? One can certainly be held responsible for the past across generations, and one can be oppressed by memories transmitted by parents as reflected in Marianne Hirsch’s concept of *post-memory* and its inherent burden. Yet how does one handle this “sense of fear” that comes down through parental silence and then one’s own fear of a dictatorship? Does one juxtapose fear with fear, learning to distinguish between the two or simply recognize the world as a torturous place with fear built into the very texture of reality?

At a certain moment, the narrator’s memory in *The Appointment* is triggered by a song sang by an elderly army officer to Lilli, his young love: “A horse is coming into camp/with a window in its head. Do you see the tower looming high and blue...” The narrator reacts with surprise: “...the idea that he knew the song in the first place cut me to the quick. My grandfather used to sing the same song; he had learned it in the camp.... (Muller 55). The text continues with scattered references all throughout to “the camp.” The narrator recalls her grandfather telling her that one night, they, “some four hundred and fifty families” were “herded” to the station, that they rode for two weeks before the train stopped “in the middle of nowhere: “Rows of stakes in dead straight lines, sky above, clay below, with nothing between but the damned crazy thistles.” How the thirst became unbearable and how the grandmother started eating mud and how her teeth fell out, then how she went mad and died. The grandfather held out for four years in the camp, in the middle of the steppe, made it back home to return to the memory years later while talking to the narrator, his granddaughter on the eve of her wedding. Stoically, he finishes his recollection on a note of belatedness: “Is there anything he can do about it, said my grandfather. No, there isn’t.” The moment marks the culmination of terror through a repressive apparatus that has managed to turn the world itself into a concentration camp permeated by an overwhelming sense of lethargy. Life cum concentration camp, realizes the young Teresa in the novel of another writer about communism, Milan Kundera, is “nothing exceptional or startling but something very basic, a given into which we are born and from which we can escape only with the greatest efforts” (136). This greatest of efforts is what Muller’s novel is ambivalent about. “A hundred grams of sweet razor blades,” her narrator asks while dropping by a small convenience store as she is by now walking towards her appointment with Major Albu towards the end of the book. The last line of the narrative comes at the end of a series of nervous, disjointed passages: “The trick is not to go mad” (214). Instead of offering an easier denouement, the apparent lightness of this final remark is just as “unbearable” as Kundera’s notion of being, of existence under totalitarianism. In a world gone mad, tricking the system promises no consolation; the narrator’s growing paranoia reflects upon a world with no exit signs, where all questions seem to have a predetermined answer. If “the absolute destruction of persons” is the defining feature of what Achille Mbembe called *death-worlds*, than Muller’s fictional evocations of communist Romania qualifies as yet another historical example of *necropower* targeting not just the body but individual consciousness as well (40).

References

- Arendt, Hanna. "On the Nature of Totalitarianism." *Essays in Understanding*. 1930-1954. New York: Schocken Books, 2005.
- . *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, 1994.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. London: Vintage Books, 2000.
- Doubrovsky, Serge. "The Place of the Madeleine"
- . *Fils*, Paris: Gallimard, 1970.
- Fox, Lorna Scott. "Eyes Wide Open." *The Nation*. June 7. 2010.
- Hirsch, Marianne and Leo Spitzer, "'We Would Not Have Come Without You': Generations of Nostalgia." *American Imago* 59:3 (2002): 253-76. Web. 12 Feb. 2012.
- Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011.
- Kolk, Van der, Bessel A. and Onno Van der Hart. "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" in Cathy Caruth ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.
- Kundera, Milan. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. New York: Harper Collins, 1999.
- Levi, Primo. "The Memory of the Offense" in *The Drowned and the Saved*. New York: Vintage International, 1989.
- Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture*. 15(1): 11-40. 2003.
- Muller, Herta. *The Appointment*. London: Portobello Books, 2011.
- . "Every Word Knows Something of a Vicious Circle. The Nobel Lecture."
- Raynaud, Claudine. "Under Scrutiny: Blueprints for Self-Writing." *Poetics Today*. 22:3. Fall, 2001.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Suleiman, R. Susan. *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska

P, 1996.

Author's Bio:

Szidonia Haragos earned her PhD from The Graduate Center, City University of New York, USA in English Literature. She is currently Assistant Professor of English at Zayed University, United Arab Emirates. Her scholarly interests are life-writing and autobiography. Her most recent article is scheduled for publication in the next issue of *a/b, Autobiography Studies*.