

# HUMANITY IN DARK TIMES: HANNAH ARENDT AND HERTA MÜLLER

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reads Herta Müller's life and works in the light of those of Hannah Arendt in order to explore Müller's place within broad currents of European history, literature, and thought. Arendt and Müller are ethical, phenomenological, and instinctively iconoclastic thinkers who insist on the value of experience and are unafraid to think and speak, to use Arendt's term, 'without a banister'. Both mount a modernist challenge to totalising discourses and seek out the possibilities of humanity in dark times, locating these in ideology's opposites: singularity, newness, and infinite possibility, in short, in the 'natality' (Arendt) which characterises the human condition. Müller's protagonists experience the loneliness and atomisation that Arendt identified as central to totalitarian rule, but they are also survivors and witnesses whose stories illuminate across time. Müller's disorienting collage technique, reminiscent of Benjamin's montages of quotations, promotes in the consumer a process of judgement and thought, a 'vigilant partiality' (Arendt on G. E. Lessing) which spurs engagement with the issues of their own era.

Dieser Beitrag untersucht Herta Müllers Leben und Werk im Lichte Hannah Arendts, um Müller innerhalb breiter Strömungen der europäischen Geschichte, Literatur und des Denkens zu positionieren. Arendt und Müller sind ethische, phänomenologische und instinktiv ikonoklastische Denker, die auf dem Wert der Erfahrung bestehen und keine Angst haben, 'ohne Geländer' (Arendt) zu denken und zu sprechen. Beide fordern auf modernistische Weise totalisierende Diskurse heraus und suchen nach Möglichkeiten der Menschlichkeit in dunklen Zeiten, die sie in den in den Gegensätzen zum ideologischen Denken finden: in der Singularität, Neuheit und den unendlichen Möglichkeiten, kurz gesagt, in der 'Natalität' (Arendt), die den menschlichen Zustand kennzeichnet. Müllers Protagonisten erleben die Einsamkeit und Atomisierung, die Arendt als zentrales Element der totalitären Herrschaft bezeichnet hat, aber sie sind auch Überlebende und Zeugen, deren Geschichten über die Zeit hinweg erleuchten. Müllers verwirrende Collagetechnik, die an Benjamins Zitate-Montagen erinnert, fördert im Leser und Betrachter einen Prozess des Urteilens und Denkens, eine 'wachsame Parteilichkeit' (Arendt über G. E. Lessing), die zum Engagement in der eigenen Epoche anregen soll.

<VERSE>

Wirklich, ich lebe in finsternen Zeiten!  
Das arglose Wort ist töricht, Eine glatte Stirn  
Deutet auf Unempfindlichkeit hin. Der lachende  
Hat die furchtbare Nachricht  
Nur noch nicht empfangen.  
(Bertolt Brecht, 'An die Nachgeborenen')

Defenseless under the night  
Our world in stupor lies;  
Yet, dotted everywhere,  
Ironic points of light  
Flash out wherever the Just  
Exchange their messages:  
May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and of dust,  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and despair,  
Show an affirming flame.  
(W. H. Auden, 'September 1 1939')

<EV>

In Herta Müller's Nobel Prize essay she recounts how her mother, left alone in an interrogation cell, distracted herself by cleaning the cell with her handkerchief. Müller was horrified – why would she do something so submissive? – until she perceived that, in finding something meaningful to do during the arrest, her mother had procured herself some dignity.<sup>1</sup> The official, Müller recounts elsewhere, did not notice that his office had been cleaned (*Schnee*, p. 72). Yet when Müller records her mother's story with her own reflections on it, and when I evoke it now, something unpredictable and uncontrollable happens: a momentary act, spontaneous and unseen, committed by a person overlooked by all official narratives of history, becomes a part of your/my reader's individual present, to be interpreted according to your/my own frame of reference. An obscure event in the past is recalled, narrated, and transmitted, and touches its readers – or does not – with each retelling and act of reading. That process is the subject of this essay.

At this time of resurgent nationalism in Europe and the USA, certain dystopian works of fiction, for example George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), are reaching new readerships. So too is *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), by Hannah Arendt (1906–75), because it directly investigates how the mass movements of Nazism and Stalinism, with their calamitous effects on twentieth-century history, arose. Because she highlighted how the twentieth century was haunted by acts of inhumanity that had broken apart old structures of explaining the world, her work has been foundational for Max Silverman and Griselda Pollock's concept of concentrationary memory.<sup>2</sup> Her later works, such as *The Human Condition* (1958), *On Violence* (1970), and *The Life of the Mind* (1978), are also relevant to the present moment because they explore the conditions for resistance: political action, the nature of freedom and the faculties of thought and judgement, all matters of the utmost importance for the present day. For Zoe Williams, Arendt's most profound legacy is indeed the idea that 'one has to consider oneself political as

part of the human condition'. Williams quotes Griselda Pollock to explain why: for Arendt, totalitarianism, with its grand ideas and theories, makes individuals superfluous, yet all is not lost, because:

Every human life is the potential beginning of something new. Unlike animals, which are predictable – each will behave as its parents behaved – something has begun in a human that could be completely different. This is 'natality'. As a result of that, the human condition is plural.

Williams concludes: 'The consequences of this are vast: as we communicate and use language, we show ourselves to one another in our difference, and it's in this disclosure that action is generated: we can do something to change the world'.<sup>3</sup>

Herta Müller, born in 1953, the year of Stalin's death, does not seek to explain totalitarianism's rise, but her life and works are profoundly influenced by its immediate and lasting effects. As the child of both a perpetrator – her father served in the SS – and a victim – her mother was one of the many Romanian-Germans deported on Stalin's orders to the Ukraine after the Second World War – the effects of dictatorships suffuse her novels, short stories, essays, collages, and public interventions. Furthermore, in their stories of survival, their fragmented structures, and in their appeal to the unique newness and capacity for action – Arendt's natality – of each of her readers, her works speak of, and enact resistance. This article reads Müller's work in the context of Hannah Arendt's life and writings, drawing particularly on Arendt's chapter 'Ideology and Terror', the essay 'The Concentration Camps', Arendt's concept of natality, and her volume of essays *Men in Dark Times* (1970). The juxtaposition is fruitful because Müller is often read as unique, a one-off: as a Romanian-German woman writer and a migrant, associated with, but only on the periphery of, the 'Atkionsgruppe Banat', with a recognisable subject matter that draws repeatedly on her own oppressive experiences in her backward-looking Banat-Swabian village and Ceaușescu's 1980s Romania, and with an equally recognisable, idiosyncratic poetic style. All these aspects (marginal status, autofictional impulse, Romanian background, individualistic

aesthetics) are, for example, carefully elucidated in the recent – and excellent – *Herta Müller-Handbuch* edited by Norbert Otto Eke,<sup>4</sup> and it is true that, as Richard Wagner notes, ‘einen Herta-Müller-Text erkennt man auf Anhieb’ on all these grounds.<sup>5</sup> But positioning Müller differently by highlighting the affinities between her life and work and those of Hannah Arendt opens possibilities for an exploration of her place within a long time frame and within broad – not just Romanian-German – currents of European history, literature, and thought. It also complements Karin Bauer’s article in this special number which shows how Müller challenges and destabilises the exclusionary canon of German literature. I argue that Müller’s work, like Arendt’s before it, is based on a modernist rejection of totalising discourses and systems, and that both are ethical, phenomenological, and instinctively iconoclastic thinkers whose lives and works provoke and disturb in productive and political ways. Both seek the possibility of humanity in dark times and, because ‘Ideologie hat das Ganze im Auge’ (*König*, p. 87), locate it in the opposite: in singularity and plurality in politics and aesthetics.

Despite its grounding in Western philosophy and political theory, Hannah Arendt’s body of work resists categorisation because it is consistently anti-systematic and phenomenological in approach, that is, concerned with individual viewpoints in the plural, and does not form a unified whole. She avoids making categorical truth claims and instead emphasises particularity, contingency, flux, spontaneity, and action. Much of her work critiques classical philosophy for dealing in lofty abstractions. She, by contrast, seeks to reinstate the dignity of practical participatory politics in a modern world which had turned its back on it. In her essay on Lessing discussed below she critiques eighteenth-century thinking as being overly influenced by philosophy and religion in its search for truth, the nineteenth century for being obsessed with history and ideology, and twentieth-century thinking for its dogmatic sense of rightness derived from science. The present confidence about ‘being right’ is ill-founded because scientists themselves know that scientific knowledge is complex,

incomplete, and evolving. Her critique extends back to Platonic idealism but particularly targets Marxian historicism for placing 'man' and progress above living human beings and real events, the future above the present. If totalitarian rule claims its legitimacy from ideology based on history or nature and, in speaking for 'man', makes individuals superfluous, often through terror, then to counter totalitarianism we need, she claims, a politics based on birth and the diversity of individuals.<sup>6</sup> Unlike many philosophers and theologians in the Western tradition who look ahead to death for meaning or transcendence, Arendt looks back to memory and birth as what gives unity and wholeness to an individual human existence.<sup>7</sup> With the birth of each human individual, newness ('natality') enters the world, as does the possibility for action: 'the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting'.<sup>8</sup> Action is important because it is unpredictable and uncontrollable, because, once carried out, it is reflected by the other and caught up in a web of other people's reactions.

Elizabeth Young-Bruehl argues that the radicality of Arendt's moral philosophising lay precisely here. In the light of the collapse of certainties in the twentieth century, Arendt did not call for a return to order or the creation of new orders but said that in a crisis, the individual should say 'I must be true to myself. I must not do anything that I cannot live with, that I cannot bear to remember':<sup>9</sup>

Morality concerns the individual in his singularity. The criterion of right and wrong, the answer to the question what ought I to do? depends in the last analysis neither on habits and customs, which I share with those around me, nor on a command of either divine or human origin, but on what I decide with regard to myself. In other words, I cannot do certain things because having done them I can no longer be able to live with myself.<sup>10</sup>

Arendt is concerned, then, with the practical role of the individual in dark times, a term she borrows from Bertolt Brecht and employs repeatedly. In his poem 'An die Nachgeborenen' (1939), 'dark times' specifically connote the Nazi regime and its rise in Weimar Germany. From his own uncomfortable position in exile, the poet asks 'Was sind das für Zeiten, wo /

Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist', questioning the role of literature under dictatorship. Arendt incorporated the term into the title of her 1959 Address on receiving the Lessing Prize in Hamburg, 'Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing', and later into the title of her volume of essays on early twentieth-century figures such as Rosa Luxemburg, Isak Dinesen, Hermann Broch, and Karl Jaspers, *Men [sic] in Dark Times* (1970). The Lessing address is reproduced in that volume, as is the essay on Walter Benjamin which also appears as the introduction to her edited volume of Benjamin's most important essays, *Illuminations* (1970).

Arendt does not claim that the dark times of the early twentieth century had never been seen in history before, though she does argue that the 'monstrosities of this century [...] are of a horrible novelty'.<sup>11</sup> The disparate figures in *Men in Dark Times* are not presented by Arendt as in any way exemplary, for they are united only by the age they lived through, the first half of the twentieth century. Though the dark times are visible 'everywhere in this book', Arendt does not claim that the individuals are representative, or function as 'mouthpieces of the *Zeitgeist*' or 'exponents of History'.<sup>12</sup> The selection is idiosyncratic: writers, intellectuals, a revolutionary, a Pope. The pieces vary in length and were originally written for different purposes: reviews, addresses, articles. What unites the collection is Arendt's interest in the uniqueness of these individuals, how they related to their times, and how their lives and works were interconnected. In the case of Rosa Luxemburg, Arendt relates her failures to those of the failed revolution of which she was part. In the case of Brecht, she considers that his political choices, of which she is critical, were 'avenged by the gods of poetry'.<sup>13</sup> A common theme is laughter – Isak Dinesen chose her first name because it means 'one who laughs' and Arendt's principal memory of the US poet, her friend Randall Jarrell, is of laughter and courage. Her admiration for Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, who was unexpectedly elected Pope in 1958 and subsequently called the Second Vatican Council,

pervades her character sketch. The chapter's slyly critical subtitle, 'A Christian on St Peter's Chair from 1958–63', foreshadows her theme: that it was the humour, humility, and self-confidence – the individuality – of this Vatican outsider that allowed him to make a mark. The *laudatio* for her mentor Karl Jaspers singles out his capacity for dialogue and the spatial and present-oriented nature of his thought. He writes of the realm of *humanitas*,

which everyone can come to out of his own origins. Those who enter it recognize one another, for then they are 'like sparks, brightening to a more luminous glow, dwindling to invisibility, alternating and in constant motion. The sparks see one another, and each flames more brightly because it sees others' and can hope to be seen by them.<sup>14</sup>

Thus – and this is characteristic of Arendt – she does not use these figures to create a theory of resistance but to produce a work which explores their natality and the serendipity of their being noticed and immortalised by her:

That even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth – this conviction is the inarticulate background against which these profiles were drawn. Eyes so used to darkness as ours will hardly be able to tell whether their light was the light of a candle or that of a blazing sun. But such objective evaluation seems to me a matter of secondary importance which can safely be left to posterity.<sup>15</sup>

'Objective evaluation' is a concept rejected by both Arendt and Müller, whose work and sense of identity are strongly marked by their own experience of dark times, a causality they make no attempt to conceal. As an intellectual designated a Jew under Nazism, Arendt fled Germany in 1933, was stripped of her German citizenship in 1937, and eventually, after some years as a stateless person, settled and made a home in the USA. She found her Jewish identity imposed from outside rather than a matter of self-identification: 'for many years I considered the only adequate reply to the question, Who are you? to be: A Jew. That answer alone took into account the reality of persecution'.<sup>16</sup> Her preoccupation with dictatorship, resistance and the conditions of practical politics was lifelong, as was her concern with statelessness and the stateless. She questioned the post-war consensus surrounding human rights, for in her view, the concept was a toothless abstraction because only rights embedded

in specific laws were of use, as evidenced by the consistent mistreatment of refugees.<sup>17</sup> Never afraid to speak her mind, or to change it where necessary, Arendt frequently gave offence, most famously in her startling and highly controversial eyewitness account of the Eichmann trial in 1961 where she used the evidence presented to her own eyes and ears to argue that the primary motivations of those implementing the Nazi evil might sometimes be not monstrous but, simply, banal.<sup>18</sup>

Just as Arendt's identity and thought were intimately linked with her persecution and experience of statelessness, so Müller's categorisation by the Romanian regime as 'Staatsfeind' for nothing more than her choice of friends and her refusal to collaborate, and her rejection by her village community for 'Nestbeschmutzung' were foundational for her life and work (*Schnee*, pp. 92, 114). Both adopted the principle of 'resisting in terms of the identity under attack'.<sup>19</sup> Müller too was an unwilling migrant, a theme she explored in her novel *Reisende auf einem Bein*, refusing the choice offered to her by the German official forms to tick only one box: German with the right to settle, or political refugee.<sup>20</sup> She re-affirmed this identity in 2015 in the context of the European refugee crisis, making an explicit connection – 'Ich war auch ein Flüchtling' – with those fleeing war and persecution and seeking a new home in Europe, and also looking back to the Third Reich when thousands had to flee Germany.<sup>21</sup> That her works, like Arendt's, unapologetically arise from personal concerns, is theorised in her adoption of the term autofiction:<sup>22</sup> her works take as their starting point events from her life which are often reworked multiple times. When early reviewers assumed the uncomprehending gaze of the protagonist of *Reisende auf einem Bein* to be the result of her foreignness, Müller declared the 'fremder Blick' instead to be the result of damage, something internal and brought with her,<sup>23</sup> which led to some critics interpreting her works as narratives of trauma.<sup>24</sup> There is no outside perspective in the novel: Irene has no comprehension of what she sees, and experiences the boundaries between



herself and the world around her to be porous; all she can do is record details. She is likened by a friend to her shape-shifting namesake in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*: 'Sähe man die Stadt von innen, so wäre sie eine andere. Irene ist der Name für eine Stadt aus der Ferne, und nähert man sich ihr, so wird sie eine andere'.<sup>25</sup> Müller's novels, essays and collages similarly form an ungraspable rhizome with multiple entry points, repetitions and variations, a dense inter- and intratextual pattern.<sup>26</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome, a term originally denoting a creeping, nodal, organic entity such as a ginger plant, is an 'image of thought' which apprehends multiplicity and is in the nature of a map, not a thing, but a process.<sup>27</sup> Müller's works are autobiographical and set in locatable places, yet are also elaborate fictions with universal resonance, founded, as Mette Hoeg argues in her contribution to this special number, on undecidability. They sketch scenarios which eastern European readers find familiar (Polish reviews, for example, read her essays as highlighting the notion that she is 'one of us'),<sup>28</sup> yet they have universal resonance. The term 'Friedhöfe machen' in *Herztier*, for example, is associated with the narrator's father, as well as her interrogator, Hauptmann Pjele, Ceaușescu,<sup>29</sup> and also, by implication, others involved in genocide or atrocities, much in the sense that Michael Rothberg talks of 'multidirectional memory': there does not need to be competition between, or a hierarchy of, wrongdoings; rather, painful memories of one may co-exist with and affectively call to mind memories of another.<sup>30</sup> And an individual's memories may be illuminated retrospectively by subsequent knowledge, so that details of past and present interconnect as this wordplay implies: 'Unversehens, grundlos, unerlaubt entsteht die Vergangenwart in der Gegenwart' (*König*, p. 108), though there is a truth to memory which language, with its capacity for manipulation and falsification, does not possess: 'Das Gedächtnis verläßt die Wahrheit nicht. Die Wahrheit verlassen kann im Kalkül der Täuschung nur der Mund' (*Hunger*, p. 100).

Through its intricate exploration of the lived experience of totalitarian rule resulting from the same twin calamities of the twentieth century analysed by Arendt, Müller's works thus challenge hegemonic discourses where these persist in the contemporary world. Like Arendt in her coverage of the Eichmann trial, Müller is never afraid to shatter existing paradigms and speak her mind: one thinks for example of the accusations of 'Nestbeschmutzung' which greeted her negative view of village life in *Niederungen*, the dismay caused by her bleak, immigrant's-eye depiction of Berlin in *Reisende auf einem Bein*,<sup>31</sup> and her many fearless pronouncements on contemporary politics, not only in Europe but also globally, as for example when she criticised China's human rights record when China was guest of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2009.<sup>32</sup>

In what follows I examine how Müller's work recalls Arendt's analysis of how totalitarian rule achieves absolute domination over its subjects, how her works also show Arendtian moments of illumination, and finally, how the formal qualities of her works bring these about. As mentioned with the example of the 'fremder Blick', these questions are not easily separated, which is why the third – the aesthetic – question carries most weight. Like Arendt, Müller is concerned with questions of how to represent and resist dark times without sentimentality. With the exception of *Reisende auf einem Bein* her novels are set in the former eastern bloc, and the protagonist of that novel too is marked by her experience of life in 'd[em] andere[n] Land' (*Reisende*, p. 7). Müller's fictional world is defined by 'die akute Einsamkeit des Menschen' (*Schnee*, p. 21). Arendt, in her chapter 'Ideology and Terror', had shown that the creation of this 'organized loneliness' was both deliberate and highly damaging.<sup>33</sup> It produced the sense of 'not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man'.<sup>34</sup> Arendt explained:

What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals. In this situation, man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time.<sup>35</sup>

The individual in Müller lives daily in a state of heightened anxiety and finds even intimate relationships and the intactness of the self-compromised. The fox fur in *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger*, which the *Securitate* operatives gradually dismember on their secret visits to the protagonist's apartment, represents the psychological pressure experienced by all victims of surveillance. The group of friends in *Herztier*, loosely based on the members of the 'Aktionsgruppe Banat', find their friendship placed under intolerable strain as they and their family members are subject to surveillance and interrogation and they are dispersed around the country. The opening of *Herztier* echoes Brecht's difficulties with language and silence in times of dictatorship quoted above: 'Wenn wir schweigen, werden wir unangenehm, sagte Edgar, wenn wir reden, werden wir lächerlich' (*Herztier*, pp. 7 and 252). *Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet* picks up the theme of betrayal, spun from one of Müller's own life events and repeatedly thematised, for example in *Herztier*, but in this iteration it is not a female friend who betrays the protagonist but her beloved husband, leaving her totally alone and fearful for her sanity: the novel's final words are 'Ha, ha, nicht irr werden'.<sup>36</sup>

*Atemschaukel* (2009), the Gulag novel based on the memories of Oskar Pastior and inspired by her own mother's experience of deportation to the Ukraine after the Second World War, is the logical consequence of Müller's lifelong preoccupation with the 'gesteuerte[] Verwahrlosung der Menschen in der Diktatur' (*König*, p. 185). The protagonist Leo Auberg is eager to leave the German village where he has had to hide his problematic sexuality, but the reality of the camp he is deported to is dehumanising. In her essay on the concentration camps Arendt perceives three levels of destruction practised by the concentrationary system in its process of preparing 'inanimate men' or 'living corpses':<sup>37</sup> destruction of the juridical person (by removing the camps from normal systems of justice), murdering in a man both the moral person and his individuality, so that 'Nothing then remains but ghastly marionettes with human faces'.<sup>38</sup> *Atemschaukel* starts to chart this

process. The camp inmates suffer extreme cold, deprivation and, in particular, hunger, symbolised by the ‘Hungerengel’, and slip into a state of de-gendered abjection in the ‘Hautundknochenzeit’, one of Müller’s many concentrated poetic neologisms.<sup>39</sup> When Leo acquires some potatoes, he becomes for a while a ‘Kartoffelmensch’ (*Atemschaukel*, p. 192), wholly defined by his source of sustenance and his relationship to it. This is a world in which a husband will steal bread from his wife and the person who administers that bread has absolute power. Yet because of the specifics of the camp, whereby the surviving deportees retain some contact with home, experience an alleviation of their conditions towards the end of their stay, and are provided with transport home after five years, *Atemschaukel* paints a differentiated picture, one in which some individuality and common morality is preserved. On his return to normal life, Leo Auberg, with his paradoxical nostalgia for the camp, his alienation from others and himself, and his fear of freedom (*Atemschaukel*, pp. 285, 264–9 and 295), is what Jean Cayrol, a theorist of concentrationary art drawing on Arendt, termed a ‘Lazarean’ hero: ‘the returnee who has experienced in his or her body and mind that other planet in which political terror became a system, and must now warn us of the reality that “everything is possible”’.<sup>40</sup>

Yet while they mourn the many victims of Ceaușescu’s Romania, Müller’s works also speak of resistance and survival, not in terms of heroism, but in the moments of illumination Arendt saw as worthy of recording in her work *Men in Dark Times* and Jaspers calls *humanitas*, moments which arise from the natality and plurality of humankind. Like Arendt, Müller is an anti-systematic thinker, rejecting universalising narratives for the violence they do to the individual who is rendered superfluous by their logic. This is her justification for rejecting utopian thinking or identity politics such as feminism.<sup>41</sup> Instead, Müller echoes Arendt’s concept of natality when she states ‘Überall, wo Menschen sich befinden, oder hinsehen, werden sie selbst, wird das, was sie sehen, eine Möglichkeit für das

Unvorhersehbare'.<sup>42</sup> Her survivors exert agency by clinging to details of the moment. As she once quoted Ionesco, 'Leben wir also. Aber man lässt uns nicht leben. Leben wir also im Detail' (*Hunger*, p. 61). Thus when her mother cleaned the cell, and when Müller herself, in an incident recounted in essays and repeatedly fictionalised, refused to join the *Securitate* because it was not in her character, echoing Arendt's definition of morality as springing from the individual being able to live with their actions quoted above (*Apfelkern*, pp. 64–5); or when she refused to bow to the pressure to commit suicide (*Apfelkern*, p. 96; *Lebensangst*, p. 30); or when the friends in *Herztier* defy the authorities and keep in touch by means of a secret code; or when Irene in *Reisende auf einem Bein* decides to make a new start in an unwelcoming Berlin; or when the old man in *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger* starts to sing the forbidden Romanian song from pre-Communist times (this last example is elaborated in Michel Mallet's contribution to this special issue): in all these incidents individuals are acting and being themselves. This is perhaps clearest in *Atemschaukel*, which, despite the darkness of its subject matter, contains many moments of light. Thus when Planton-Kati defies the camp orders because her mental incapacity means she simply does not understand them, when Leo finds a rhythm in shovelling and pleasure in bathing in golden sand, when the Russian woman feeds Leo because she cannot feed her own son who is far away at war, they are, however weakly, illuminating the darkness, or, as W.H. Auden, a poet much admired by Arendt, put it in his poem 'September 1 1939', showing 'an affirming flame'.<sup>43</sup>

But it is in matters of aesthetics that the most productive parallel can be drawn. Here too the link is through the detail, new beginnings, and the unexpected. Though usually described as a political theorist, Arendt's distrust of systems extends to the homogenising, objectifying methods of the social sciences.<sup>44</sup> Her own method she called 'thinking without a banister'.<sup>45</sup> She was drawn to fragmented narrative forms as a way of assigning meaning to events in their contingency and particularity, and to the spectator and the storyteller as

guardians of important insights.<sup>46</sup> Although she did not develop an aesthetic theory,<sup>47</sup> some of her most useful statements for my purposes are made in her essays on Benjamin and Lessing, where the parallels to Müller are striking. Arendt sees Benjamin as writing in the awareness of a loss of authority and of a break with tradition which tried to put the past in order, and as a modernist influenced by surrealism. She notes that Benjamin had a passion for small things and for collecting, and was fascinated, not by ideas, but by phenomena. Benjamin's study of German tragedy, she notes with approval, was composed of quotations, it was a kind of 'surrealistic montage'.<sup>48</sup> In fact, she writes that quotations were at the centre of every work of his, and that he thought poetically even though, paradoxically, he saw himself as a literary critic. Generally valid statements are replaced in Benjamin by metaphor which, unlike allegory, does not need explanation but makes connections through sensual perception and, as Steve Buckler puts it, metaphor 'renders experience in its phenomenal dignity'.<sup>49</sup> For Benjamin, to quote is to name, and naming rather than speaking, 'the word rather than the sentence, brings truth to light'.<sup>50</sup> She saw Benjamin as a pearl diver bringing up crystallised thought fragments of the past. In what follows I shall explore how these attributes belong also to Müller, but no less relevant are Arendt's observations on Lessing.

Arendt was drawn to Lessing because of his fearless, independent thinking and acting, his embracing of contradictions, and desire to make his audience think for themselves. She admires the fact that, while never feeling at home in his own 'dark times' and resisting the religious and secular foundationalism of his age,<sup>51</sup> he 'never allowed supposed objectivity to cause him to lose sight of the real relationship to the world' and retained a sense of commitment.<sup>52</sup> The essay praises friendship, highlighting Lessing's play of religious tolerance, *Nathan der Weise*, for Nathan's sacrifice of 'truth' to friendship. She quotes Kafka's 'magnificent pronouncement' on truth: 'It is difficult to speak the truth, for although there is only one truth, it is alive and therefore has a live and changing face', relating it to

Lessing's rejoicing that 'the truth, as soon as it is uttered, is immediately transformed into one opinion among many'.<sup>53</sup> This multi-perspectivism calls for empathy and ongoing engagement. Arendt concluded that the critical task of humanity in dark times is 'not to restore light by reconstructing a common moral framework (whether secured by reason or by faith), but to practise "vigilant partiality"',<sup>54</sup> which involves 'taking sides for the world's sake, understanding and judging everything in terms of its position in the world at any given time'.<sup>55</sup> Great importance is placed on thinking: 'For Lessing, thought does not arise out of the individual and is not the manifestation of a self. Rather, the individual – whom Lessing would say was created for action, not ratiocination – elects such thought because he discovers in thinking another mode of moving in the world in freedom'.<sup>56</sup> Importance is placed too on narration. The past cannot be mastered but it can be narrated, a task which involves not only poets and historians but each individual in telling their own stories to others, 'Thus we are constantly preparing the way for "poetry", in the broadest sense, as a human potentiality; we are, so to speak, constantly expecting it to erupt in some human being'.<sup>57</sup>

Benjamin's pearls, his assemblages of quotations and favouring of individual words and of metaphor, and Lessing's advocacy of friendship across difference, narration, and 'vigilant partiality' are all profoundly relevant to Müller's anti-totalitarian creative method, aesthetics, and effects, in which, I suggest, the collage form is key. Müller, like Benjamin, rejects ordering tradition, is a passionate collector – of words and word parts –, practises surreal montage, prizes metaphor, material objects, and detail, and brings discrete moments of the past together in the present. Like Lessing's, her creative method involves juxtaposition, ethical engagement, and the deferral of meaning. Collages form a large part of her output, with five published volumes, *Der Wächter nimmt seinen Kamm* (1993), *Im Haarknoten wohnt eine Dame* (2000), *Die blassen Herren mit den Mokkatassen* (2005), *Este sau nu este Ion* ['Ion Is or Is Not'], *Vater telefoniert mit den Fliegen* (2012), and others published in

other places, including online. Müller's reasons for creating collages are deeply personal, and political. They began in the form of postcards, an increasingly antiquated form of expression, linked to her friend, the poet Roland Kirsch, whose final postcard to her from Romania before his suspicious death, after she had left for the safety of the West, expressed his anxiety: 'Ich muß mir manchmal auf den Finger beißen, um zu spüren, daß es mich noch gibt' (*König*, p. 60). Sending these postcards was dangerous for him but she was glad to get them as it showed he was still alive. The image on the last postcard of new tram rails made her think of the oppression she had left behind, and the Arendtian 'konfiszierte Spontaneität unserer Beziehung' (*König*, pp. 59–60).

Nevertheless, her own crafting of postcard collages, composed of image and words, now become a habit, almost a form of recreation, is a product of freedom and plenty: after moving West, the unaccustomed abundance of printed material and the freedom from censorship allowed new methods of expression. This is thematised in *Reisende auf einem Bein*, where Irene cuts up photos from magazines and re-arranges them, creating a new image. Her collage, composed of details detached from their sources and glued together in a new composition, is at the same time both singular and static, and plural and mobile: 'Die Verbindungen, die sich einstellten, waren Gegensätze. Sie machten aus allen Photos ein einziges fremdes Gebilde. So fremd war das Gebilde, daß es auf alles zutraf. Sich ständig bewegte' (*Reisende*, p. 47). It is a startling and dynamic effect, and one that is characteristic of Müller's writing as a whole. At the heart of the collage is reduction to the detail and infinite suggestion. The collage feeds on simultaneity, juxtaposition, isolation and concentration. Though fixed in a new composition created by the author, it is disorienting to comprehend because it asks to be read, and viewed as an artwork, simultaneously, which both defies time and confuses intellectual and sensual responses. The words can be read for meaning, rhythm, rhyme and assonance (for, increasingly, they do resemble poems), yet the



relationship between the words and the accompanying image is usually unclear and the words themselves bear the traces of their former positioning in terms of differing fonts and colours and so on. The individual word or word-part in Müller's collages is both isolated and strong, standing alone after being liberated from its former subordinating context, but also assertive in drawing attention to itself:

Die ausgeschnittenen Wörter sind alle verschieden, jedes Wort ist ein anderer Gegenstand, vielleicht sogar ein Individuum. Das Aussehen, die unterschiedliche Größe, die Farbe, die Schrift sind für die Collage genauso wichtig wie die Bedeutung des Wortes. Im Grunde ist die Individualität der Wörter, die beim Tippen immer gleich aussehen, das Fesselnde an der Kleberei. (*Apfelkern*, p. 226)

The collage, each a Benjaminian assemblage, is also Arendt's natality in visual form: multiplicity of response is inbuilt. The eye is drawn to patterning and detail simultaneously. The role of the author here is both to select and to react to the chance encounters of colours or visual or verbal patterns which arise; she is both creator and medium. The collage technique places Müller's readers in the position of reacting with our senses, but also of seeking to think and to judge (two terms central to Arendt's unfinished late work *The Life of the Mind*) from our individual viewpoints. In short, the collages create in the consumer an 'Irrlauf im Kopf', a key concept in Müller's aesthetics which she uses to classify her preferred reading. She favours texts which produce in her this confusion or disturbance, or 'poetischer Schock' (*König*, pp. 14, 20, 49 and 88; *Lebensangst*, p. 55). Her own prose style produces this 'Irrlauf' too, through linguistic innovation of various kinds, for example, the incorporation of Romanian metaphors into German and the contrast of simple syntax with complex meaning. Her early paradoxical formulation, 'die erfundene Wahrnehmung', borrowed from Jorge Semprún, which explores the gap between action and its expression in thought and language, stresses the dynamism of the process: 'Die Wahrnehmung, die sich erfindet, steht nicht still. Sie überschreitet ihre Grenzen, da, wo sie sich festhält. Sie ist unabsichtlich, sie meint nichts Bestimmtes. Sie wird vom Zufall geschaukelt' (*Teufel*, p. 19). The phrase 'die erfundene Wahrnehmung' recurs in her Nobel speech, this time with an emphasis on the monitory

function of literature in any dark times, including our own. Speaking on a very public platform, aware, no doubt, of her work having been honoured as, in the words of Alfred Nobel, ‘the most outstanding work in an ideal direction’,<sup>58</sup> she stressed the continued presence of dictatorships of all colours, mentioning Iran, Russia, and China, but also warning of the ‘Halbdemokratien’ of eastern Europe. Literature, she said, cannot change all this, ‘Aber sie kann – und sei es im Nachhinein – durch Sprache eine Wahrheit erfinden, die zeigt, was in und um uns herum passiert, wenn die Werte entgleisen’ (*Schnee*, p. 23). Together with her concluding words: ‘Literatur spricht mit jedem Menschen einzeln – sie ist Privateigentum, das im Kopf bleibt. Nichts sonst spricht so eindringlich mit uns selbst wie ein Buch. Und erwartet nichts dafür, außer das wir denken und fühlen’ (*Schnee*, p. 24), this brings us back to Kafka’s energising of living truth, Lessing’s vigilant partiality, and Arendt’s natality.

Müller’s works thus memorialise the experiences of the victims of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes in general and of Ceaușescu-era Romania in particular by giving formal expression to the terror, disjuncture, and isolation they experienced, and also recording the moments of self-determination they enacted, seeing in their lives and actions points of illumination in dark times. Müller’s distinctive collages exemplify this. They enact the violence and atomisation committed under totalitarian rule and also the possibilities of natality: in their splintering of reality, their reconfiguring of details, their formal patterning, and their exploitation of the gaps between languages and between text and image, they reproduce the violence done to individuals, release the Benjaminian energy locked into previous structures and engage the reader or viewer in the search for the here and now in defiance of the subjugating narratives of monumental power. This is why she empathises with Semprún who rejected the language of Franco’s Spain, just as she had experienced Romanian as a language of interrogation, agreeing with his statement that ‘Nicht Sprache ist

Heimat, sondern das, was gesprochen wird' (*König*, p. 30), for language 'lebt immer im Einzelfall' (*König*, p. 39). The surreal juxtaposition of apparently unconnected images, words, and word-parts expresses the disorientation of her traumatised protagonists, and articulates their humanity. In their resistance to easy interpretation, in their provocation of an 'Irreife im Kopf', Müller's smashed-up, intense, and sparkling works challenge the reader to make intellectual, affective, and unpredictable – but always plural and individual – connections:

Wenn Zerbrochenes funkelt, entsteht ein störrischer Glanz, aber nie ein Ganzes. Und wenn wir im Einzelnen hängenbleiben und im Detail denken, besteht alles aus Zerbrochenem. Es bricht sich selbst, damit man es genau sehen kann. Und ich breche es noch einmal anders, damit ich darüber schreiben kann. Damit es im Wort annähernd das Ausmaß kriegt, das es den wirklichen Dingen, die ich kenne, schuldig ist. (*Schnee*, pp. 114–15)

## CONCLUSION

I do not wish to argue for a simplistic application of one maverick woman to another: Simona Forti warns against a cosy, do-good Arendtianism which reduces her thought to a common-sense vision of an egalitarian society in which difference is celebrated. Nor do I wish to propose that Müller's works are political in the sense that they convey a political message or even, as Arendt does, consider the prerequisites for a better society. She is a creative writer, not a political theorist. Forti reminds us that Arendt's thought is agonistic (combative, polemical), rich and aporetic (tending to doubt), and founded on an idea of reality which constantly exceeds any theoretical bounds.<sup>59</sup> This is why she was drawn also to literature and why her work illuminates Müller's. Arendt's writings are more about questions than they are about answers. They are more about processes than structures, present than future, dialogue than knowledge, acting politically than theorising, beginnings than endings. They call for vigilant partiality. Müller's literary works similarly call for imagination, thought, empathy, and engagement. Brecht's 'An die Nachgeborenen' is addressed specifically to those in a utopian future where humanitarian values finally prevail. It contains both self-congratulation

(‘Aber die Herrschenden / Saßen ohne mich sicherer, das hoffte ich’) and self-pity (‘Ach, wir / Die wir den Boden bereiten wollten für Freundlichkeit / Konnten selber nicht freundlich sein’), and appeals to the future generation to look kindly on those who had to endure the dark times. For Müller, by contrast, dark times are simply a fact. She does not project forward or presume to assess her own impact. These would be closed, controlling, blinkered gestures that would exclude the unforeseeable responses – the natality – of others. Nor does she posit a community of people defined simply as ‘the Just’ as W. H. Auden does in his poem ‘1 September 1939’, quoted above and written to mark the outbreak of the Second World War, though her work shares with Auden’s the sense that even in the darkest of times the individual may illuminate and be noticed. It is what Arendt prized in Jaspers: the realm of *humanitas* where the sparks that are individuals may illuminate each other, but always on the basis of contingency employed as ‘dauerhafte kritische Perspektive’<sup>60</sup> that highlights how Müller can be seen as the heir to Arendt, to Lessing, and to Benjamin. Müller creates a form, composed of poetic metaphors and fragments, Benjaminian pearls, Auden-like ‘ironic points of light’, for example the anecdote about her mother cleaning the cell, to engage the reader’s imagination, and create connections to, and inspire participation in, their own times.

## FOOTNOTES

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1. Herta Müller, *Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel*, Munich 2011, p. 21.  
Further references appear in the text as *Schnee*.
  2. Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman (eds), *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance in Alain Renais's 'Night and Fog' (1955)*, New York 2011.
  3. Zoe Williams, 'Totalitarianism in the Age of Donald Trump: Lessons from Hannah Arendt', <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/01/totalitarianism-in-age-donald-trump-lessons-from-hannah-arendt-protests>. See also Elizabeth Genier, 'Why the World is Turning to Hannah Arendt to Explain Trump', <https://www.dw.com/en/why-the-world-is-turning-to-hannah-arendt-to-explain-trump/a-37371699>; and Gideon Rachman, 'Amor mundi: Understanding Trump', <http://hac.bard.edu/news/post/?item=20057> (all accessed 30 October 2018).
  4. Norbert Otto Eke (ed.), *Herta Müller-Handbuch*, Stuttgart 2017.
  5. Richard Wagner, quoted in Beverley Driver Eddy, 'A Mutilated Fox Fur: Examining the Contexts of Herta Müller's Imagery in *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger*', in Brigid Haines and Lyn Marven (eds), *Herta Müller*, Oxford 2013, pp. 84–98 (p. 98).
  6. Miguel Vatter, 'Nativity and Biopolitics in Hannah Arendt', *Revista de Ciencia Política*, 26/2 (2006), 137–59 (143).
  7. *Ibid.*, 140.
  8. Arendt, quoted in Pollock and Silverman, *Concentrationary Cinema* (note 2), p. 27.
  9. Arendt, quoted in Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*, Yale 2006, p. 200.
  10. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
  11. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, London 1970, p. ix.
  12. *Ibid.*, pp. vii–viii.
  13. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

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14. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
  15. *Ibid.*, pp. ix–x. On darkness and illumination in Müller see also Michel Mallet’s article in this special number.
  16. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (note 11), p. 17.
  17. Hannah Arendt, ‘The Concentration Camps’, *Partisan Review*, 15/7 (1948), 743–63, (752).
  18. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, New York 1963. See also David Watson, *Arendt*, London 1992, p. 74.
  19. See Lisa J. Disch, ‘On Friendship in “Dark Times”’, in Bonnie Honig (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, Pennsylvania 1995, pp. 285–312 (p. 293).
  20. Herta Müller, *Hunger und Seide*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1995, p. 25. Further references appear in the text as *Hunger*.
  21. Herta Müller, ‘Ich war auch ein Flüchtling’, <https://www.bild.de/news/standards/herta-mueller/ich-war-auch-ein-fluechtling-42373418.bild.html> (accessed 30 October 2018).
  22. Brigid Haines and Margaret Littler, ‘Gespräch mit Herta Müller’, in Haines (ed.), *Herta Müller*, Cardiff 1998, pp. 14–25 (p. 14).
  23. Herta Müller, *Der König verneigt sich und tötet*, Munich 2003, pp. 130–51; and *Mein Vaterland war ein Apfelkern*, Munich 2014, pp. 178–9. Further references appear in the text as *König* and *Apfelkern*.
  24. See Beverley Driver Eddy, ‘Testimony and Trauma in Herta Müller’s *Herztier*’, *GLL*, 53/1 (2000), 56–72; Lyn Marven, ‘“In allem ist der Reiß”: Trauma, Fragmentation and the Body in Herta Müller’s Prose and Collages’, in *MLR*, 100/2 (2005), 396–411; and Brigid Haines, ‘“The Unforgettable Forgotten”: The Traces of Trauma in Herta Müller’s *Reisende auf einem Bein*’, *GLL*, 55/3 (2002), 266–81.

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25. Herta Müller, *Reisende auf einem Bein*, Munich 2010, p. 94. Further references appear in the text as *Reisende*.
  26. Norbert Otto Eke, 'Schönheit der Verwund(er)ung: Herta Müllers Weg zum Gedicht', in *text + kritik* 155. *Herta Müller* 2002, 64–79 (70).
  27. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, tr. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis 1987.
  28. Wiebke Sievers, 'Eastward Bound: Herta Müller's International Reception', in Haines and Marven (eds), *Herta Müller* (note 5), pp. 172–98 (p. 184).
  29. Herta Müller, *Herztier*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1994, pp. 21, 56, 248. Further references appear in the text as *Herztier*.
  30. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford 2009.
  31. Moray McGowan, "'Stadt und Schädel", "Reisende", and "Verlorene": City, Self, and Survival in Herta Müller's *Reisende auf einem Bein*', in Haines and Marven (eds), *Herta Müller* (note 5), pp. 64–83 (pp. 64–5).
  32. Sievers, 'Eastward Bound', in Haines and Marven (eds), *Herta Müller* (note 5), p. 178.
  33. Hannah Arendt, 'Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government', in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, San Diego, New York, and London 1966, pp. 460–79 (p. 478).
  34. *Ibid.*, p. 475.
  35. *Ibid.*, p. 477.
  36. Herta Müller, *Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1997, p. 240.
  37. Arendt, 'The Concentration Camps' (note 17), 746 and 752.
  38. *Ibid.*, 755–9.

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39. Herta Müller, *Atemschaukel*, Munich 2009, p. 157. Further references appear in the text as *Atemschaukel*.
40. Pollock and Silverman, *Concentrationary Cinema* (note 2), pp. 26 and 19.
41. See Eke, *Herta Müller-Handbuch* (note 4), pp. 241–5. On feminism, Müller said in interview, ‘Ich bin vielleicht eine Individualistin, und ich bin eine Frau’, in Haines and Littler ‘Gespräch mit Herta Müller’ (note 22), p. 19.
42. Herta Müller, *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel: Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet*, Berlin 1991, p. 18.
43. Hannah Arendt, ‘Happy Birthday to the Poet who thought “Poetry makes nothing happen”’, *Literary Hub*, 21 February 2018, <https://lithub.com/hannah-arendt-on-the-time-she-met-w-h-auden/> (accessed 30 September 2018).
44. Watson, *Arendt* (note 18), p. 89.
45. Hannah Arendt, *Thinking without a Banister: Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn, Berlin 2018.
46. Watson, *Arendt* (note 18), p. 94.
47. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb, ‘Introduction’, in Hannah Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb, Stanford, CA 2007, pp. xi–xxxi (pp. xii–iii).
48. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (note 11), p. 202.
49. Steve Buckler, *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory: Challenging the Tradition*, Edinburgh 2011, p. 203.
50. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (note 11), p. 52.
51. Disch, ‘On Friendship in “Dark Times”’ (note 19), p. 289.
52. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (note 11), p. 5.
53. *Ibid.*, pp. 28 and 27.



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54. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
  55. *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.
  56. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
  57. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
  58. [https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/) (accessed 30 October 2018).
  59. Simona Forti, 'Introduction: Hannah Arendt's Legacy at 100 Years of her Birth', tr. Miguel Vatter, *Revista de Ciencia Política*, 26/2 (2006), 121–3.
  60. Ralph Köhnen, 'Visualität und Textualität', in Eke, *Herta Müller-Handbuch* (note 4), pp. 190–200 (p. 198).