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Literature as an Exploration of Past Worlds as Spaces of Possibility: Herta Müller's *The Hunger Angel*

This chapter develops the concept of a space of possibility to theorise how literature functions as a medium of cultural memory and mnemonic migration. I suggest that an important way in which fiction can help us understand past worlds is by dealing with them as spaces of possibility in which certain modes of action, thought and affect were possible, while others were impossible or unlikely. Crucial to why we read historical and memory fiction is perhaps less the desire to know "historical facts" about a specific historical world and more an interest in getting a sense of what it might have been like to live in that world. Through engagement with narrative fiction we can obtain not only a sense of that world as *a space of possibilities* in which individuals negotiate their life choices but also resources to reflect on the relevance of that space for our current *sense of the possible* (Meretoja 2018, 2, 14 – 16, 90 – 97). The notion of a space of possibilities allows us to resist the reification of the past and to see both that individuals have agency in shaping the course of events that may seem to have been necessary and that such agency has limits set by the historical world in which it is embedded. I suggest that cultural memory studies would benefit from paying more sustained attention to the aspect of the possible in looking at how cultural memorial forms travel and shape our understanding of past and present worlds. I will develop this theoretical approach in dialogue with how Herta Müller's novel *The Hunger Angel* (2012, *Atemschaukel,* 2009a) depicts a Soviet forced labour camp as a space of possibilities in which certain modes of action, thought and affect were possible and others were impossible or extremely difficult.

Spaces of possibilities

Ever since Aristotle, philosophical and theoretical reflection on literature has been dominated by the idea that literary fiction belongs to the realm of the possible, which is contrasted with the realm of the actual and real. Aristotle (1985, 1451a) argued that literature is more philosophical than history since it deals with the possible, or with what could be and what is probable, including general wisdom about life, whereas history deals with the actual and what is contingent, that is, with the randomness of what happens to happen. In the memory boom of the

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past few decades, however, it has become a widely shared view that literature is an important medium of cultural memory, which implies that literature is seen as playing a role in how we understand actual past worlds.[1] Literature helps shape how we remember the past, and it contributes to debates on whose experiences and stories get heard, and how the past is used in the present to mould identities and orientations to the future. It not only draws on cultural memorial forms, but also challenges and renews them.[2] As literature carries memories of the past to new contexts and as it transnationally transports memories from one cultural context to another, it functions as a vehicle of mnemonic migration. What I would like to suggest in this chapter is that, in this process, literature shapes our understanding of past worlds as spaces of possibility, and it can thereby open new possibilities for us in the present and as we imagine different futures.

As I have argued in my earlier work, the conceptual dichotomy between the actual and the possible has led to a dismissal of how a sense of the possible is integral to who we are and how it constitutes an important aspect of intersubjective reality in every actual world. This sense is crucial to how a historical world is experienced. By a *sense of the possible* I mean a sense of what possibilities were open in a specific historical world or social situation and a sense of how things could be otherwise. Fiction can explore past worlds as spaces of possibility in which certain modes of action, thought and affect were possible and others were impossible or unlikely. This means it can depict actual past worlds and also open new possibilities for us in the present and for the future. The way in which people in a past world understood their possibilities is a constitutive aspect of that past world as a space of possibilities. Literature not only provides interpretations of actual worlds past and present through its own literary means, but it can also enrich and expand our sense of real worlds as spaces of possibilities.[3]

Both literary theorists and philosophers have tended to share Gottlob Frege's view that fiction lacks truth value and so is not, as Dorrit Cohn puts it, "subject to judgments of truth and falsity" (1999, 15; see also Doležel 2010, 36–42; Frege 2008 [1892], 23–46). Cohn defines fiction as "nonreferential narrative" and argues that a fictional world "remains to its end severed from the actual world" (1999, 9, 13). Such theories of fictionality rely on the idea that reality consists of "facts" that can be objectively observed, but this position ignores the way in which human reality also consists of such invisible phenomena as patterns of experience, affect

1 On literature as a medium of cultural memory, see e.g. Erll 2011a, 144–171.

2 On cultural memorial forms, see Laanes and Meretoja 2021.

3 As I here develop the idea of mnemonic migration as a process of understanding past worlds as spaces of possibilities, I will draw on my discussions on the possible in Meretoja 2018, 14–15, 90–93, 2023, 2024a, 2024b.

and meaning-giving. Past worlds are also constituted by thoughts, feelings and representations, or by what is invisible and perishable, and so the study of the past should also involve mapping the possibilities of the past (Salmi 2011, 173–174; Wyschogrod 1998).

Fiction can be a particularly productive mode of exploring past worlds as spaces of possibilities. It can give a sense of how inhabiting a world means inhabiting a particular space of possibilities in which it is possible to experience, perceive, think, feel, do, and imagine certain things, and difficult or impossible to experience, perceive, think, feel, do, and imagine other things (Meretoja 2018, 14–15, 2023, 140). In developing this idea, I have been inspired by Paul Ricoeur who argues that fiction can function as a "detector of possibilities buried in the actual past": "What 'might have been' – the possible in Aristotle's terms – includes both the potentialities of the 'real' past and the 'unreal' possibilities of pure fiction" (1988 [1985], 191–192).

This understanding of the power of fiction also draws on Reinhart Koselleck's concepts of "space of experience" [*Erfahrungsraum*] and "horizon of expectation" [*Erwartungshorizont*] (2004). The space of experience refers to the way in which a certain historical world is shaped by frameworks of meaning, an important aspect of which is how it understands the past. The horizon of expectation, in turn, signifies the way in which the people of that world orient themselves to the future and imagine the yet-to-be (Koselleck 2004 [1979]). Narrative practices shape both spaces of experience and horizons of expectation, and the shifting relationships between them. Neither the space of experience nor the horizon of expectation of a particular world, however, is as homogenous as Koselleck makes them sound. As Rancière puts it, each age includes the "co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities" (2013 [2000], 26). In a sense, a historical world always consists of a multitude of historical worlds.

Fiction can deal with historical worlds as heterogeneous spaces of possibility by depicting them from multiple perspectives and showing that they do not provide the same possibilities to everyone. Different possibilities are available from different subject positions, which are constituted through relationships of power (Meretoja 2023, 138). It is also important to acknowledge that a temporally changing sense of the possible is crucial to how individuals experience a historical world as a space of experience. I will next discuss this idea in relation to Herta Müller's novel *The Hunger Angel*, which shows how extreme conditions, such as those in a forced labour camp, diminish the inmates' sense of the possible.

The Soviet labour camp as a space of possibilities

Herta Müller's *The Hunger Angel* recounts the experiences of a 17-year-old gay man called Leo Auberg who is deported from his small Romanian hometown to a Soviet labour camp, known as the Gulag.[4] In the 1940s, Romanian-Germans were ordered to contribute to rebuilding the Soviet Union in forced labour camps, and some 60,000 – 75,000 Romanian-Germans were deported, of whom at least 3000 died in the camps. The forced labour camps were part of the Soviet plan for German war reparations. In *The Hunger Angel*, Leo Auberg ends up spending five years of his life in a camp in Nowo-Gorlowka (Novogorlovka, Ukraine, now part of Gorlovka), with paralysing hunger as his constant companion. Initially, he welcomes the forced departure from his hometown where he has felt suffocated by homophobia and conservative norms, but in the camp severe hunger quickly transforms his life, and he becomes permanently a captive of what he calls the "hunger angel" [*Hungerengel*]. The novel draws on the real-world experiences of Oskar Pastior, a Romanian-born German poet who was deported in January 1945 to the Soviet Union for forced labour, like many other ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe after the war. Herta Müller planned to write the book together with Pastior, but after he died, Müller ended up writing the book on her own. Müller also drew partly on her mother's experiences in the camp and particularly on the silence that surrounded her experiences (Müller 2009b).

While many commentators have emphasised the documentary aspects of *The Hunger Angel*, others have argued that a "dichotomy between truth and fiction is at the core of Müller's poetics" and that the novel "belongs to fiction and not to historical narrative" (Shopin 2014, 198, 212). Such a dichotomy, however, is highly problematic. I suggest that we can transcend it by seeing the novel as a way of imagining the camp as a space of possibilities that set boundaries on what was possible for the prisoners, and that this is elemental to the way *The Hunger Angel* contributes to the cultural memory of the Soviet labour camps. Müller deals with these experiences as a German novelist with a background in Romania. She writes in a language that made her a minority writer in Romania and that happens to be a majority language in Europe. In 1987, Müller emigrated to West Germany after being persecuted for years by Nicolae Ceaușescu's government. *The Hunger Angel* manifests mnemonic migration in the way it transfers the fictionalised memories of a forced labourer in a Soviet labour camp to German-language audiences, both German minorities in Romania and other Central and Eastern Europe-

4 The Gulag was a system of forced labour camps that Joseph Stalin established during his reign, from the 1920s to the early 1950s. They incarcerated about 18 million people.

an countries, and German-language majorities in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. At the same time, this widely translated novel transfers these memories from the 1940s to twenty-first-century Europe and to the collective memory of those camps that have received little attention in comparison to the Nazi concentration camps.[5] Müller has been called an author who moves between cultures (Marven 2005). Through her migration from Romania to Germany, she has become an important witness of Soviet terror in the Western European context.

The Gulag is a very particular kind of space of possibilities or impossibilities. It forms a closed reality of its own, a micro-cosmos that nevertheless reflects the realities of the outside world. The camp sets clear limits on what is possible and impossible for the forced labourers. They have to follow strict orders, they are kept in hunger, and they have to endure harsh physical labour. Many die of malnutrition and illness; all of them suffer from excruciating hunger. One of the key questions the novel asks is whether it is possible to remain human in such inhumane conditions.

The novel suggests that in such conditions, humans are reduced to numbers: "Each of us had to know his number day and night and never forget that we were not private individuals but numbered laborers" (Müller 2012, 21).[6] In consequence, humans also lose their gender and sexuality: "Of course you go on saying HE or SHE but that's merely a grammatical holdover. Half-starved humans are really neither masculine nor feminine but genderless, like objects" (149).[7] Leo compares them to "draft animals" and suggests that through this reduction to animality they also lose a sense of shame: "[I]n our nakedness we looked like worn-out draft animals. But no one was ashamed. What is there to be ashamed of when you no longer have a body. Yet our bodies were the reason we were in the camp, to perform bodily labour. The less of a body we had, the more it punished us. The shell that was left belonged to the Russians" (224).[8]

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5 *The Hunger Angel* is her internationally most successful, best-known, and most widely translated novel (Sievers 2013, 178).

6 "Jeder musste sich seine Nummern Tag und Nacht merken und wissen, dass wir Nummerierte, keine Privatleute sind" (Müller 2009a, 29). In the following only the page numbers will be given, for the English translations by Philip Boehm in the main text and for the German original quotations in the footnotes.

7 "Man sagt zwar weiter DER oder DIE, wie man auch der Kamm oder die Baracke sagt. Und so wie diese sind auch Halbverhungerte nicht männlich oder weiblich, sondern objektiv neutral wie Objekte" (158).

8 "[N]ackt sahen wir aus wie ausgemustertes Arbeitsvieh. Geschämt hat sich keiner. Wovor soll man sich schämen, wenn man keinen Körper mehr hat. Aber seinetwegen waren wir im Lager, für körperliche Arbeit. Je weniger Körper man hatte, desto mehr war man durch ihn gestraft. Diese Hülle gehörte den Russen" (235).

The novel links this bodily dis-identification to a profound loss of a sense of selfhood and to a sense that one's life no longer belongs to oneself. This loss of self provokes an identity crisis, as the person suffering it does not know who they are and what their dreams and hopes are. The forced labourers also lose most of their agency, since their actions are regulated by their role as forced labourers and everything that they do or think is dominated by hunger. In this situation, they are both together and alone. Being stripped of all privacy and reduced to basic human needs creates a certain sense of commonality, a sense of connection, as when they are told to defecate in a field in the middle of their train journey of deportation (18). In the camp they share the reality of hunger, but "hunger has its secret side and its public side" (149).[9] Everyone has "hunger words" for example, which "make up a map, but instead of reciting countries in your head you list names of food"; "but even so, you're still alone", since "[y]ou can't hunger together" (148–149). The hunger angel provides "each of us with our own individual agony, and yet we were all alike" (149).[10] It defines their shared condition but also makes them unable to share it with one another.

Their humanity, agency and sense of self are diminished because all they can think about is hunger: "What can be said of chronic hunger? […] How can you face the world if all you can say about yourself is that you're hungry. If you can't think of anything else" (17–18).[11] In such conditions, all action is reduced to hunger: "No matter where I was, in my bunk or between the barracks, at the yama on a shift or with Kobelian on the steppe […] – everything I did was hungry. Everything matched the magnitude of my hunger in length, width, height, and color" (149).[12]

Extreme hunger means that you no longer have a choice even about how to treat your loved ones. A shocking example is the way one prisoner steals his wife's soup and thereby contributes to her death. Leo the narrator suggests that this is what happens when people are put in an impossible situation:

> The naked truth is that Paul Gast the lawyer stole his wife's soup right out of her bowl until she could no longer get out of bed and died because she couldn't help it, just like he stole her

9 "[A]m Hunger selbst das Heimliche und das Öffentliche gibt" (158).

10 "Hungerwörte sind eine Landkarte, statt Ländernamen sagt man sich die Namen vom Essen in den Kopf. […] man bleibt doch allein. […] Der Hungerengel […] besorgte jedem seine eigene, persönliche Qual, obwohl wir uns alle glichen" (157–158).

11 "Was kann man sagen über den chronischen Hunger. […] Wie läuft man auf der Welt herum, wenn man nichts mehr über sich zu sagen weiß, als dass man Hunger hat. Wenn man an nichts anderes mehr denken kann" (24–25).

12 "Egal wo ich war, im meinem Bettgestell, zwischen den Baracken, in der Tag- oder Nachtschicht auf der Jama oder mit Kobelian in der Steppe […], alles, was ich tat, hatte Hunger. Jeder Gegestand glich in Länge, Breite, Höhe und Farbe dem Ausmaß meines Hungers" (158).

> soup because his hunger couldn't help it […], and the days couldn't help being a chain of causes and effects, just like all causes and effects couldn't help it that they were the naked truth […]. That was the way of the world: because each person couldn't help it, no one could. (219)[13]

Leo suggests that it is the hunger angel who possesses him and continues to do so after he returns from the camp, but in reality it is of course the Soviets who exert their power over the forced labourers and treat them as if they were responsible for Germany's war crimes even when they have had no role in the war: "None of us were part of any war, but because we were Germans, the Russians considered us guilty of Hitler's crimes" (36).[14] While many Germans participated in the Holocaust in Romania and were antisemites, like Müller's father who was a member of the Waffen-SS, others were against Hitler and against the antisemitism of his regime; even so, fascist attitudes remained widespread among the German minority in post-war Romania. As Brigid Haines (2013, 121) puts it, by choosing a protagonist who is a "young German untainted by Nazism, Müller risks simplifying a situation in which many undoubted perpetrators and 'Mitläufer' suddenly found themselves victims", but in the Gulag camps there was no discrimination between former Nazis and others, and the younger ones were less likely to have participated in the war; in any case, *The Hunger Angel* places Leo in the position of a double victim, as he is persecuted by the Soviets and is vulnerable because of widespread homophobia.

Over time, the prisoners depicted in *The Hunger Angel* internalise the idea that they are mere numbers. When the first one of them dies of hunger, Leo knows who will be next. People become numbers to him too. By March of the fourth year, 330 people have died. "With numbers like that you can no longer afford separate feelings. We thought of the dead only briefly" (79).[15] This draws attention to the way the possibility of feelings is not self-evident and cannot be taken for granted. Only in a certain space of possibilities are certain feelings possible. When the labourers are reduced to a mere empty space for the hunger angel, they are unable to nourish feelings within themselves: "We are the frame for the hunger" (79).[16] It is difficult for people who are treated as mere animals to en-

13 "Die nackte Wahrheit ist, dass der Advokat Paul Gast seiner Frau Heidrun Gast aus dem Essgeschirr die Suppe stahl, bis sie nicht mehr aufstand und starb, weil sie nicht anders konnte, so wie er ihre Suppe stahl, weil sein Hunger nicht anders konnte, […] so konnten auch die Tage nichts dafür, dass sie eine Kette von Ursachen und Folgen waren" (230).

14 "Wir waren alle in keinem Krieg, aber für die Russen waren wir als Deutsche schuld an Hitlers Verbrechen" (44).

15 "Da kann man sich die deutlichen Gefühle nicht mehr leisten. Da hat man nur noch kurz an sie gedacht" (90).

16 "Wir sind das Gestell für den Hunger" (89).

gage in rational or ethical reflection: "My bloodlust had swallowed my reason. And I wasn't the only one, we were a mob" (103).[17] The novel thus makes clear that it is extremely difficult, or perhaps impossible, in a space of possibilities like a Soviet labour camp to cultivate a sense of ethics or related forms of relationality such as solidarity, care, compassion, or empathy.

Different realities within the camp

As I noted earlier, no historical world is a uniform space of possibilities. Each world has different subject positions available for people who are placed in different social groups. The guards and the inmates in *The Hunger Angel* live in radically different spaces of possibility even though they seemingly share the same reality of the camp. The narrative makes it clear in particular that the commander, Tur Prikulitsch, has a completely different set of possibilities available to him than what the prisoners have: "He doesn't know the hunger angel, so he can give commands at roll call, strut around the camp, smile cunningly in the barber room" (22).[18] The camp is a space of possibilities in which there is a strong division between "us" and "them", and this means that there are also things that the guards cannot do as they are not part of "us": "But he can't take part in our conversation" (22).[19]

The Hunger Angel conveys a sense of how a certain historical world is both a world that objectively sets certain limitations on what is possible for its inhabitants and a lived world that is shaped by how the inhabitants understand their possibilities. The camp is a space of possibilities where there are different degrees of privilege and extreme lack of privilege, which are defined by strict hierarchies. The barber, for example, is not a commander but he is higher in the hierarchy than the prisoners: "The barber was not an accomplice of the camp administration, but he was privileged" (38).[20] Nevertheless, even those who are not high in the hierarchy but high enough to be spared hunger live in a completely different world. Leo suggests that those who administer the bread have absolute power over those who are starving. He describes in most detail Fenya, the "mistress of the bread and accomplice of the hunger angel": "We smiled out of necessity and out of principle […]. So as not to challenge her sense of justice but to encourage

17 "Mir hatte die Mordlust den Verstand geschluckt. Nicht nur mir, wir waren eine Meute" (113).
18 "Wer den Hungerengel nicht kennt, kann auf dem Appellplatz kommandieren, auf dem Lagerkorso stelzen, in der Rasierstube schleichend lächeln" (30).
19 "Aber mitreden kann er nicht" (30).
20 "Der Rasierer war kein Komplize der Lagerleitung, aber privilegiert" (46).

it, and if possible even increase it by a few grams" (98).[21] Calling the way in which bread is rationed "justice" strikingly brings out the difference between real justice, which would involve the right to life and the right not to be starved to death, and the twisted "bread justice" that is the only form of justice possible in the camp: "Bread justice has no prologue or epilogue, it is only here and now. […] [V]iolence meted out by bread justice is different from hungerless violence. You cannot approach the bread court with conventional morality" (104).[22]

The Hunger Angel depicts reification both from the side of the labourers and from the side of the guards (Berger and Luckmann 1987 [1966], 192). While the guards treat the prisoners as thing-like, the prisoners tend to reify those who work for the administration by perceiving them not as human but as part of a necessary system akin to a sacred, unchangeable law: "Fenya was neither good nor bad, she was not a person but the law in a crocheted sweater" (100).[23] Her justness in rationing the bread makes it appear necessary and renders the prisoners "submissive" (100). Leo seems to think that the inevitability of her way of operating has a certain power that affects the prisoners and makes them slaves to hunger so that they are even capable of killing in its name: "Early on […] it dawned on me that Fenya's saintliness, cold and cruel, had crept inside the bread, which is why we were capable of killing in the name of hunger" (99).[24]

The novel shows that the privileged ones have immensely more space to make choices than the forced labourers. They have the privilege of being able to treat others humanely for example, as this does not threaten their own chances of survival. Although the possibility of treating the labourers as humans is open to them however, very few of them seize the opportunity. Leo remembers a "construction supervisor" as a particular exception: "He considered us thinking human beings and not just forced labourers, which is why I remember him so well" (247).[25] Leo generally remembers the camp as a space where things are repeated ad nauseam, day after day, but there were also exceptional moments, such as this one, when someone treated them humanely. Even though the narrative focuses closely

21 "[eine] Brotherrin und Komplizin des Hungerengels"; "Man lächelte notgedrungen und grundsätzlich, […]. Um Fenjas Gerechtigkeit nicht zu riskieren, sondern aufzumuntern, wenn es geht, die Gerechtigkeit um ein paar Gramm zu erhöhen" (108).

22 "Die Brotgerechtigkeit hat kein Vor- und kein Nachspiel, sie ist nur Gegenwart. […] Auf jeden Fall ist die Brotgerechtigkeit anders gewalttätig als hungerlose Gewalt. Dem Brotgericht kann man nicht kommen mit der gängigen Moral" (114).

23 "Fenja war weder gut noch böse, sie war keine Person, sondern ein Gesetz in Häkeljacken" (110).

24 "Schon ein halbes Jahr vorher […] dachte ich mir, dass wir vor Hunger imstande sind zu töten, weil sich Fenjas kalte Heiligkeit ins Brot geschlichen hat" (109).

25 "Er sah in den Deportierten denkende Menschen, darum habe ich mir das gemerkt" (258).

on Leo's experiences, it nevertheless gives a sense of the camp as a space of possibilities that was radically varied, as it was different for people in different social groups, depending on their place in the power hierarchy. At the same time, however, the novel also shows that it was possible, particularly for the powerful ones, to break the norms and be unexpectedly kind.

Imagining alternatives: A sense of the possible

As *The Hunger Angel* describes the camp as a lived world that is shaped not only by the actual limitations it sets for its inhabitants but also by how they understand their possibilities, it links that understanding to the faculty of imagination of the inhabitants, and to the way the conditions of the camp damage this faculty. The interaction between the inhabitants and the stories they exchange shape their sense of the possible, which is severely diminished by the conditions of the camp. When their lives are dominated by hunger, there is little scope for imagination: "In the camp, all wishing was taken away from us" and they didn't "dare yearn ahead" (248).[26] During the last year of their time in the camp, however, they are less hungry and this makes it possible for them to imagine different paths to different futures.

One of Leo's pass-times is precisely to imagine different futures. This involves a recurring dream of strolling down "elegant lanes, where people have a different way of life than in the small town" (246)[27] where he was born. Presumably this "different way of life" would make it possible for him to be openly homosexual. He also dreams of living in a country with mountains: "Someday, I thought to myself, who knows in which year of peace and in which future, I'll come to the land with the mountain ridges" (247).[28]

In addition to such private day dreaming, the prisoners engage in collective imagining. Much of this collective imagining of the future is about their homecoming:

> There are many variations on the theme of going home, different scenarios circulated through the camp. According to one, our best years would be behind us by the time we made it back.

26 "Im Lager wurde einem das Wünschen abgenommen. […] man traute sich nicht in die Sehnsucht nach vorn" (260).

27 "Ich dachte mir, einmal werde ich aufs elegante Pflaster kommen, wo man anders zu Hause ist als in der Kleinstadt, wo ich geboren bin" (257).

28 "Ich werde einmal, dachte ich mir, wer weiß im wievielten Frieden und der wievielten Zukunft in das Land der Bergkämme kommen" (258).

> [...] [I]n other versions we never even leave [...]. Or we wind up wanting to stay here because we no longer know what to make of our home and our home no longer knows what to make of us. (247–248)[29]

The prisoners are migrants who come mainly from German-language communities in Romania and other Central and Eastern European countries, and their collective imagining and remembering creates attachments between them.[30] Remembering and imagining are entangled in the way they deal with their longing for home.

One of the processes conveyed by the narration is the process of diminishing human beings with a need for self-expression to mere flesh that cannot imagine or be creative. Leo has a need for poetic self-expression, but hunger efficiently destroys the possibility of all artistic creativity: "But he also knows that hunger devours nearly all artistry" (74).[31] In the beginning he has a strong need to write, to express himself through literature, but this need is juxtaposed by the "cement" that is integral to the labour they are forced to conduct:

> In the camp every type of work made you dirty. But nothing was as relentless as the cement. Cement is as impossible to escape as the dust of the earth [...]. It seems to me there's only one thing in our minds quicker than cement, and that's fear. And the only explanation I can give for why, as early as the beginning of the first summer, I had to jot this down in secret on a piece of thin brown cement-sack paper:
> SUN HIGH IN THE HAZE
> YELLOW CORN, NO TIME. (32)[32]

Leo feels like he is "made of cement" and there is less and less of him so that one day he may disappear altogether (33).[33] The cement keeps him from writing more. He would like to write "Deep and crooked and lurking reddish / the half-moon

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29 "Eine Variante des Heimfahrens, die hier im Lager zirkulierte, besagte, dass unsere besten Jahre vorbei sind, wenn wir dann mal nach Hause kommen. [...] Oder die anderen Varianten: Dass wir überhaupt nicht von hier wegkommen [...]. Eine andere Variante sagt, dass wir zuletzt hierbleiben wollen, weil wir nichts mehr anfangen können mit dem Zuhause und das Zuhause nichts mehr mit uns" (259).

30 Erll argues that migrants are carriers of memory, understood as "individuals who share in collective images and narratives of the past" (2011, 12).

31 "Er weiß aber auch, dass der Hunger fast die ganze Artistik frisst" (84).

32 "Im Lager war man immer dreckig von jeder Arbeit. Doch kein Dreck war so zudringlich wie der Zement. Zement ist unausweichlich wie der Staub der Erde [...]. Mir scheint, nur eins ist im Kopf des Menschen noch schneller als der Zement – die Angst. Und nur so kann ich mir erklären, dass ich schon im Frühsommer auf der Baustelle heimlich auf ein Stück von dem dünnen braunen Zementsackpapier notieren musste: / SONNE HOCH IM SCHLEIER / GELBER MAIS, KEINE ZEIT"(40–41).

33 "Ich bin doch auch aus Zement und werde auch immer weniger" (41).

stands in the sky / already setting", but he does not write that, just says it quietly under his breath, "where it shattered" (33),[34] and the cement grinds in his teeth and makes him fall into silence.

The tension between language and silence and the struggle to express *the inexpressible* [*Unsagbare*] are central to *The Hunger Angel*. The novel also shows how language participates in constituting and reflecting the space of possibilities in a certain life world. Müller foregrounds language in many ways through her poetic style, which has been described as an interplay between simplicity and complexity (Boase-Beijer 2013, 191), or between "the concentration of poetry and the frankness of prose" (The Nobel Prize). Müller uses the German language to rebel against that very language. She invents compound nouns that form new words for example, such as *Hungerengel* [hunger angel] or *Atemschaukel* [breath-swing]. Jean Boase-Beijer suggests that Müller's "language reflects her themes: of silence, censorship, fear. Her language is fragmented, full of gaps, non sequiturs, repetitions, and compressions" (2013, 192). Müller thereby rebels against the norms of the German language, refusing to be obedient to it: her "characters are studies in what happens when you internalise rules and norms, and when you transgress them. And her language echoes this concern, [...] by deviating very slightly from its accepted behaviour, creating a sense of displacement, of not quite fitting, of quiet rebellion" (Boase-Beijer 2013, 194).[35] Such quiet resistance pervades both the agency of the characters, particularly that of Leo, and Müller's relationship to the German language.

This dual resistance can be seen in the way the novel deals with one of the most devastating of the questions that haunt Leo and the other forced labourers throughout their imprisonment: the question of whether or not it will be possible for them to return home. The novel's narrative structure means the reader can guess that the narrator has survived the camp experience and is narrating retrospectively, but the oscillation between tenses is a way of refusing a neat, grammatically coherent sense of narrative mastery and instead conveys a profound sense of undecidability, uncertainty and layeredness of the experience of time. The possibility of the imprisonment ending and of the inmates returning home sustains Leo, but it is also a burden that makes camp life unbearable because the chance of returning home is so uncertain. At one point he fills in two little bottles in his toilet kit with cabbage soup as a kind of memento that he might bring home one day. When the commander finds out, he makes it clear what such an act of stealing

34 "Tief und schief und rötlich lauernd / steht der halbe Mond am Himmel / schon im Untergehen"; "Es ist gleich zerbrochen" (41).

35 On Müller's "aesthetics of resistance", see also Vinter 2020.

makes him: "I was a Fascist, a spy, a saboteur, and a pest, I had no culture, and by stealing cabbage soup I was committing treason against the camp, against Soviet authority, and against the Soviet people" (152).[36] Leo is unable to understand even for himself why he stole the soup, but it seems to involve the dimension of resistance, of sustaining at least a minimal sense of agency:

> To this day I don't know why I filled the bottles with cabbage soup. Did it have something to do with my grandmother's sentence: I know you'll come back. Was I really so naïve as to think I'd come home and present the cabbage soup to my family as though I were bringing them two bottles of life in the camp. [...] Was going home even the opposite of staying here. I probably wanted to be up to both possibilities, if it came to that. I never lost my yearning to go home, but in order to have something besides that, I told myself that even if they kept us here forever, this would still be my life. (154)[37]

Imagining the possibility of the camp life turning out to be his only life seems for him a way of trying to cope with the uncertainty and trying to make the life that is forced on him nevertheless his own. In a way, he prepares himself for the possibility that he would be forced to become Russian: "After all, the Russians have their lives." He remembers a Russian inmate saying something about "the grassy soul of the steppe and his Ural heart": "That could beat in my breast as well, I thought" (154).[38] Through such "imaginative variations of the self", he prepares himself for different futures, including ones in which the camp turns out to be his whole world.[39]

The lingering effects of the camp experience

Memories travel with people, and while Müller's novel deals with mnemonic migration from the Soviet labour camp to Romania, at the same time it contributes to

36 "Dass ich ein Faschist, Spion, Saboteur und Schädling bin, dass ich keine Kultur habe und mit gestohlener Krautsuppe das Lager, die Sowjetmacht und das Sowjetvolk verrate" (161).

37 "Ich weiß bis heute nicht, warum ich die Flacons mit Krautsuppe füllte. Hatte das mit dem Satz der Großmutter zu tun: Ich weiß, du kommst wieder. War ich wirklich so arglos zu glauben, ich komm wieder und präsentiere der Familie zu Hause meine Krautsuppe als zwei Fläschchen mitgebrachtes Lagerleben. [...] Waren Heimfahren und Hierbleiben überhaupt noch Gegensätze. Wahrscheinlich wollte ich beidem gewachsen sein, wenn es so kommt. [...] Den Wunsch nach Heimkehr wurde man nicht los, um aber außer ihm noch etwas anderes zu haben, sagte ich mir, wenn sie uns für immer hierbehalten, so ist es doch mein Leben" (162–163).

38 "Die Russen leben ja auch"; "von der Grasseele der Steppe und seinem Ural-Gefühl. In meine Brust geht das auch, habe ich mir gedacht" (163).

39 On imaginative variations, see Ricoeur 1992 [1990], 148.

that migration by narrating fictionalised memories of the Gulag for German and other Western European audiences. The novel shows how the memory of the camp keeps hold of the forced labourers and never lets them free. It thereby deals with what it means in concrete terms to live with a diminished sense of the possible and how that may linger on later in life and determine the course of a person's life. The protagonist cannot help remembering, the memories force themselves upon him, and he struggles to free himself from them without success:

> For sixty years now, at night I try to recall the objects from the camp: the things I carry in my night-suitcase. [...] And it's against my will that I have to remember. [...] Occasionally the objects from the camp attack me, not one at a time, but in a pack. Then I know they're not – or not only – after my memory, but that they want to torment me. [...] I'm pursued by objects that may have had nothing to do with me. They want to deport me during the night, fetch me home to the camp. (26)[40]

This defines his sense of the possible later in life. He carries the memories of the past with him to the present, and as traumatic memories they permanently shape his sense of possibilities. Through this the novel shows how memories live in us as layered time, so that even when we confront a new situation, we necessarily experience it through the horizon of expectation shaped by our earlier experiences. This is already evident in the way that Leo's experience of the camp is coloured by his earlier experience of being different at a time when homosexuality was not socially acceptable. He had to hide it from his family, and at the camp he has to hide it from the other inhabitants of the camp. In reality, it is impossible for Leo to practise any kind of sexuality at the camp, not only because starvation destroys sexuality but also because he has to hide his homosexuality: "I had to keep out of all the mixes and make sure no one had any idea why" (233).[41] When he returns home, it remains impossible for him to be openly homosexual, and even when he leaves home to search for a more open-minded community, he never feels at ease with himself.

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40 "Seit sechzig Jahren will ich mich in der Nacht an die Gegenstände aus dem Lager erinnern. Sie sind meine Nachtkoffersachen. [...] Ich muss mich erinnern gegen meinen Willen. [...] Manchmal überfallen mich die Gegenstände aus dem Lager nich nacheinander, sondern im Rudel. Darum weiß ich, dass es den Gegenständen, die mich heimsuchen, gar nicht oder nicht nur um meine Erinnerung geht, sondern ums Drangsalieren. [...] Gegenstände, die vielleicht nichts mit mir zu tun hatten, suchen mich. Sie wollen mich nachts deportieren, ins Lager heimholen, wollen sie mich" (33–34).

41 "So wie ich mich aus allen Mischungen heraushalten und aufpassen musste, dass keiner ahnt warum" (243).

An important question the novel raises is when is it possible to feel at home? It deals with this question in relation to "homesickness", which is, for Leo, a permanent condition. It torments him both at the camp and after his release from the camp. Before his deportation, it was not possible for Leo to be himself in his small hometown where homosexuality was a crime, and so he did not feel "at home" even before his deportation. This makes him initially welcome the deportation, at least partly, but in the harsh conditions of the camp, he soon begins to feel homesickness and misses his home. After returning home however, the homesickness does not go away. It is a longing for a place where he could be himself, feel at home and at ease, nourished and safe. When he returns, he feels alienated because people are unable to understand what hunger did to him and how it continues to affect him.

An important factor here is the traumatic experience of not being able to trust anyone. This is one of Leo's key experiences at the camp and it never leaves him: "Mistrust grows higher than any wall" (30).[42] After the camp experience, Leo never lets anyone close to him: "Every day since I came back home, each feeling has a hunger of its own and expects me to reciprocate, but I don't. I won't ever let anyone cling to me again. I've been taught by hunger and am unreachable out of humility, not pride" (237). His intersecting traumatic experiences make him cautious and unwilling to be open to others in his vulnerability. Refusing intimacy is a way of maintaining some sense of control and agency for himself: "I need much closeness, but I don't give up control. […] Since the hunger angel, I don't allow anyone to possess me" (283).[43] His layered, intersecting traumas mean that his diminished sense of the possible does not allow the construction of a multifaceted narrative identity through a process of narrating where he comes from, where he is now and where he is going; his temporal horizon remains diminished, so that he is unable to imagine how things could be otherwise and, in particular, how his life might be entangled with someone else's life, someone whom he could trust, be intimate with, and think of as integral to who he is.[44]

This is a paradoxical situation in which Leo seeks to protect himself from the camp, but it takes hold of his mind, and he cannot protect himself from it, neither by keeping silent nor by telling stories about it: "That the camp let me go home only to create the space it needed to grow inside my head. […] The camp stretches on and on, bigger and bigger, from my left temple to my right. So when I talk about

42 "Höher als jede Wand wächst das Misstrauen" (38).

43 "Ich brauche viel Nähe, aber ich gebe mich nicht aus der Hand. […] Seit dem Hungerengel erlaube ich niemandem, mich zu besitzen" (295).

44 On how layered, intersectional traumas shape Leo's narrative identity and diminish his sense of the possible, see Merivuori 2021. On the concept of narrative identity, see Meretoja 2018, 65–68.

what's inside my skull I have to talk about an entire camp. I can't protect myself by keeping silent and I can't protect myself by talking" (282).[45] The hunger he had to go through at the camp has been so strong that it has left an emptiness inside him: "empty on the inside ever since I no longer have to go hungry" (283).[46]

Mnemonic migration: Expanding the readers' sense of the possible

Even though *The Hunger Angel* deals with a radical diminishment of a person's sense of the possible, the novel as a whole can, in contrast, expand the readers' sense of the possible through our ability to imagine what was possible and impossible in that historical world, how the legacy of the Gulag affects contemporary societies, particularly in the area of the former Soviet Union, and how learning from the past could help us prevent history from repeating itself. We can distinguish between mnemonic migration within fictional worlds and mnemonic migration through fiction. In this last section, I will focus on the migration through fiction from the perspective of how *The Hunger Angel* contributes to the cultural memory of the Soviet forced labour camps.

Müller is a migrant who writes in German, which is her native language but also that of her country of destination. She has crossed linguistic, cultural and national borders as a migrant and as a writer, and as she is a widely translated author, the memories of the Gulag that she has given shape to have entered new linguistic, cultural and historical worlds around the globe. The Western narrative imagination of camps has for a long time been dominated by a cultural memory that revolves around Nazi concentration camps. The Soviet labour camps, the Gulag, have certain similarities to those camps but there are also important differences. Gulag camps were an extreme form of incarceration and were a combination of imprisonment and penal colony. Food was scarce and about 10 % of the prisoners perished, but the vast majority survived and were able to return home. In Nazi concentration camps, in contrast, the aim was systematically to kill certain parts of the population, most notably the Jews. The inmates were either

45 "Dass mich das Lager nach Hause gelassen hat, um den Abstand herzustellen, den es braucht, um sich im Kopf zu vergrößern. […] Immer mehr streckt sich das Lager vom Schläfenareal links zum Schläfenareal rechts. So muss ich von meinem ganzen Schädel wie von einem Gelände sprechen, von einem Lagergelände. Man kann sich nicht schützen, weder durchs Schweigen noch durchs Erzählen" (294).

46 "ich von außen bedrängt und innen hohl bin, seit ich nicht mehr hungern muss" (295).

killed immediately or exploited with extreme work and almost no food until they died. The prisoners in the Gulag worked long days of ten to fourteen hours a day, and the extremely exhausting physical work in inhumane conditions left a lasting mark on them.[47] Müller lived surrounded by "damaged people", including her own mother, who had returned from the camps and were unable to talk about their traumatic experiences (Haines 2013, 124).

For a long time, the way in which the Holocaust was presented as the ultimate evil to which nothing else can be compared prevented any comparison of the Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet Gulag, and made it difficult to deal with the traumatic experiences of the Gulag. The continuation of Communist rule also prevented any open discussion of Soviet terror. This started to change gradually after the fall of the Iron Curtain, and historical distance from the Soviet era has made a critical re-evaluation of that era possible over the past couple of decades. Müller's works originally received far more attention in Western Europe than in Eastern Europe; her works were censored and then banned in Romania, and while she first became known for her criticism of the backward and fascist attitudes of the German minorities in Eastern Europe, she then became famous as a witness of communist terror, especially after she had left Romania for West Germany. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, interest in her work and in German literature more broadly has increased continuously in Central and Eastern Europe (Sievers 2013, 176–177). Even so, at the time *The Hunger Angel* was published, even most Germans did not know about the deportations of Romanian-Germans to the Gulag (Shopin 2014, 198). It was a time when German wartime suffering was emerging as a topic in literature, but the portrayal of Romanian-Germans as the victims of deportations was still taboo in Romania and the topic had not yet been dealt with in literature (Haines 2013, 119–121). *The Hunger Angel* is consequently an important contribution to a little-known aspect of Gulag memory and has contributed to the travel of Gulag memory, particularly to a language-area in which the Holocaust memory is rich and varied but also beyond that to other language-areas. Moreover, at the time I am writing this, the war that Russia is waging in Ukraine provides a new context for re-evaluating the legacy of Soviet state violence. Reading Müller's novel in the present moment brings it into contact with Russia's war in Ukraine and the camps to which they are now sending Ukrainians for imprisonment and "re-education" (Khoshnood 2023).

The Hunger Angel has taken shape through Müller's interpretation of Oskar Pastior's stories about his camp experience, mediated by her own experience of Soviet terror in Romania. Later, it has been read through the lens of the knowledge

47 On the history of the Gulag, see e. g. Khlevniuk 2004; Applebaum 2011.

that emerged about Pastior's involvement with the Romanian secret police agency the Securitate.[48] Reading involves an ongoing process of reinterpretation that always emerges as an encounter between the world of the text and the world of the reader. Now I am interpreting Müller's interpretation of Pastior's experiences from my own theoretical and experiential horizon marked by my interest in the sense of the possible and also by the current world-historical context, including the war that Russia is waging in Ukraine. Many European countries are currently in a process of re-evaluating their relationship with Russia in the light of the recent events. This process has been particularly evident in Finland, which famously suffered from Finlandisation during the Cold War, exercising self-censorship in refraining from opposing its Eastern neighbour in its diplomatic effort to hold onto its independence. Now the new war has reactivated old historical traumas linked to Russian aggression and oppression over the centuries. In Finland, there is currently a lively debate on what was possible in the post-war period and during the Cold War. Would it have been possible for us to be more assertive and critical of the Soviet Union and yet maintain our independence? Should we have applied for NATO membership much earlier, at the same time as the Baltic countries? Trying to imagine the past world as a space of possibilities can guard against unwarranted hindsight and abstract demands about how we should have known better at the time, but it also helps in seeing the past world as a space in which different options existed – it was not part of a predetermined order of events but rather a space in which choices were made and certain possibilities were seized while others were disregarded for various reasons. At the same time, this perspective can allow us to see some blind spots that are only visible from a distance.

Overall, it is important to acknowledge that mnemonic migration is a phenomenon that takes place at both the individual level and the collective level. As I hope to have shown in this chapter, the memories that are forced on Leo in *The Hunger Angel* accompany him throughout his life and permanently diminish his sense of the possible. This conveys how not only imagination but also memory and the entanglement of the two are important aspects of how our sense of our possibilities takes shape. By imagining the experience of the deported Romanian-Germans and transporting this previously little-known aspect of Gulag memory to the German cultural context, and through translation to other cultural contexts, Müller's *The*

48 After four years of surveillance by the Securitate, Pastior then worked for them as an informer in 1961–1968, until he obtained a scholarship that allowed him to leave the country and settle in West Germany. The revelation of his collaboration came out in 2010. It was "presumably the threat of blackmail as a gay man that made Pastior collaborate", and this "points to ongoing silences within Romanian remembrance, here in relation to the activities of the Securitate" (Haines 2013, 122).

Hunger Angel shows how literature can participate in shaping transcultural memory and processes of mnemonic migration by dealing with a past world as a space of possibilities. Through such processes, literature can contribute to our understanding of the complex and entangled dimensions of histories of violence and thereby also to our ways of orienting ourselves in the present. By enriching our sense of past worlds as heterogeneous spaces of possibility, literature can also shape our sense of the possible in the present and for the future.

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