Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, 2, 1 (2010) 135-143

The Death of an Ethos . . .

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Abstract. The article analyzes the experience under the communist regime as it is depicted in Herta Müller's novel *The Land of the Green Plums*. It is more like a metaphysical experience rather than a political one—the novel is a metaphor not only for the abjection and the degradation of the human beings trapped in the totalitarian world, but also for the destruction of an old type of attitude towards life, an attitude which is defined by Virgil Nemoianu in some of his studies as the ***ethos of learning***.

Herta Müller's characters seem to carry within themselves certain features of this ethos, but in a world which has no logic or causality, they become victims of their own attempts to evade the terrible reality. Nevertheless, in spite of the lack of substance of the characters and the apparently incidental ending of the novel, *The Land of the Green Plums* manages to describe what many other Central and Eastern European authors have ignored or have tried to forget—the fear, the ugliness and the absurdity of life in communism.

Keywords: Herta Müller, communism, ethos of learning, absurdity

In a series of studies explaining the manifestations of *Romanticism* in Europe, Virgil Nemoianu asserts that the main difference between the Western European and the Central European culture relies in the ***work ethic*** of the first (as Max Weber once defined it) and what he calls the ***"learning ethos"*** of the latter. In his opinion, social advancement before the First World War "over a large area of Central Europe—roughly covering what is now Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, the former Yugoslavia, Romania" was a result not of "gainful

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labor and individual achievement" but rather of the "acquisition of information and the communitarian recognition of learning and as a standard of merit" (Nemoianu *Imperfection* 91).[1] In other words, while the most important features of the capitalist Western European attitude towards life and God were related more to material matters—work, temperance, industry, resolution, acquisition of wealth, etc.[2]—in Central Europe the focus shifts towards the acquisition of knowledge and information, meaning it "postulated the world as a vast arena in which affirmation and promotion were possible through orderly and fair tests, struggles, and strategies. . . . Learning could justify wealth and high position and it was an avenue open to all classes" (Nemoianu *Imperfection* 96).

As Nemoianu argues later on, this *learning ethos* explains the blossom of many cultural organizations promoting knowledge, information and the protection of the arts around 1840 in Hungary, Bohemia, Romania, Serbia, etc., organizations in which "social interaction would transcend class interests by establishing common standards of learning and of striving for intellectual and spiritual betterment" (Nemoianu *Imperfection* 98). Moreover, the members of these societies had a great influence on the political and social life of their countries, they made learning become an aspiration and even a tradition among different social classes, and a way to establish and keep a status among the governing elite.

However, this type of ethos had its downfalls as well; it generated "slothful modernization, excessive nostalgia, deficiencies in the relationship to reality, and the chronic addiction to all kinds of retrograde populism" (Nemoianu *Imperfection* 119). I would add that all these deficiencies are depicted particularly clear in a large part of the Romanian literature—from Eminescu's intellectuals (both in his poetry and in his prose) who spend their entire life among books seeking knowledge in spite of their extreme poverty only to realize in the end how disconnected they are from the rest of the world, through the more realistic characters depicted in Ioan Slavici's short stories or the feeble thinkers such as Titu Herdelea or Apostol Bologa in Rebreanu's novels, continuing with Camil Petrescu's intellectuals who, in spite of their sincerity and refinement, are subjects of the most ardent internal dramas and ending with Marin Preda's Victor Petrini,

[1] Chapter 4, "East / Central Europe as a Confirmatory Case Study," also published, with a few annotations in Virgil Nemoianu, *The Triumph of Imperfection. The Silver Age of Sociocultural Moderation in Europe, 1815-1848*, Chapter 8, "Learning Over Class. The Case of Central-European Ethos".

[2] As Nemoianu asserts: "A certain congeniality of elective affinity" between capitalism and Calvinism made the two to reinforce each other; the Puritan-Calvinist-capitalist nexus blossomed into a fully-fledged system of moral-religious virtues. Individualism was bolstered through the doctrine of personal saint-liness and a private direct relationship with God. Justification takes place through work, success, human self-discipline, and perfectibility, both moral and material. Acquisition is sacramentalized. Temperance, resolution, industry, frugality, cleanliness, and chastity are among the foremost virtues" (Nemoianu *Imperfection* 95).

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crushed under the absurd veil of history. However, in spite of their inner conflicts and the impact history has on their existence, all these characters are part of a well-defined plot, their personality and thoughts are part of a course of events that can be easily inferred and explained by the reader. But what happens with the ethos of learning in the later years, before and after the falling of the communism in Romania and in the rest of Central Europe?

Herta Müller's novel *The Land of Green Plums* is unmistakably auto-biographical, deriving from the terrible experience the author had under the communist regime and how she was forced to leave her native country, Romania. But at the beginning of the text, the first person narrative voice hides behind a number of other voices—Edgar's voice, uttering the same words which will actually end the novel as well: "when we don't speak, said Edgar, we become unbearable, and when we do, we make fools of ourselves" (Müller 1), or Lola's thoughts which she writes in her notebook.

The movements of the story are so vague, so slow and the language so highly metaphorical that they make any description, in the traditional sense of the term, very obscure. Lola does not have a certain age; we do not know almost anything about her past or her family. All we are allowed to know is that she's a young student from a poor province in South Romania. Her only possession, in the "little cube of a room" in the campus which she shares with five other girls, is a suitcase with stockings and a few dresses (yet she has "fewer than anyone else") and her only dream is "to spend four years studying Russian," "to become somebody in the city" and then, "four years later, to go back to the village" but not "on the dusty path down below, but higher up, through the branches of mulberry trees" (3-5). She does not care what she studies as long as education can help her marry a respectable man and escape poverty. As she writes in her notebook, she wants her kids to have a "big childhood" and she knows in her village the only children who were allowed to have such a childhood were the ones who had "a father and a mother who have been to school".

In spite of the vagueness and mere allusiveness surrounding the details about her life, Lola's dream seems so far legitimate, achievable; she carries the potential of a perfect picaresque character built on the pattern of the learning ethos. Yet in the world of communism, a world of shadowy workers roaming aimlessly around the city in the night tram with "a greedy desire of a starved dog" (13), Lola's writing speaks for her guilt, her notebook is a proof both for her profoundness and of her duplicity. When a few pages later she becomes a prostitute, a member of the communist party and begins a relationship with an official, the entire edifice of the potentiality is reversed. And by the time the first narrative voice finally steps in, she can only witness Lola's death.

The posthumous exclusion from the party and from the university is one of the most intense scenes of the entire novel, making the experience of dread the

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characters have to face almost unbearable. The world of communism is so absurd and so dramatic that not even the ones involved can understand it and so they constantly suppress their feelings, suspect each other and spy on each other's gestures:

> At four o'clock in the afternoon, in the great hall, two days after she'd hanged herself, Lola was expelled from the Party and exmatriculated from the university. Hundreds of people were there.
>
> Someone stood at the lectern and said: She deceived us all, she doesn't deserve to be a student in our country or a member of our Party. Everybody applauded.
>
> In the cube that evening someone said: Everyone felt like crying, but couldn't so they applauded too long instead. No one dared to be the first to stop. Everybody looked at each other's hands while they were clapping. A few people stopped for a moment, then were so frightened they started clapping all over again. By that time most of the people wanted to stop, you could hear the clapping in the room lose its rhythm, but because those few had started again, everyone else had to keep going. At last, when one beat bounced against the walls like a giant hoe, the speaker raised his hand for silence. (25)

However, in spite of such scenes and many other references to the communist regime, the dictator and the secret police, the novel is not necessarily a political one. At least not in its most important parts. It does not carry any type of political message, it does not aspire to openly oppose a certain truth against the gloomy ideology of the regime. The narrator and her three friends, Edgar, Georg and Kurt, do not exactly tell the story of rebelling against the order of things; none of them, taken separately, has the force of a tragic character, giving "a voice to whatever is without a voice," as Italo Calvino used to say about political literature, "especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude" (98). In fact, there is so little known in the novel about the inner life, the biography or their past that they could be very easily mistaken for one another. Their voices and their actions are so similar that in the absence of a name is hard to establish who is who. Even when they start being watched by the other students in their dormitory or when their parents' houses are searched, their reaction has nothing to do with fury; they seem completely paralyzed with fear. Romanian communism is no longer about politics; it has become what Matei Călinescu once defined as a "*thanatocracy*" (175), a world which censors the very essence of the living. Life is thus forced to hide itself, to become corrupted. Fear and lie are the very essence of this corruption:

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> The bodega, too, was a lie, with its tablecloths and plants, its bottles and wine-red uniforms of its waiters. Here no one was a guest, they were all just refugees of a meaningless afternoon. The men staggered and yelled at one another before smashing each other over the head with empty bottles. They bled. . . . Peasants, I thought—only peasants jump from laughing to crying, from shouting to silence. So great was their desire for life that each passing moment was capable of extinguishing life in one blow. Every one of them would have followed Lola into the bushes in the dark, with the same doggish eyes.
>
> If they stayed sober the following day, they would go into the park alone to get a grip on themselves. Their lips would be parched and white from booze, the corners of their mouths cracked. They would step cautiously into the grass, chewing over every word they had shouted while drunk. They would crawl into the lost memories of the previous day and sit there like children.
>
> They were scared they might have shouted something political in the bodega. They knew the waiters knew everything.
>
> But booze protects the skull from the forbidden and fodder protects the mouth. Even when the tongue can only babble, the habit of fear does not desert the voice.
>
> They were at home in their fear. The factory and the bodega, the shops and the apartment blocks, the railway station and the train rides through fields of wheat, corn, and sunflowers all were listening. The streetcars, the hospitals, the graveyards. The walls and the ceiling and the open sky. And if it happened, as it often did, that drunkenness grew careless in places which were lies, it was more like a mistake of the part of the walls or the ceilings or the open sky, than any intention of the human brain. (31-2)

These images in which people are reduced to stupefied beings, with no control whatsoever over their lives and no mind of their own have nothing to do with the learning ethos, on the contrary. Herta Müller's cynicism brings the novel, in this point, far closer to the absurd universe of Kafka, Orwell, or Eugène Ionesco than to the literature of dissidence and revolt against a totalitarian system of Soljenitsin or Mandelstam.

The only type of survival in this dehumanized world is, however, precisely the attempt of evading it sometimes through subtle intellectual strategies. We would never know exactly why Lola left her notebook in the narrator's suitcase, we can only infer that her German ethnicity, her immersions in the memories of her childhood when she learned that she "had to grow against death" (34) and the fact that she comes from a village as well (so do Georg, Edgar and Kurt) creates some sort of connection between the two of them. But it is none of the less true that once

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she discovers the object, which she manages to read before the secret police lays its hand on it, she fully understands its significance. Moreover, when she meets Georg, Edgar and Kurt, the notebook becomes a link between them and a pretense for their friendship:

> I wanted to keep Lola's notebook in my head. Edgar, Kurt and Georg were looking for someone who shared Lola's room. After they approached me in the cafeteria, I met with them every day: I couldn't keep Lola's notebook in my head on my own . . . . When I thought of Lola on my own, there were many things I could no longer remember. When they were listening, everything came back to me. I learned from their staring eyes how to read what was in my head. (35)

Lola's notebook and her death are proofs the evasion from the terrible communist reality is possible. Insanity is another, but it is a tragic one, as the stories of the singing grandmother, the deaf dwarf lady on Trajan Square or the philosopher who mistook telephone poles and tree trunks for people show. The fourth one is friendship, but even friendship is tainted by fear and the four companions end up hurting each other on purpose in their conversations. Love itself is not possible in the rarefied atmosphere of the regime in which intimacy has disappeared. Duplicity and shallowness have become so common that people simply do not realize they betray their friends or even their families . . . Tereza, the trusted friend from the factory is also an informant for the secret police, the seamstress will flee the country unexpectedly although her children stay behind, the unnamed lover will leave no trace in the narrator's thoughts and feelings after he dies trying to cross the border with his wife. *The Land of Green Plums* speaks of such an absurd world that it cannot be rendered through a story, the evil has transgressed the regular order of things and it has become not only ubiquitous, but extremely ordinary. The victims are no longer strong characters, but feeble sketches of people carrying an unexplainable guilt of their own, the acts of malfeasance have no logic, no causality can explain the events. The time of the novel in itself has lost its power to organize the action and carry any type narrative meaning, it is continuously fractured through a simultaneous accumulation of different voices, perspectives, locations and moments, all of which give the impression of a constant stagnation—in the land where everyone expects the dictator to die or run away from the country temporality is also suspended. Herta Müller attempts to write a novel about something that cannot be described, about a universe, as Milan Kundera noticed in one of his essays, which is incompatible with the very idea of the novel, an incompatibility

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> . . . deeper than the one that separates a dissident from an apparatchik, or a human-rights campaigner from a torturer, because it is not only political or moral, but **ontological**. . . . The world of one single Truth and the relative, ambiguous world of the novel are molded of entirely different substances. Totalitarian Truth excludes relativity, doubt, questioning; it can never accommodate what I would call the spirit of the novel. (14)

But in Herta Müller's writing, the Totalitarian Truth as Kundera defines it has dissolved in an infinity of lies and the relativity, the doubt has acquired an ***ontological*** dimension of its own—all human relationships and feelings lost their genuineness while people's lives have no meaning.

This is particularly obvious after the fifth type of evasion, and probably the most important one when it comes to the further development of the characters and from the point of view of the ethos of learning, the evasion in art and literature. At first it gives the characters the illusion of freedom—Gellu Naum's poem they constantly recite, the German books smuggled into the country which they read in the summerhouse, Edgar's and Georg's poetry and Kurt's photos make them believe they found ways to keep their humanity. Yet just like everything else, this illusion is a lie as well:

> We were no different from those who brought mulberry trees with them, but we only half-admitted it in our conversations. We looked for things that would set us apart because we read books. While we drew tiny distinctions, we stored all the sacks we had behind our doors, just like everyone else.
>
> But in our books we learned that those doors were no shelter. All we could open or slam or leave ajar were our own foreheads. And behind those were ourselves, with our mothers who sent us their illnesses in letters and our fathers who stashed their guilty conscience inside the damn stupid plants. . . . We imagined the land where the books came from as a land of thinkers. We sniffed at the pages and caught ourselves sniffing our own hands out of habit. We were surprised our hands didn't blacken as we read, the way they did from the ink in the newspapers and books printed in our country.
>
> All the people who went around the city carrying their provinces with them sniffed at their hands. They didn't know the books from the summerhouse. But they wanted to go there. In the land those books came from, there were bluejeans and oranges, soft toys for children and portable TVs for fathers and whisper-thin nylons and real mascara for mothers. (46-7)

Moreover, their intellectual and artistic preoccupations seem to be the ultimate sin against the order of things under the regime. It is as if the victims

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themselves invent their guilt and search for a punishment, aware that this punishment would come no matter what other path they would have chosen. Not only doesn't it save them from being sent after college in sordid little towns or villages where they witness the most terrible images of destruction and ugliness, but it condemns them to being constantly watched and interrogated by the secret police. Every time the narrator and her friends have to confront Captain Pjele, the conversations revolve not around political ideas, but around their guilt of being different, of being intellectuals. His main purpose seems to be precisely the annihilation of this difference:

> Captain Pjele, who had the same name as his dog, first interrogated Edgar, Kurt and Georg about this poem.
> Captain Pjele had the text of the poem on a piece of paper. He crumpled it up, Pjele dog barked. Kurt was made to open his mouth, and the captain stuffed the piece of the paper into it. Kurt had to eat the poem. It made him gag. Pjele the dog jumped at him twice, tore his trousers and scratched his legs. . . . Captain Pjele said to Edgar, Kurt and Georg that the poem was an incitement to flee the country. They said: It's an old folk song. Captain Pjele said: It would be better for your sake if one of you had written it. That would be bad enough, but not as bad as this. Maybe it was a folk song once, but those were different times. The rule of the bourgeoisie and the landowning class is long gone. Today our people sing different songs. (79-80)

In other words, just as Captain Pjele says, the times have changed and so has what once used to define the ***ethos*** of this part of Europe. Books, learning in general cannot change people's lives in a country where nobody is allowed to live outside the limits of what they are officially allowed to think and where censorship and reclusiveness complete the fears and the lies which have replaced free thinking. At the end of the novel, Georg's and Kurt's sudden and uncalled for death comes to emphasize this truth . . . no one can escape the randomness of the fate in a communist regime, no one is truly capable of evasion, except when they are, in Edgar's words "the lucky ones". The final triumph of the two characters is simply accidental.

Herta Müller's novel is a metaphor not only for the abjection and the degradation of the communist world, but also for the corrosion of an old type of attitude towards life. The lack of intimacy, the fear, the violence and the constant terror which characterize life in communism have managed to defeat not only people's aspirations and humanity, but also life in itself. Thus the author manages to describe the indescribable, to convey a world almost impossible to speak of.

Communism is certainly a crime just as big as the Holocaust. But one which is more difficult to rationalize, due to its absurdity and randomness . . . its victims

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were not chosen for a specific reason, its survivors were just "the lucky ones". In other words, as long as it is so hard to find an explanation, to understand it and to find the ones responsible for it—it makes the line between the victims and the executioners very hard to define. Herta Müller's novel has precisely this great merit . . . it reminds us of the line and of the risks of a totalitarian system.

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