Fictions of Trauma: The Problem of Representation in Novels by East and Central European Women Writing in German

by

Lynda Kemei Nyota

Department of German Studies
Duke University

Date:_______________________

Approved:

__________________________________________
Thomas Pfau, Supervisor

__________________________________________
Jakob Norberg

__________________________________________
Eric S. Downing

__________________________________________
William C. Donahue

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of German Studies in the Graduate School of Duke University

2013
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the fictional narratives of Eastern and Central European women authors writing in German and explores the ways in which historical and political trauma shapes their approach to narrative. By investigating the atrocities of the World War II era and beyond through a lens of trauma, I look at the ways in which their narrative writing is disrupted by traumatic memory, engendering a genre that calls into question official accounts of historical events. I argue that without the emergence and proliferation of these individual trauma narratives to contest, official, cemented accounts, there exists a threat of permanent inscription of official versions into public consciousness, effectively excluding the narratives of communities rendered fragile by war and/or displacement. The dissertation will demonstrate how these trauma fictions i) reveal the burden of unresolved, transmitted trauma on the second generation as the pivotal generation between the repressive Stalinist era and the collapse of communism, ii) disrupt official accounts of events through the intrusion of individual traumatic memory that is by nature unmediated and uncensored, iii) offer alternative plural accounts of events by rejecting normal everyday language as a vehicle for narrative and instead experimenting with alternative modes of representation, articulating trauma through poetic language, through spaces, and through the body, and v) struggle against theory, while paradoxically often succumbing to the very same institutionalized
language of trauma that they seek to contest. Trauma fiction therefore emerges as a distinct genre that forestalls the threat of erasure of alternative memories by constantly challenging and exposing the equivocal nature of official narratives, while also pointing to the challenges faced in attempting to give a voice to groups that have suffered trauma in an age where the term has become embedded and overused in our everyday language.
## Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. iv

List of Figures ........................................................................................................................................ ix

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................................. x

1. Introduction ......................................................................................................................................... 1

2. Trauma, Language and Representation in Herta Müller’s *Atemschaukel* ....................................... 25
   2.1 Locating the Gap: Traumatic vs. Narrative Memory ................................................................. 33
   2.2 Trauma and the Problem of the Unarratable: ........................................................................... 41
       2.2.1 In the Shadow of the Holocaust ......................................................................................... 41
   2.3 Rendering the Unnarratable: Repetition, Metaphor and Metonymy .......................................... 51
       2.3.1 Repetition and Entrapment ................................................................................................. 51
       2.3.2 Narrative Progression through Metonymy ......................................................................... 56
   2.4 Metaphor and the Bipolar Nature of Trauma ............................................................................ 73
       2.4.1 Statistics as Narrative ........................................................................................................... 73
       2.4.2. Religion: Grasping Trauma through the Incomprehensible ........................................... 76
   2.5 Representing Unnarratable Collective Memory: Trauma and Taboo ......................................... 83
       2.5.1 The Signs of the Times: ....................................................................................................... 85
       2.5.2 Displacement and Repression of Collective Guilt: Der Koffer ......................................... 87
       2.5.3 Competing Narratives: Der Ersatzbruder ......................................................................... 89

3. Spaces, Dislocations and Itineraries: Tracing Trauma in Zsusza Bánk’s *Der Schwimmer* .......... 97
   3.1 Going Home ................................................................................................................................... 97
3.2 Der Schwimmer ........................................................................................................... 100
3.3 Displacing Trauma ....................................................................................................... 105
3.4 Trauma’s Past, Present and Future ................................................................................. 111
  3.5.1 Space and Freezing Time .................................................................................... 111
3.5 Trauma and Coping: The Swimmer .............................................................................. 121
3.6 Tracing National Trauma ............................................................................................. 126
  3.6.1 Forgetting and Being Forgotten ........................................................................... 129

4. Writing with the Body: Trauma, Visuality and Corporeality in Léda Forgó’s Der Körper Meines Bruders .................................................................................................................... 142
  4.1 Body Memory, Memory of the Body ........................................................................... 149
    4.1.1 Body Memory ....................................................................................................... 149
    4.1.2 Memory of the Body .......................................................................................... 156
    4.1.3 Der Körper meines Bruders ............................................................................... 158
  4.2 Rewriting the Socialist Body ...................................................................................... 165
    4.2.1 Reclaiming Past Heroes in Folk Poetry .............................................................. 169
    4.2.2 Dismantling of the Utopian Ideal in Soviet Film .................................................. 174
    4.2.3 Reimagining History in Art .................................................................................. 182
    4.2.4 Private Commemoration and the Usurping of the Official .................................... 186

5. Trauma after Theory: Terézia Mora’s Alle Tage ............................................................ 193
  5.1 Trauma as a Global Condition of the 21st Century ..................................................... 193
  5.2 Staging Trauma: Alle Tage and its Modernist Precursors ........................................... 199
  5.3 Crisis Spaces: The Trauma of Permanent Transit ....................................................... 216
5.4 Trauma and the Futility of Communication ........................................... 228

6. Conclusion ................................................................................................. 244

Appendix A: Fragen an Frau Léda Forgó ..................................................... 247

Works Cited .................................................................................................... 254

Biography ........................................................................................................ 267
List of Figures

Figure 1: Tracing Trauma. The Displacement of Kata’s Family throughout Hungary... 105

Figure 2: Endre Ady (1877-1919)................................................................. 172

Figure 3: Isthander at the beginning of the film, angelic, young and idealistic........ 180

Figure 4: Isthander with his defeated look...................................................... 180

Figure 5: The Mephistophelean depiction of Pedro the Spanish pearl trader......... 182

Figure 6: Csontváry, “Riders on the Sea Shore” (1909)................................... 184

Figure 7: Csontváry, “Storm on the Hortobágy” (1903).................................... 185
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I dedicate this project: may you continue to live up to your names and remain diligent and generous.
1. Introduction

This dissertation focuses on the emergence of 21st century Post-totalitarian fictional narratives that center on trauma and looks at the way individual trauma is presented as representative of the experiences of a collective. The writers in question all from former Soviet Bloc countries—ethnic German returnees or immigrant writers—are coming to grips with a past threatened with erasure, as public reminders of a totalitarian, communist regime that permeated every aspect of their lives are torn down or replaced with new ones. While many emerging writers were not immediate witnesses to postwar events like the internments in Gulag camps or anti-communist revolutions, their narratives suggest that these events continue to have a lasting impact, both on them and on their communities. These novels by non-native Germans who find themselves confronted with the notion of a homogenizing, postunification German culture are vying for space for their alternative histories within German cultural memory, while at the same time, recognizing that their countries of origin, together with their cultures and languages are critical to their own self-understanding. A new form of memory literature that shifts way from the autobiographical introspection, characteristic of the early 1990s, is emerging. These are fictionalized narratives of trauma that focus, not only on events impacting their own communities, but also explore experiences characteristic of groups affected by migration, whether forced or voluntary.
Trauma and narrative representation are generally regarded as being mutually exclusive, because we often understand trauma to be an extreme experience which exhausts representational resources. Given its unassimilated nature, trauma involves a collapse of understanding and a shattering of the self, while narrative is often associated with identity construction.\(^1\) The narratives I explore display an awareness of the fact that trauma cannot adequately be rendered within a conventional narrative framework. They work to unveil trauma the mutilated language, in spaces and itineraries, as well as in corporeal and visual images, transforming individual narratives of pain and suffering into a memory discourse that is not confined within any particular national border.

While their narratives draw on and represent trauma in their fictions to record and bring to public consciousness past events experienced by their marginal communities, they also evoke a sense of rootlessness and constant mobility that is characteristic of the postmodern condition. In this way, they challenge the notion of what it means to be German, to have a common past, opening up possibilities for the reconstruction of a memory space that is transnational. The narratives that I will examine deal with diverse traumatic experiences ranging from historical occurrences that have yet to be

\(^1\) Caruth views trauma as a response to a sudden or catastrophic event that can never be fully known—this is what repeatedly haunts the victim—and is therefore non-representational. See Cathy Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History.* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1996), 4. Similarly, Laub notes that in a traumatic event, the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out. A traumatic event can thus not be represented because it is an event without a witness. See Dori Laub. “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening” *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History.* Ed. Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 74.
incorporated into the wider national memory discourse, as portrayed in Herta Müller’s novel *Atemschaukel*, depicting life in the Russian Gulags—to existential anxiety arising from the loss of one’s homeland and life lived in exile in Germany—as experienced by the protagonist of Terézia Mora’s *Alle Täte*. The internment of ethnic Germans in Gulag camps has for a long time been an unmentionable topic that German society has been unable to embrace as part of its own difficult history and as Herta Müller points out in the epilogue of her novel, it was just as unmentionable in Communist Romania, because it evoked memories of the country’s fascist past.\(^2\) Andreas Huyssen, among others has noted however that the taboo surrounding German victimization has now lost its force and should be included in the German postwar imaginary.\(^3\)

Narrating trauma and suffering has often been adopted as an aesthetic strategy in the literatures of former Socialist countries since the end of World War II. Illness, pain and trauma were often located as a site of resistance to Soviet authority and often signaled problems in the socialist system,\(^4\) while also providing an alternative possibility of presenting and preserving national memory in forms other than official history books or journals that were subject to blatant manipulation.\(^5\) As the narratives that I will

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2 Herta Müller. *Atemschaukel* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2009), 299.
examine illustrate, trauma continues to be the underlying, structural principle of Post-totalitarian narrative.

**Children of Stagnation**

My work will focus on the novels of four women authors: Léda Forgó (*Der Körper meines Bruders*) and Zsuzsa Bánk (*Der Schwimmer*), both from Hungary, Herta Müller (*Atemschaukel*), an ethnic German from Romania, and Terézia Mora (*Alle Tage*), who occupies a more peculiar position as a Hungarian from a German-speaking minority along the border with Austria. As writers who were born after World War II and more specifically, after the Stalinist era, they are all members of the same cohort, a generation that has been referred to by Russian journalist, Marina Knaizeva as the “Children of Stagnation” (*Deti Zastoia*). In her 1990 newspaper article she identifies this group as the generation of those born between 1953 and 1973 (post Stalin and pre-Glasnost), who grew up during a period of the Soviet Union’s apparent immutability and eternity. The authors whose works are the subject of my dissertation fit neatly into this category, beginning with Herta Müller, born in 1953 and ending with Léda Forgó, born in 1973. This time is, as noted by Alei Yurchak, marked by a remarkable absence of cataclysmic or momentous events, such as those experienced by their parents and grandparents. The collapse of communism was experienced as the momentous event that was as

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unanticipated as it was (paradoxically) also expected. In seeking to understand the conditions that facilitated such a collapse “without making it anticipated,” Yurchak points out that “[m]any discovered that, unbeknownst to themselves, they had always been ready for it.”\(^8\) When asked in a personal interview about the social situation in Hungary during this period, Léda Forgó responded: “Alle waren so zu leben bis zur Ewigkeit eingerichtet. Sie kannten es nicht anders, sie sind da hineingeboren.”\(^9\)

However, in an apparent contradiction to the idea that everyone was conditioned toward the permanence of the communist regime she continues by noting that there existed a lively “verbotene[] aber geduldete[] Underground-Kultur.”\(^10\) The event that they had been waiting for is ironically also the one that shocks them as unprecedented.

Léda Forgó who grew up in Budapest, Hungary moved to Germany in 1994. Other than Der Körper meines Bruders (2007), a novel set in 1956 Hungary, Forgó has written several mini-dramas, short stories and a children’s series. Her latest novel Vom Ausbleiben der Schönheit (2010) retains the familiar corporeal representation that we find in her debut novel, Der Körper meines Bruders, as well as the themes of pregnancy and reluctant motherhood. This novel however, moves beyond Hungary, into Germany and combines questions of memory with the challenges of integration and Jewish identity.

\(^8\) ibid. Knaizeva and Yurchak refer specifically to the Soviet Union; however, the same can be said of the former Eastern Bloc countries in general. In Hungary for example, the period after the failed Hungarian Uprising was followed by a period of political and social stagnation that is reflected in both Zsuzsa Bánk’s and Léda Forgó’s novels.


\(^{10}\) ibid.
Characteristic of her writing are her long, dense sentences which are a direct effect of her native Hungarian dialect. They evoke a sense of pessimism, a quality that she attributes to the Hungarian people in general: “Ich glaube, dass Schwermut eine sehr verbreitete ungarische Eigenschaft ist […]. Die schwierige Situation dieses Landes währt bereits mehrere Hundert Jahre.”\(^1\) She also blends in traditional Hungarian poetry into her novel which adds a mythic quality to a story about individual lives. Forgó is currently working on “einem kleinen Alltagsmärchen über Musik,” which she refers to as a happier piece.\(^2\)

Zsuzsa Bánk’s parents fled to Germany from Hungary immediately after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. She was born and grew up in Germany, but spent several of her summers in Hungary as a child. In addition to her fictional novel, Der Schwimmer (2004), which recalls some memories of her parents dramatic escape from Hungary, she has also written a collection of short stories Heißester Sommer (2005), based on her childhood experiences in Hungary.

Terézia Mora, who moved to Berlin from Hungary in 1990, has received numerous awards for her writings which include a selection of short stories, Seltsame Materie (1998) and her novel Alle Tage (2004). Mora often discusses her inability to deal


\(^{12}\) Léda Forgó. Personal Interview 02.12.2012
with themes concerning the tragic events under communist Hungary, despite coming up
with several drafts for a novel, noting instead that they are best treated by journalists,
who can approach them as events and not as personal experiences. In response to the
question whether she keeps a diary Mora answers: “Ich bin zu traumatisiert.”13 In Alle
Tage, Mora confronts her own trauma not through recollection, but by narrating the
trauma of another community, locating her plot in unnamed locations (“nennen wir den
Ort hier”14), under vague circumstances (a certain Balkan war) in the present (“nennen
wir die Zeit jetzt”15). Her latest novel Der Einzige Mann auf dem Kontinent (2009) breaks
away from questions of trauma, war, and displacement to explore the alienating world
of computers and the internet through the eyes of her protagonist, a savvy computer
security specialist an employee of an American Computer company based in Europe,
who is permanently bound to his computer and the internet, even though the work he
does never becomes apparent to the reader. The anonymity and absurdity of her
protagonist, the new internet personality of the modern age closely resembles the main
character of her novel Alle Tage, which will be the focus of my fourth chapter.

Herta Müller is perhaps the best known author of the group discussed in this
dissertation. The prize winning Nobel Laureate introduced herself during an acceptance

13 Terézia Mora. Interview by Anke Biendarra. “‘Schriftstellerin zu sein und in seinem Leben
anwesend zu sein, ist für mich eins’: Ein Gespräch mit Terézia Mora.” TRANSIT, 3(1) 2008.
15 Ibid.
speech at the *Darmstädter Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung*, 10 years after her
emigration to Germany from Romania as follows: “1953 bin ich in Nitzkydorf geboren, das Jahr, in dem Stalin körperlich starb - geistig lebte er noch viele Jahre.” Stalin’s legacy, even for those born after his death, continues to have a lasting effect on their lives.

**Belated Memory**

In her review of Müller’s *Atemschaukel*, novel critic Iris Radisch dismissed the notion of second-hand accounts of suffering, noting that: “Gulag-Romane lassen sich nicht aus zweiter Hand schreiben.” Yet, as I demonstrate, this suffering, these past experiences constitute a vital part of this generation’s identity. They are part of a “hinge generation” that bears the burden of their parents’ unspoken and unresolved trauma as well as that of their own fractured communities. Thus, while the trauma depicted in these narratives is not their own; the effects continue to reverberate in their own lives. Zsusza Bánk uses the expression “Da bebts etwas nach,” to refer to the aftershocks experienced by her generation as a result of the cataclysmic events in Hungary.

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18 Eva Hoffman. *After Such knowledge: Memory, History and the Legacy of the Holocaust*. (Cambridge: Perseus Books, 2004). She notes: “The second generation is the hinge generation in which received, transferred knowledge of events is being transmuted into history, or into myth.” xv. She is referring specifically to the second generation of Holocaust survivors. Her argument however is very applicable to the Post-Stalin second generation.
experienced by her parents’ generation in the years that directly followed the death of Stalin.

Other writers from the Post-Stalinist era such as Eleonora Hummel (born 1970), an ethnic German author from Kazakhstan, have made reference to a haunting by the unspoken events, both of the Stalinist era and in the years following his death. By presenting her fictional narrative *Die Fische von Berlin* in the form of a second hand account of what she calls a “Männerschicksal,” she laments what she perceives as a lack of willingness on the part of her compatriots to face their history, and views with dismay their resistance to any form of literary, social or political visibility as the unfortunate inheritance from the communist era. She notes:


Hummel’s remark about her community’s reluctance to be visible in present Germany not only emphasizes the pervasive nature of the former Soviet regime, but also suggests the possibility of transgenerational transmission of the regime’s impact. Indeed, theorists like Marianne Hirsch have used terms such as *postmemory*, to refer to the modes of

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remembering by younger generations who did not experience traumatic events, but have inherited their memory and remain deeply affected by it.21

Key to understanding the reason behind the emergence of post- or belated memory is the Stalinist regime’s tight grip on public memory of World War II as well as the repressive attitude toward any forms of alternative remembering. The official school curriculum in Romania for instance, taught that the country was occupied by Germany in October 1940, before being liberated by the Soviets in 1944; this despite the fact that Romania joined the Axis powers in November 1940 and joined the war against the Soviet Union, July 1941. Later this so-called “Tag der Befreiung durch die gloreiche sowjetische Armee,” would later be toned down during the Post-Stalinist era with emphasis now placed on territorial losses to the Soviet Union, such as the annexation of Bessarabia and Bukowina.22 This notion of holding on to the role of victim was not limited to Romania, but rather, was a typical tactical move by Eastern European nations that once collaborated with the Nazi regime and now found themselves occupied by the Soviet Union. For Hungary, who joined the war against the Soviet Union in 1943, the catastrophic turn of events was yet another familiar chapter in her traumatic history,

21 Marianne Hirsch: “The Generation of Postmemory.” Poetics Today 29:1 (Spring 2008): 106. Hirsch attributes her notion of “postmemory” to Toni Morrison, who has used the term “rememory” to refer to a similar phenomenon. Hirsch argues that these traumatic events that preceded this generation have impacted them “so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” 103.
which found its climax in the bloody suppression by Soviet troops of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. In both Romania and Hungary the official imperative during the communist era to forget and to repress any reminders of their collaboration with the Nazi regime meant that it was difficult for families to pass on their alternative memories from generation to generation, because parents shied away from discussing “heikle Themen,” thus giving way to the cementing of official memory. What is more, the post Wende rush to reconstruct a revised national history of WWII and the Soviet occupation reveal an image of Romania and Hungary as victims of a tragedy that deliberately excluded any possibility of a history from a perpetrator perspective.

The Place of Trauma

In his discussion on the role of individual memory in the writing of history, Huyssen argues that trauma cannot and should not serve as a foundation for history (in particular the history of the twentieth century). Huyssen, who is one of the stronger critics of trauma as an approach to history, cautions against what he regards as our current obsession with psychoanalytic theories that reduce the wider memory discourse

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24 see Boia. 541.

25 see ibid. and Kovács and Seewann. 821.
to a problem of a haunting of the present by the past.\textsuperscript{26} Moreover, he is concerned that when we view memory (20\textsuperscript{th} century memory, in particular) through a lens of trauma, we conflate personal and public memory and impose on everyone a status of victimhood\textsuperscript{27}—an approach he disapprovingly refers to as “history entering through the back door […] via Freud.” This approach, he further notes, which defines memory by employing a vocabulary of pain and suffering, “would deny human agency and lock us into compulsive repetition,” given that “memory, whether individual or generational, political or public, is always more than only the prison house of the past”\textsuperscript{28} Huyssen does not, however, altogether dismiss the concept of historical trauma and regards it as relevant for “groups of people trying to come to terms with a history of violence suffered or violence perpetrated.”\textsuperscript{29} He however emphasizes that this trauma should be worked through with the help of officially established bodies, or through the installation of memorials (sites of memory), rather than resorting to psychoanalysis. He argues that it is

\textsuperscript{27} See also Dominick LaCapra. “Trauma, Absence, Loss.” \textit{Critical Inquiry}, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Summer, 1999): 696-727 (in particular 699, where he brings up what he refers to as “vicarious victimhood,” which easily allows anyone empathizing with the victim of trauma to claim a victim status). See also 712, where he cautions against the “dubious” notion of a “wound culture” that would allow both victim and perpetrator this status of victim.
\textsuperscript{28} Huyssen. \textit{Present Pasts}, 8.
\textsuperscript{29} ibid. 9; once again, he reiterates what LaCapra has touched upon in “Trauma, Absence, Loss.” LaCapra argues that, not everyone is subject to historical trauma, and even among those who suffer historical trauma, not every one traumatized is a victim: “‘Victim’ is not a psychological category” 723.
the function of public memory discourses to allow individuals to break out of traumatic repetitions. Human rights activism, truth commissions, and juridical proceedings are better methods for dealing with historical trauma. Another is the creation of objects, artworks, memorials, [and] public spaces of commemoration. 30

One key example that Huyssen provides of the way in which a fixation on trauma would “lock us into compulsive repetition,”31 is in the revisiting of past events in literatures of trauma such as in the writings of author W.G. Sebald. Sebald’s essay, “Luftkrieg und Literatur” is especially singled out for criticism because of the way he opens up a past event—that of the allied bombings on German cities during World War II. While Sebald accuses the German people of being a “nation strikingly blind to history and lacking in tradition,”32 Huyssen sees Sebald’s writing as sort of a déjà vu, part of a pattern in postwar German literary history’s obsession with endings and new beginnings that turns out to be no more than a chronological ordering of the past, “tied to a structure of national memory that stretches across generations and decades.”33

Huyssen also takes issue with Sebald’s claim because as a second generation post World War II German author he had no direct access to the memory or trauma of the allied bombings and instead bases much of his writings on authors like Nossak and Kluge, the very writers he accuses of engaging in repression. Sebald’s writing (and post 1989

30 Huyssen. 9.
31 ibid. 8.
33 Huyssen. 140.
literature for that matter) therefore does not represent a new beginning or a turn (Wende) in German literature but is locked in what Huyssen sees as a continuous pattern of repetition that he believes must be broken through alternative modes of remembering.  

Huyssen makes a valid argument for public forms of memory as a means of looking, remembering, and moving on. The danger however lies in the very idea that they are official and thus susceptible to manipulation. What makes particular memories dominant? Langenbacher’s answer to this question is that it is because the “representatives of this memory have succeeded in delegitimizing and defeating competing memories.” This echoes Tal’s view who notes that individuals who undergo trauma lose control over the representation of their trauma by virtue of their vulnerability as survivors. Public forms of commemoration therefore do not constitute alternative but rather dominant forms of remembering. As we shall see in the first chapter, in the case of Romania, a country can come to terms with past guilt by constructing a history that assigns blame to a portion of the population, thereby absolving the majority of its citizens from any responsibility for atrocity.

34 Huyssen highlights 1945, 1968 and 1989-90 as part of the multiplicity of new beginnings which he finds problematic. 140.
37 It was only after the 2004 Elie Wiesel Commission that the Romanian government officially acknowledged its role in the Holocaust and began a process of reeducating the public on the past. see American Holocaust Memorial Museum.
Ruth Leys is also critical of the suggestion that history could be imagined and represented in terms of trauma. While Huyssen does not dispute the notion that trauma can be passed on to subsequent generations, he argues that there is a need to break out of the cycle of repression and repetition. Leys however takes issue with the idea that trauma can relocate, whether intergenerationally or even via empathetic listening, because this allows trauma and victimhood to “migrate or spread contagiously to others.” This for Leys is unacceptable because it blurs the distinction between victims and perpetrators. From her choice of words—“ghosts,” “contamination,” “contagion,” “infection” as descriptors for the transmission of trauma—it is clear that she holds the idea not only as untenable but also as unserious. While Leys does make a point in rejecting trauma as infectious, however unsettling it may be for the listener, her position as well as that of Huyssen’s regarding inherited traumatic memory makes no room for individual stories in the arena of history. Leys notes of individuals or groups who claim to have inherited traumatic memories: “The group is thus imagined as having the same psychology as the individual, so that history itself can be conceptualized in traumatic

38 Dori Laub for instance suggests that the listener can experience trauma and become a co-owner of the trauma through his listening. See “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening in Testimony” in Crisis of Listening in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History. Ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57.
Narratives of individual suffering can however be taken to be representative of a collective if the event was far reaching in its impact and particularly if accounts are taken from several survivors. A similar argument has been put forward by Urry in his Marxist analysis of spatiality and social relations. He notes that spatially separated experiences of individuals can be interpreted as experiences of an entire group. And as my dissertation will show, a tragic event that is unassimilated in one generation becomes the preoccupation of later generations, particularly if these generations have no foundational event that characterizes their own generation. Ron Eyerman has also suggested that if a traumatic event forms the basis of collective memory, it may take several generations of interpretation and reinterpretation before it finally moves on to public memory. He further suggests that later generations often have to deal with traumatic scars left by an original event that they had no experience of. It can thus be argued that inherited trauma is a legitimate concern of post-communist generations who had little or no direct experience with the totalitarian regimes that their parents and grandparents lived under.

While this study does not suggest that a discussion of trauma should function as the paradigm or even as the entry point for the study of all history, it affirms trauma’s

40 Leys. 284-85.
centrality in dealing with a discourse of memory among communities with a history of pain and suffering. This is particularly significant when such communities experience marginalization both in their countries of origin (e.g. German minorities in former Soviet countries) only to arrive in Germany and experience additional estrangement in terms of separation from their homeland and alienation in language. This traumatic moment is paradoxically also an enabling one that allows for creative literary production. Anne Whitehead’s *Trauma Fiction* (2005) also provides us with a valid example of how traumatic memory can be instrumental in crafting counter-histories. She shows how Toni Morrison’s novels draw on a discourse of trauma to counter resistance to the acknowledgement of slavery, by fashioning new ways of thinking about history through a trope of memory.

I aim to show how these narratives are indispensable to the writing of national histories and as a way of opening up discussions on events that have not been worked out and thus continue to be carried forward transgenerationally. In communities where memory was effectively placed under erasure by repressive regimes in the past and continues to be manipulated by current democratic governments in the present, private memories can serve to orient these communities by providing alternative forms of

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43 Deterritorialization describes the moment of alienation and exile in language that for Deleuze and Guattari constitute the creative conditions for a great literature. This moment is located in minor literatures. See: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Minuit, 1975), 34–38.
remembrance. This is especially true for younger generations born outside their parents’ native countries (as is the case with of Zsuzsa Bánk) because of upheavals that displaced them from their homeland. As already discussed, an important part of identity involves rootedness in the past and for that, narrative is indispensable.

Writing in German by Central and Eastern European authors has mainly been theorized in connection with literature from the former GDR often because of the communist background shared by the writers. Like most GDR literature, the literary works were often viewed as social or politically motivated documents that granted the reader insight to life under repressive regimes. Other than studies of the works of Herta Müller, and Libuše Moniková of Czech origin, there has been little critical work done on East and Central European writing particularly in American scholarship. Lyn Marven’s study *The Body and Narrative in Contemporary Literatures in German* (2005) is one of the few works that engage critically with Eastern European writing, providing an in-

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45 In their discussion on the struggle for memory in Hungary, Kovács and Seewaan highlight two key factors that hint at an attempt at a revisionist history, one that recalls the greater Hungarian nation before 1918. These are the presence of Otto Habsburg as guest of honor at the declaration of the Hungarian Republic in 1989, and the reintroduction of the “Stephanskrone” into the country’s coat of arms. Éva Kovács and Gerhard Seewann. “Der Kampf um das Gedächtnis.” *Mythen der Nationen: Arena der Erinnerungen*. Ed. Monika Flacke. (Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2004-05), 817.


depth analysis both on a thematic and structural level. Her work, which focuses on images of the female body as suffering and as the locus of female subjectivity, looks at the relationships between the body and narrative strategies through figures of trauma, hysteria, and the grotesque in the works of Hensel, Müller and Moniková. This way she reveals how images participate in wider political discourses on the body in Eastern Bloc countries. When she carried out her study she highlighted the fact that all of Herta Müller’s narrators and protagonists were female — with the exception of her protagonist in *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt* (1986). This is significant because her latest novel *Atemschaukel* Müller departs from her usual female narrator and employs a marginalized male focalizer and protagonist to represent the Gulag experiences.

Another study that engages with the topic of female trauma in Müller’s novels is Brigid Haines and Margaret Littler’s *Contemporary Women’s writing in German* (2004), which focuses on one of her earlier works, *Reisende auf einem Bein* (1992). Also worth mentioning is Stuart Taberner’s overview of literature in the Berlin Republic *Contemporary German Fiction* (2007), which has included a brief discussion on East and Central European literatures that incorporate the works of more recent writers like Terézia Mora and Zsuzsa Bánk. My dissertation, which includes emerging authors, hitherto untheorized, moves beyond female trauma as the locus of criticism to explore the different ways in which language and corporeality, spatiality and temporality are
manipulated as a means of revealing trauma and its destructive effects on the individual and on communities as a whole.

**Trauma Fiction**

Trauma fiction is a distinct genre that, as Whitehead suggests, borrows from both postmodern and postcolonial fiction in its self-conscious use of narrative devices that critique history as grand narrative and favor private acts of memory over public narratives of history.\(^48\) If, as she asserts, the genre overlaps with both modes of fiction, it would help explain the increasing affinity by these emerging minority writers for trauma fiction as a genre. Because representing trauma is ethically problematic, given the desire to highlight its destructive nature within a framework that often has the effect of diminishing its impact, postmodern narrative techniques such as multiple narrative voices, collapse of narrative chronology and intertextuality provide a way of representing the past in the form of individual narratives by undermining conventional approaches to writing. The novels in questions have historical and political implications: they question the validity of historical accounts, while holding on to their status as fiction. Beyond that, they consciously engage with familiar techniques and theories of trauma, revealing the manner in which the term has been banalized, while also pointing to its effects on fractured communities that seek to put their experiences into words.

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\(^{48}\) Whitehead. *Trauma Fiction*, 82.
This way place all versions of memory under a state of doubt and expose the constructedness of memory.

**Chapter two** which is an analysis of Herta Müller’s *Atemschaukel*, looks specifically at the way in which traumatic memory functions, as distinct from normal narrative memory. Unable to be repressed, the story of the ethnic Germans who had to endure incarceration in the Gulags emerges as an unresolved question that haunts both Romanian and German history. The dilemma however, involves the ethical question of representing German suffering in the shadow of the memory of the Holocaust, in particular given the community’s resistance to acknowledging the existence of any suffering, as well as the possibility of representing individual trauma which eludes, even as it pursues the victim. I demonstrate how Müller’s flight into the poetic and into the realm of religion is an attempt to articulate an incomprehensible event that is shrouded in silence and taboo.

Müller’s relationship to Celan’s writing is highlighted in this chapter; anyone acquainted with Celan’s works would not fail to notice the echo of his poem “Atemwende” in the title of Müller’s novel *Atemschaukel*. Her indebtedness to Celan is brought to light in Ernest Wichener’s essay, “Schreiben nach der Diktatur.” In it Wichener discusses Herta Müller’s, Rolf Bossert’s and his own conflicted relationship

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49 Despite the similarity in titles, however, I will show in chapter one that the title is in fact a reference to the subject of the last stanza Goethe’s poem “Talismane.”
with Celan, which initially was one of shame—as members of a community responsible for killing Celan’s parents (“wir wußten auch, daß wir kein Recht hatten, uns in seinen Schatten zu stellen, daß wir zu jenen gehörten, die sein Leben zerstört hatten”50)—before later developing into a predecessor-follower relationship because of their status as fortunate survivors of the Ceausescu dictatorship. He goes on to explain that they had all studied Celan’s poetry both in high school and in college as teenagers had met upon hearing of Celan’s suicide and read four of his poems, one of which included “Todesfuge.”51 Like Celan’s poetry, Müller’s writing in Atemschaukel is saturated with mystical imagery and prayer-like litanies, and although God is not mentioned directly, there are several allusions to biblical passages such as the Lord’s Prayer, portions of the Psalms and even the book of Isaiah. The link between trauma and religion has already been established by theorists like Freud, whose essay “Moses and Monotheism” suggests a link between trauma and the development of the Jewish religion, involving the murder and repression of their leader Moses, which Freud suggested was just a part of a repetitive pattern of repression and return, beginning right from man’s origin with the murder of the primordial father by his sons.52 In Atemschaukel however, the narrator’s heavy reliance on religious symbolism suggests a possible commonality

51 ibid. 146-47.
between the two experiences in terms of their incomprehensibility and their inexpressibility. In the same way that Tersteegen declares that, “[e]in begriffener Gott ist kein Gott,”53 so Müller’s novel suggests that a trauma comprehended is no trauma.

Chapter three deals with a seemingly solid and coherent narrative, Zsuzsa Bánk’s *Der Schwimmer*, which is rendered through the eyes of a child. In this chapter I argue that the account of a family’s vertiginous movement throughout Hungary is in fact an articulation of traumatic national memory through the individual spaces occupied by individuals in the novel, as well as in their circular movements and instances of stasis. Bánk’s manipulation of space and time in her novel reveals trauma’s effect on the victim who is portrayed as being unable to anticipate the future because of an unresolved, unspoken, past trauma. The subjective experience of a collapse of chronology is depicted in the corresponding disorientation in space, while freezing time, which indicates a tumultuous event, is experienced spatially as an inability to move forward. The narrative revives the unresolved question of the West’s role in the failure of the 1956 Hungarian uprising through a tragic narrative of abandonment of a family by a mother. The description of the private spaces through which the family moves allow us to construct an alternative account of the events surrounding the failed revolution.

The **fourth chapter** engages with a similar historical event as that of the second chapter; however, Léda Forgó’s *Der Körper meines Bruders* choses to confront official memory and commemoration through body memory. As such the body functions as a site of impression of traumatic memory, offering a phenomenological approach to understanding and representing trauma. Traumatic events are visualized and performed through corporeal actions and reactions, as official events, which are juxtaposed to these individual actions are challenged and often rendered nonsensical by individual bodies.

In the **fifth chapter** I look at a Terézia Mora’s *Alle Tage* as a “novel after theory.” Language and narrative are regarded as banalizing trauma and thereby marginalizing already vulnerable groups by depriving them of a means of voicing their trauma. Her plurality of narrators, embedded narratives and employment of metalanguage reveals a refusal to allow for one official account to stand for the plight of many, and for an everyday language to describe the overwhelming condition of trauma that ails many who are violently uprooted from their homelands.
2. Trauma, Language and Representation in Herta Müller’s *Atemschaukel*

Let the world be beaten down as I wobble up again.
Let me go back to my family changed.
Let the path beat me down.
Let this path beat me down.
Let the path break me as I come¹

(Samaras, “Anaphora”)

The rise in literary production by Ethnic Germans from countries of the former Eastern Bloc reflects the increasing concern, both for the rapid demographic changes that have taken place in Europe in the past two decades, as well as for the response by members of the community to a potential erasure of collective memory as a result of these changes. Müller notes that with the emigration of Romanian Germans to Germany a historical community has come to an end. She however emphasizes that, “[e]s ist keine Katastrophe, es ist so.”² The feeling is not one of nostalgia for the inevitably lost community; rather, writers like Müller are more concerned with the loss of collective memory of a past era that people are either reluctant to talk about or even remember because, as Müller notes, it is for them a burden that threatens to destroy them:

“Erinnerung ist ja auch eine Last. Das Erleben ist die Last, und danach die Erinnerung.
An der Erinnerung kann man *genauso zerbrechen*, und dieses ‘Nichtreden’ darüber ist ja

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Müller’s observations reflect her concern and motivation for foregrounding events from the Stalinist era, themes that have been criticized as being both overworked and belated. Müller brings up two key issues which will form the core of this chapter: first, the burden (“Last”) of experience implies that an atrocity or wrong has been committed against a group or groups of people, while the burden of memory ensures that the victims are forever tied to the original event. Second, the silence (“Nichtreden”) suggests that a resolution and restitution is still outstanding. It however also highlights the threat to the victim because of the unspoken ban placed on a discussion of this period in history. This chapter will consider the problem of unarratable traumatic memory in Müller’s *Atemschaukel* as a crisis of language, looking in particular at how the tension that arises in the attempt to represent German suffering in the Russian Gulags in the face the devastation of the Holocaust is both exposed and resolved in Müller’s novel. This, I argue, is achieved by making reference to Celan’s poetry in particular, as well as to other elements that traditionally belong to the register of Holocaust memory.

One of the questions that emerge subtly in Herta Müller’s novel *Atemschaukel* is the issue of wartime collaboration and white-washing of historical facts. The novel, 

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3 ibid. 16; emphasis added.
published in 2009, marks a significant departure from Müller’s previous autobiographically inspired writing that focused primarily on life under the dictatorial regime of the then president Nikolai Ceausescu. Trauma, fear, oppression are still central to this novel; however, a subject that was previously considered taboo in communist Romania is now opened up for reflection—the experiences of ethnic Germans living in Soviet controlled countries, forced to work in Russian labor camps in the Ukraine as retribution for the role they played in supporting Nazi Germany in World War II. While Müller privileges individual experiences over the politics and the events surrounding the deportation of male and female members of the Romanian German community between the ages of 17 and 45, the novel does not hesitate to question the logic behind these deportations. Her protagonist and narrator notes: “Wir waren alle in keinem Krieg, aber für die Russen waren wir als Deutsche schuld an Hitlers Verbrechen. Auch der Zither-Lommer” (44). The addition of Lommer, a German Jew, to the list of deportees very subtly questions the selection criteria used to identify the enemy. For Müller there is no question that the Romanian German minority was made to pay for what the Romanian Government was guilty of—collaboration with the Nazi regime. She notes in a 2009 interview:

In Rumänien wurden die Juden vernichtet von den Rumänen. Also, die Rumänen haben die gleichen Dinge getan wie die Nazis, in manchen Dingen sogar mit größerer Überzeugung und mit brutaleren Mitteln [...]. Das ist alles ein furchtbares Thema. Mich hat das jahrelang beschäftigt.
Irgendwie hat es mich natürlich auch geärgert, dass ein Staat seine Geschichte fälschen kann. Das haben wir auch heute wieder.  

_Atemschaukel_ does not deny the fact that the Romanian Germans played an active role as collaborators; in fact, the efforts by the community to pass over the any reminders of the disappearance of Jews from their midst, during the Nazi era, or any attempts at covering up experiences at Russian Labor camps receive special attention in the novel. The question however, is, on the one hand, whether the German community served as the scapegoat for the entire Romanian community, and, on the other hand, whether the individuals selected for deportation were also regarded by their own community as an atonement for their own perceived guilt. With their deportation the community would be absolved of any guilt and life could go on as normal, especially because there was little or no hope for the deportees’ return, given the dire conditions at the Russian Gulags. Where the deportee defied death and returned home, life continued as though they had never left. Müller’s phrase, “Das haben wir auch heute wieder” is an expression of dismay at the political elite’s continued manipulation of history at a time when repressive regimes have fallen and past events could be represented in a more transparent manner. She touches on the contentious relationship between memory and political power where appropriation and control of the former is seen as ensuring possession of the latter. Control over memory, as Eric Langenbacher writes in his

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5 Müller. _Ich glaube nicht_. 2009, 33.
discussion of changing memory regimes in present day Germany, influences political outcomes. He continues by noting that regimes will often look for memories that resonate with and influence elites and masses. The fact that Müller’s assertion that the Romanian regime continues to manipulate the country’s history appears to corroborate Langenbacher’s observation is unfortunate, more so because with the departure of the German minority from Romania, one has the sense that there is a feeling of relief that the perceived bearers of the responsibility for Nazi collaboration have finally left the country and the conscience of the dominant group has been eased. As we shall see in the closer analysis of Müller’s *Atemschaukel*, the protagonist and former Gulag survivor Leo Auberg chooses not to remain in Romania after his release, leaving instead for Austria and informing his wife in a postcard: “Ich komme nicht wieder” (291). The simple sentence can be understood as a farewell message from husband to wife, but on another level we can read it as representative of the thousands of one-way departures by ethnic Germans from Romania to Austria and Germany. The troubling memories that they possess, they will carry with them.

*Atemschaukel* sheds light on a historic event that impacted the lives of individuals in a community; however it is not the event that is at the center of the narrative but rather the gap caused by the individual’s inability to specify the meaning of the past

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event. By focusing her attention on the experiences of an individual, her narrative sheds light on the experience of an entire community. Müller has herself stressed that *Atemschaukel* is the story of her mother who was also deported, as well as the story of women and men from her mother’s generation.7 This “kollektive Erfahrung” as she describes it, is condensed into a fictional autobiography narrated from the perspective of Leo Auberg, a young male homosexual, a pariah in the Romanian society and whose activities, if discovered, would have been punishable by death (9). This is significant because in his marginalized sexuality, he becomes representative, not only of a marginalized voice that bears witness, but also of a struggle for narrative where elusive memories combine with threatening memories to render one’s story unnarratable. Leo confirms in the novel that he speaks as a collective when he identifies one of the five valuable lessons that he has learned at the camp as: “Das Lager-Wir ist ein Singular” (263). The internee is nothing but a number, a statistic whose suffering is not only a replication of the experience of many, but also one whose voice speaks for the experience of many.9 If, as Kalí Tal asserts, “[b]earing witness is an aggressive act,” and

7 It is also the story of Oskar Pastior, whose biography Müller had planned to write before his death in 2009. Most of the details of the internment camps were provided by Pastior, who accompanied Müller to the Ukraine in 2003. Leo Auberg, Müller’s protagonist is also modeled on Pastior. Müller. *Ich glaube nicht.* 2009, 10.
8 ibid. 7-8.
9 This statement can also be compared to Pastior’s own statement: “Was ist Erinnerung, was ist Deportation? Es geht immer um mich, oder verwechsle ich hier was?” The deportation story of an entire group is his own individual story and vice versa. qtd. in Müller. ibid. 11.
if “‘telling it like it was’ threatens the status quo,”\textsuperscript{10} then Müller’s story of an individual’s trauma promises to change her earlier plaint about the continued manipulation of memory, “das haben heute wieder” to “das haben wir heute \textit{nicht}.” Tal’s portrayal of bearing witness as an aggressive act refers to controlling how traumatic experiences are represented, rejecting codified narratives as well as refusing to repress or revise one’s experience.\textsuperscript{11}

Control over the representation of one’s experiences does not necessarily mean that the individual can successfully shape past traumatic events into a continuous and coherent narrative; rather, as evidenced in \textit{Atemschaukel}, even with the narrator’s stunted and fragmented narration that point to a failed narrative, he maintains a measure of control over his retelling because of his desire to bear witness. Müller’s unique language, particularly her frequent recourse to the poetic, serves to expose the inadequacy of language in the representation of trauma; the suffering that is associated with trauma is presented as a moment of doubt in language. Thus, when she uses expressions such as “monströse Zärtlichkeit” (81) we are taken back and forth, from one pole to its opposite, momentarily grasping the signification of the two words, yet at the same time cut off from their meaning. As remains to be seen, the back and forth, swinging motion that is expressed in her novel’s title \textit{Atemschaukel} or “Breath swing” is characteristic of her


\textsuperscript{11} ibid.
language throughout the novel and makes reference to a breath poem which forms the last stanza of Goethe’s poem “Talismane,” a poem of oppositions that reflects Goethe’s principle of polarity. The recurrence of polar opposites, particularly in the form of the oxymoron reveals itself as yet another example of the narrator’s impaired thought process, a struggle to arrive at one thought either via an opposing but accessible thought, or through a combination of the two opposites. While the experiences at the Russian labor camp have left an indelible mark on the narrator, the causes of his trauma are not limited to these events. His struggle with language also involves the struggle for the representation of topics regarded as taboo by the community. These topics are buried in the narrative only to threaten to reemerge over and over again. Leo’s grandmother makes a promise on the day of his deportation: “ICH WEISS DU KOMMST WIEDER” (14); these words constantly shift in meaning as they are repeated over and over again throughout the narrative, developing from words of hope and promise of his safe return, to a threatening reminder that what is repressed will return. Here again Müller’s skillful manipulation of language and her powerful imagery combine together to reveal the destructive effects of trauma not only on the individual psyche, but also on a community caught between a perpetrator and victim status. Fraught with guilt over its Nazi past, and overwhelmed by the retaliatory actions by the Soviet regime, they chose the path of least resistance; repression of the past and normalization of the present. The departure of Müller’s narrator from his home country
and his promise, “[i]ch komme nicht wieder,” suggests that this path is one that leads to a loss of the community and its history.

2.1 Locating the Gap: Traumatic vs. Narrative Memory


Müller’s narrator begins his story by echoing the words attributed to the Greek philosopher Stilpo, the archetype of displacement and loss, who after losing his homeland, family and possessions responded with the very same words when asked whether he had lost anything: “No,” he said, “all the goods I have I carry with me. [...] I carry everything with me.” These simple introductory lines thus carry with them the notion of displacement and dispossession as being a phenomenon with a history, not bound to one period in time or afflicting a particular group, but rather a recurring and universal phenomenon. This does not reduce the event of alienation and loss to a predictable narrative; rather it causes us to recall that individual stories of loss, though unique are not isolated, that individual stories do count and do become integrated into a community’s broader history. But more than evoking the notion of dispossession, the

12 “Stilpo,[...] whom (when his country was taken, and he had lost his children, and his dearer wife, and had escaped from the flames, alone; and yet seemed happy,) being asked by Demetrius Policrates [...] whether he had lost anything: No, says he, all the goods I have I carry with me. [...] I carry everything with me.” Lucius Annaeus Seneca. “The epistles of Lucius Annæus Seneca; [1786]”. Vol. 1 of 2. Religion and Philosophy. Accessed 1 Feb. 2011, 29.
words also hint at possession in an abstract sense, the idea of always carrying something with you, because it will not leave you. At the heart of trauma lies the possession of an experience that one, cannot claim and yet is repeatedly possessed by; one carries, as Cathy Caruth puts it, “an impossible history within them.” 13 This is because after a tragic event, whose meaning is not fully registered at the time of the occurrence, takes place, the victim is repeatedly taken to the scene of their missed event, not through a normal memory process, but through nightmares or hallucinations. The narrator’s first words thus introduce us to the notion of trauma, as the issue that is at the heart of Atemschaukel. The enigma of trauma thus lies in the fact that it not only involves a past event, but that it also inhabits the present. The second line of the narrative involves what appears to be a simple reformulation of the first sentence: “Getragen habe ich alles, was ich hatte. Das Meinige war es nicht” (7). It rapidly creates a temporal shift from the present narrated time, where the narrator is an 82 year old man, to the past where the narrator, a 17 year old boy, is packing up in preparation for his deportation to a Russian labor camp.

Just as we become aware of the gap that emerges from the analepsis, Müller rapidly fills the information gap in the first three pages of her novel: we learn that Leo, the narrator, together with other Romanian Germans between the ages of 17 and 45, was rounded up in January of 1945 and sent to a Russian labor camp, where he spent 5 years.

13 Cathy Caruth. Trauma: Explorations in Memory. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP), 1995. 5.
We also find out that the deportation came as a welcome relief for him because, as a homosexual, he felt threatened by a regime that had a zero tolerance policy toward gays. Finally we are also privy to future events; his release from the camp and subsequent emigration from his native Romania to Austria in 1968. Müller’s rapid treatment of the events both past and future eliminates any notion of narrative suspense and would suggest that while the text does have the story of thousands of deported ethnic German Romanians at its core, a more vital question moves the narrative back and forth. Additionally, as one reads the novel, one is also struck by the absence of direct references to the country’s political landscape; the Romanian authorities are conspicuously absent, Stalin is only briefly alluded to by way of a picture hanging on a wall, and even the presence and authority of the Russian guards at the labor camps is rendered indirectly—through descriptions of what the narrator perceives as their harsh language, through the watch dogs, and through fellow inmates to whom a measure of authority over the other internees has been delegated by virtue of their bilingual abilities. Atemschaukel is minimally involved in the larger historical picture: it seeks to understand the individual, and undertakes the risky endeavor of attempting to represent the actual gap that is the traumatic experience. Collective trauma is also a subject of Atemschaukel in as far as it impacts the individual negatively. The information provided early in the narrative is key to understanding the background to the rupture that is at the foreground of the novel. Part of the challenge that traumatic experience
presents is that it is not readily available to the normal process of recollection but rather spontaneously assaults the victim even when he does not want to remember. Recalling his nightmares 60 years after leaving the camp, Müller’s narrator notes:

Manchmal überfallen mich die Gegenstände aus dem Lager nicht 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. (34; emphasis added)

Leo’s remarks suggest that traumatic memory, which he refers to as “Drangsalieren,” and normal narrative memory, “Erinnerung” are distinct, separate—the former ambushes when you least expect it: “überfallen [...] im Rudel,” it seeks you out: “heimsuchen,” as opposed to allowing you to recall at will; it is presented as very literal and concrete: “Die Gegenstände aus dem Lager.” While the objects appear as very real, they do not allow you time to grasp or give them meaning, because the assault comes swiftly, in the form of what appears to be an endless train wreck: “eine Zahnkammmadelscherenspiegelbürste,” that takes one’s breath away: “ich muss hecheln” (34).

The violence with which the psychological assault is described recalls yet another shattering event described by Felman in her essay “Education and Crisis.” In it she describes the poet Mallarmé’s speech before an audience at Oxford University, where he likened himself to a traveler who, in breathless gasps testifies to “an accident known and
The tragic incident in this instance is what Mallarmé terms as violence done to the classical French Alexandrin through the introduction of free verse. The two events are incomparable in terms of the damage inflicted on the individual even though, as Felman notes, the disintegration of the Alexandrine is an event of great magnitude with far reaching impact; the consequences of the tragic two events as well as the reaction to them are however similar. Felman goes on to add that knowledge of the accident is acquired belatedly, as the victim continues to be pursued long after the original event has occurred.

In both Leo’s description of the assault by his memories, as well as in Mallarmé’s description of the pursuit, a sense of defenselessness is evoked. Leo notes, “die Nacht packt ihren schwarzen Koffer gegen meinen Willen, dass muss ich betonen. Ich muss mich erinnern gegen meinen Willen” (34; emphasis added). He however follows this statement with a cryptic phrase composed of a combination of modal verbs: “Und wenn ich nicht muss, sondern will, würde ich es lieber nicht wollen müssen” (34; emphasis added). This statement appears to contradict the earlier notion of traumatic memory as forcefully imposing itself on the victim, since he in turn wants to remember even though he would rather not want to. Returning to Felman’s discussion of Mallarmé’s speech, she highlights a similar ambiguity in the French original of his utterance “un accident su

et le pursuing," which is lost in the translation of the speech into English. Since the pronoun “le” could refer both to the accident as well as to the victim, the possibility that the victim pursues the accident, even as it pursues him, is not carried forward in the translation. For Felman this ambiguity means that the accident refuses to let go of the witness, while at the same time, the witness has the opportunity to liberate himself by pursuing the accident:

But if, in a still less expected manner, it is the witness who pursues the accident, it is perhaps because the witness, on the contrary, has understood that from the accident a liberation can proceed and that the accident, unexpectedly, is also in some ways a freeing.

Felman suggests here that the victim willingly pursues the accident in order to be liberated from it. Mallarmé, she notes, pursues the accident of free verse “in the same way Freud pursues, after the accident of dream, the path of free association.” Such a reading would help strengthen her argument that the act of bearing witness, of becoming a medium of testimony liberates the victim in some sense. I would argue however, that while the act of testifying to an accident could provide some sense of relief, Mallarmé’s paradox points more acutely to the complexity of the nature of the overwhelming event, which refers both backward as well as forward, in that it assails the victim who is in turn

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15 This could mean: “an accident known and pursuing him” but also “an accident known and that he pursues.”
16 ibid. 22. Here Felman refers to Barbara Johnson who originally highlighted this syntactic ambiguity.
17 ibid. 23.
18 ibid.
unwillingly fixated on or bound to it. Freud also notes of the traumatic nightmare that even though it would make sense for patients to try to avoid recalling the traumatic experience, we find them appearing to be fixated on the events, which in reality is not the case.\footnote{Sigmund Freud. \textit{Beyond the Pleasure Principle}. Trans James Strachey. (New York: Liveright, 1961), 7.} The apparent fixation on or pursuit of the accident that pursues is part of what renders trauma incomprehensible. Müller’s narrator is also caught up in this impossible situation of having to remember: “\textit{muss mich erinnern gegen meinen Willen},” wanting to remember” “\textit{ich [...] will},” and not having to want to remember: “\textit{ich [würde] es lieber nicht wollen müssen}.” (emphasis added).

We can therefore say that the traumatic event demands to be remembered or symbolized—it pursues, harasses—all the while that it remains elusive, as the victim unwillingly pursues it, inextricably bound to it. For Müller’s narrator then, documenting his experiences is not a choice but a given. After his release from the Lager he records his disparate memories of his deportation, cognizant of the fact that he is a false witness “\textit{falscher Zeuge}” (283). The demand that trauma imposes—that it be remembered, ultimately overrides any debate as to whether or not it can be represented. Caruth has argued that the very process of attempting to narrativize trauma constitutes a betrayal of the truth of trauma by giving meaning to incomprehensible events.\footnote{Cathy Caruth. \textit{Trauma: Explorations in Memory}, 153} For Caruth, trauma as an event without precedence is a unique experience, located outside of language and
hence can at best only be inadequately narrativized. She, like Bessel van der Kolk, maintains that traumatic memory is non-symbolic and that traumatic flashbacks are literal reproductions of the original event. Her argument refers back to Lacan, who has suggested that because trauma belongs to a register that cannot be assimilated into language, it belongs to the Real as opposed to the Imaginary or the Symbolic. Her position challenges the validity as well as the significance of narratives that attempt to make sense of or lend coherence to a traumatic event. The integration of traumatic memory into narrative memory was viewed by Pierre Janet as an integral part of the healing process for survivors of trauma. Bessel van der Kolk, who draws from Janet, also suggests that although traumatic memory belongs to a different register from ordinary memory, one should attempt to reconstitute a logical narrative over time and where possible, out of the fragments that comprise the traumatic memory. The same view is held by Judith Herman who also identifies traumatic memory as distinct (“wordless and static”), but available for transformation into narrative through therapy. The idea behind narrative representation of trauma could therefore be regarded as an attempt at mastery of the trauma through a return to the scene of the


event, while at the same time facilitating its gradual assimilation. The trauma narrative according to Caruth however robs the event of the precision and force that characterizes traumatic memory, and ultimately its incomprehensibility.

The trauma narrative nonetheless, is not always simply a transformation of the victim’s “wordless and static” traumatic memory into coherent narrative by giving it a voice, as Herman has suggested. As we find in Atemschaukel, as a combination of both narrative and traumatic memory, the narrative has its brief, logical and coherent moments, for instance, at the beginning of the story, where the events leading to the narrator’s deportation are retold. The narrative however, begins to disintegrate as the narrator’s language is locked in repetition before breaking down into a succession of related elliptical structures and images that point to the trauma indirectly. This moment of breakdown does not represent a failed plot, but rather, it is simply a symptom of the challenge posed by the rendering of the unnarratable in the novel.

2.2 Trauma and the Problem of the Unarratatable:

2.2.1 In the Shadow of the Holocaust

In the first volume of his extensive study on Russian prisons, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn decries the country’s unwillingness to prosecute those responsible for the

incarceration and deaths of millions of prisoners in the Russian Gulags. Comparing the Soviet Union to the situation in Germany during the Nuremberg trials of the 1960’s he wonders why one country is allowed to punish its evildoers while Russia is not, adding that it “is unthinkable in the twentieth century to fail to distinguish between what constitutes an abominable atrocity that must be prosecuted and what constitutes that ‘past’ which ‘ought not to be stirred up.’” While his indignation is perfectly justifiable—Primo Levi refers to the German and Russian camps as “two models of hell,”—Solzhenitsyn’s juxtaposition of the German and Soviet situation is problematic on several counts; the first is what Levi refers to as the “finality” of the Nazi process of dealing with the Jewish population, which lent the Holocaust its unique and unprecedented character. He explains that while the Gulags were places of intimidation and often death, they were not without a history. Political adversaries have been targeted in this manner since ancient times. The Nazi camps however, had as their primary purpose the eradication of the Jewish population. Second, the modern,

26 ibid. 237.
28 ibid.
industrialized nature of the Nazi death machine which “standardized” death renders the Holocaust an event unparalleled in history. It is however inevitable for writers of the Gulag experience, or of any other catastrophic event of after the Holocaust to reach out to it as a paradigm for traumatic events, especially where one’s suffering defies understanding. The “abominable atrocity” (in Solzhenitsyn’s words) that is the Holocaust makes it an unprecedented event that serves as a precedent for subsequent atrocities.\(^{30}\)

Solzhenitsyn’s own eye-witness account of the Gulag cannot escape the shadow of the Holocaust; for Müller, documenting the Gulag experience, first as a second-generation daughter of a Gulag survivor and therefore not as a first-hand witness, and second, from a German, and consequently from perceived perpetrator perspective, the task is doubly daunting. Her writing demonstrates an acknowledgement of her own implication in the Holocaust by virtue of being German—“Wir waren […] als Deutsche schuld an Hitlers Verbrechen” (44)—while at the same time validating the reality of individual German suffering. She achieves this by embracing the shadow of the Holocaust, strongly evoking key signifiers of Holocaust memory such as “schaufeln,” “duschen”, “Watte,” “Haar,” before pulling back and placing emphasis on the main


characteristics of the Gulag—“Hunger,” Zwangsarbeit.” In the end, what is narrated in
Atemschaukel is in fact a Holocaust narrative; however, the trauma that is referred to is
that of the Gulag.31

In one description of the life in the Gulag, the daily task of shoveling coal is
presented as a rhythmic activity resembling a beautifully choreographed dance:

[D]er linke Fuß steht jetzt graziös, mit leicht angehobener Ferse wie beim
Tanz […] Es ist schön wie ein Tango, wechselnd spitzwinklig bei
gleichbleibendem Takt. Und ab der Feststellung, wenn die Kohle weiter
wegfliegen muss, wird es fliegend abgelöst von Walzeranwandlungen,
wobei die Gewichtsverlagerung im großen Dreieck geschieht, die
Körperneigung ist bis 45 Grad, und in der Wurfdistance fliegt die Kohle
wie ein Vogelschwarm. Und der Hungerengel fliegt mit. Er ist in der
Kohlen, in der Herzschaufel, in den Gelenken […] Er weiß aber auch,
dass der Hunger fast die ganze Artistik frisst. (84)

The reference to the forced labor as an art, particularly as one that leads to death from
starvation, coupled with the narrator’s reference to the dance as a tango immediately
draws the reader’s attention to Paul Celan’s well-known poem “Todefsuge,” The poem
first published in Bucharest, bore the initial title “Todestango,” and appeared in a
Romanian translation with the title “Tangoul Mortii” or “Tango of Death”32 In both

31 Bettina Banasch maintains that in Atemschaukel, Müller is not “talking about the concentration
camp, but a different kind of camp.” I argue however that she is indeed talking about the
concentration camp and the Holocaust; however, it functions both as a means of accessing the
trauma of the Gulag as well as respectfully distancing itself from the Holocaust event,
highlighting the predicament of representing German suffering. Bettina Banasch. “Zero – A
Gaping Mouth: The Discourse of the Camps in Herta Müller’s Atemschaukel between Literary
Theory and Political Philosophy.” Other People’s Pain: Narratives of Trauma and the Question of
32 James Brasfield. “Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan, and: Glottal Stop: 101
Celan’s poem and Müller’s narrative the inmates are engaged in forced labor. The difference however, is that in “Todesfuge,” there is no question that the only purpose of the shoveling is meant to end in the death of the inmates: “wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng.” The Gulag on the other hand, is a place of forced labor, where death comes as a side effect of the hunger. She invokes the Holocaust through Celan and at the same time pulls away, almost dancing around it. The “Kohle,” and not the grave is the focus, even though the ultimate end is death.

The tendency to reach out to Celan occurs in protagonist’s moments of greatest despair, as though these moments could not be accessed except via one who has experienced horror and has lived to bear witness. This is evident in an episode which Müller’s protagonist believes to be the final moments of his life. We are presented with a vivid description of Leo Auberg, as he and other internees are herded out of their camp, half-naked in the middle of the night and driven to an unknown destination. As he stands waiting for the execution, Leo describes the scene as though he were experiencing a vision. He and the other internees are standing in a large box, knee deep in mud with the black sky over them. Before him is a bier with the beds or coffins rising to the sky:

Auf der Lagermauer drüben, zwischen den Wachtürmen, war der Schnee ein Katafalk. Darauf stand ein turmhohes Etagenbett in den Himmel, ein

Poems by Paul Celan (review)” Prairie Schooner, Volume 77.3, Fall (2003): 175.
Once again, reference is made to Celan’s “Todesfuge,” particularly to act of digging a grave in the skies. The difference is that in Auberg’s vision, in death, the internees will all be laid out, one above the other, as opposed to Celan’s poem where the lyrical “I” notes: “da liegt man nicht eng,” in reference to the cremation of the victims.

Another Holocaust memory is also referenced in this episode. The rounding up and driving of the prisoners half-naked somewhere in a Ukrainian steppe to what the narrator strongly believes will be their execution by firing squad vividly recalls the memory of the 1941 Babi Yar massacre in the Ukraine, where thousands of Jews from Kiev where driven outside of the city to a ravine where they were forced to strip naked and shot to death. The narrator’s repeated fixation on and certainty of an impending shooting brings the reality of Babi Yar to the fore: “In der Trance des Erfrierens ergab ich mich dem Erschießen” (73). When, instead of being shot, he and the other inmates are given the order to begin digging, Auberg continues to connect the orders to a plan to execute them noting that they were digging “für unsere Erschießung zwei Gänge” (73).

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35 ibid.
Once his fear reaches a climax the commandant shouts the order: “Baumlöcher graben” (73). Auberg makes a point of highlighting the imposing nature of the trees they planted: “Nicht filigran und wachsweiß durchscheinend wie die Birken, sondern imposant im Wuchs und mit stumpfer Haut wie Gipspaste” (74). With the description of the trees we once again experience a conflation of memory as we are reminded of Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s poem “Babi Yar.” In it he attempts to put into words the eyewitness accounts of the massacre making specific reference to trees that stand at the site as though in judgment:

The wild grasses rustle over Babi Yar.
The trees look ominous, like judges.
Here all things scream silently, and, baring my head,
Slowly I feel myself turning grey.
And I myself am one massive, soundless scream
Above the thousand thousand buried here.
I am each old man here, shot dead.
I am every child here, shot dead.
Nothing in me shall ever forget!37

Yevtuschenko recalls how he first visited the site of the massacre expecting to find a monument to the dead. To his surprise however, all he saw were trucks “unloading stinking garbage on the tens of thousands of people who were killed.”38 The ominous trees that stand in the gap for the missing, official acknowledgement of the atrocity also become a symbol in Auberg’s own memory of the Gulag. Upon his release from the

37 ibid.
38 ibid.
internment camp, he catches sight of the same kind of trees he had planted at the camp growing in a park. Referring to their name, “Schwarzpappel,” he notes, “Wenn man einmal unterm schwarzlackierten Himmel die halbe Nacht auf die Erschießung gewartet hat, ist der Name [Schwarzpappel] nicht mehr verlogen” (75). The trees serve as the monument to his own experience, even when no one else wants to remember.

The narrator’s vision of standing knee-deep in a box of mud as he awaited execution demonstrates the utter helplessness (Ausweglosigkeit) of his situation. Whether or not the Gulag was intended as a labor camp or a death camp, for the victim there was no hope of survival. In the same manner that mud functions as a key signifier for the concentration camp experience the ubiquity of the mud is emphasized in the narrative:

“Die Watte saugte sich voll mit Regen und Schnee und blieb wochenlang nass. Man klapperte mit den Zähnen, bis abends war man unterkühlt. In der Baracke mit der 68 Bettgestellen und 68 Internierten mit ihren 68 Wattemonturen” (51). Referring specifically to cinematic experience, Hanno Loewy describes the effect of the presence of mud in Holocaust film: “It makes us feel stuck to the ground and to a world of suffering and bondage” and has become a “stock image for Holocaust films” and a “synecdoche

of the camp as a whole.” The mud which we thus strongly, and more importantly, visually connect to the Holocaust experience, becomes a symbol of the Gulag experience.

Hair, like mud is a powerful signifier of the Holocaust and as Loewy notes the shaving of hair in this context is a ritual “bound to the extreme of the most violent act of dehumanization, the signature of extermination, which first kills human dignity and then the human being.” Loewy addresses the shaving of women in particular and connects the taking away of their hair to disempowerment, loss of identity and more importantly to a form of initiation into a community of “others,” who exist outside of normal life. When Auberg discusses the shaving of the men and the women in the Gulag, his description is conspicuously brief: “Wir wurden mit der Nullermaschine kahlgeschoren, die Männer in der Rasierstube von Oswald Enyeter. Die Frauen in einem Brettverschlag neben der Krankenbaracke (234). He however adds a comment regarding the generosity of the Russians toward the women: “Beim ersten Kahlschere
durfen die Frauen ihre Zöpfe mitnehmen und sie in den Koffer legen als Andenken an sich selbst” (234). While the shaving of the head in the camp carries the connotation of

40 ibid.
41 ibid. 196.
42 ibid.
43 Müller’s reference to the “Rasierstube” does not simply evoke the memory of shaving in the concentration camps. It brings Claude Lanzmann’s documentary film Shoah sharply into the reader’s focus. One of the most striking scenes in the film is the recreated barber scene, where Abraham Bomba talks about the shaving of the women in the concentration camps and particularly the memory of the one barber who had to endure shaving his family members while being prohibited from telling them that this was the final step before their gassing. Claude Lanzmann. Shoah. DVD. (Hollywood: New Yorker Video, 2003).
death, giving back the hair removes the horror of the Holocaust memory just as quickly as it was introduced. Once again Loewy’s discussion on the significance of hair in Wanda Jakubowska’s Polish film Ostatni Etap (The Last Stage) is key to understanding the significance of being allowed to keep one’s hair at the camp. He notes how, as the female inmates in the film were going through the shaving process, one inmate, Martha, who is appointed as the translator is exempted from the process when a Kapo shouts to her: “Come over and keep your hair.” In Atemschaukel then, the depiction of the shaving of the heads allows us to witness an aspect of the Gulag through the Holocaust while at the same time taking care to maintain a respectful distance to the event.

Finally, one cannot overlook the curious case of the German Jew, David Lommer mistakenly interned at the camp and released suddenly after spending three and a half years in internment (44). Auberg remarks how skilled Lommer is at ridding the prison clothing of lice by burying the clothing item in a 30 centimeter deep hole in the freezing cold: “[E]r wusste schon im ersten Winter, wie man Wollpullover von Läusen säubert” (234). The “schon im ersten Winter” suggests that Lommer picked up the survival skill prior to coming to the Gulag, possibly at a concentration camp. Once again, we observe events through a lens of the Holocaust, but more than that the narrator places emphasis  

44 In Holocaust films in particular, the mention of shaving and showering of the female prisoners always has the effect of generating fear because of their connection to the process of gassing. See for example Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1993) and Wanda Jakubowska’s Ostatni Etap (1948). Müller’s narrator also discusses the shaving of the inmates’ heads and follows this with a description of the delousing showers in the “Heißluftkammer” (235).
45 Loewy, 196.
on the victim status of the internees and their innocence by pointing toward the arbitrary nature of the Russians’ “Liste” (44).

2.3 Rendering the Unnarratable: Repetition, Metaphor and Metonymy

2.3.1 Repetition and Entrapment

While the memory of the Holocaust is single most important factor that undoubtedly complicates the rendering of the Gulag experience from an ethnic German perspective, on an individual level, the challenge of successfully shaping past traumatic events into a continuous and coherent narrative constitutes a serious impediment to representation. The story of Leo Auberg is as already pointed out, is theoretically unnarratable because the language that would represent it belongs to an event of greater magnitude. It is also unnarratable because, despite the victim’s desire to bear witness, the nature of traumatic memory, as we have seen, is such that the event eludes him even as it pursues him. What results then is a narrative comprising fragmented and disconnected structures which, as I aim to show, emerge as a series of metonymically related thoughts that serve to move the plot forward even while repetitive structures threaten to lock the narrative in a traumatic black hole. Where the repetition appears to render the narrative static, Müller’s use of anaphora as a device brings the failing
In the following example, the narrator moves from a description of calm to one of terror by linking each subsequent phrase to the antecedent utterance through repetition:

Oft gab es keine Wolke, nur einerlei Blau wie offenes Wasser.
Oft gab es nur eine geschlossene Wolkenendeck, einerlei Grau.
Oft liefen die Wolken, und kein Haken hielt still.
Oft brannte der Regen in den Augen und klebte mir die Kleider an die Haut.
Oft zerbiss der Frost mir die Eingeweide. (27)

In this example we have one of the first insights into life at the labor camps as the narrator attempts to reconstruct the experience of the roll call that the deportees must participate in. During this daily exercise, no movement is tolerated: “Nur die Läuse durften sich rühren an uns” (26). Auberg is described, holding his breath, his face turned upward, pondering the clear blue sky.

The reiteration of “Oft gab es” establishes not only the routine nature of the sky’s deceptively calm appearance but also the monotony of the roll call which makes the observation possible. The tempo picks up with the repetition of “Oft,” now in conjunction with action verbs “liefen,” “brannte,” and finally, “zerbiss.” Within this

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46 See Joelle Biele. “‘For he can creep’: Christopher Smart and Anaphora.” Mentor and Muse: Essays from Poets to Poets. Ed. Blas Falconer, Beth Martinelli and Helena Mesa. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2010), 93. Anaphora as a rhetorical device refers to the use of the same word or phrase at the start of each line. The term, according to Biele, comes from ancient Greek and “means a ‘carry up or back’” and is related to the term “offering” and therefore also has strong religious connotations and is used liberally in the bible, particularly in the Old Testament. The frequent employment of Anaphora by Müller in connection with religion will be examined later in the chapter.
repetitive structure, the narrator remains passive and helpless as the elements run (the clouds), burn (the rain) and tear him apart with their teeth (frost). The narrative acquires a disturbing rhythm through the anaphoric use of “Oft” as the calmness of the beyond is contrasted to the brutality of the narrator’s situation down below, with no relief in sight and as the reference shifts from the sky to the victim. The sense that he stands helpless, caught between two impossibilities, and unable to progress is emphasized by his statement that on such days, the sky would turn his eyes upwards, “drehte mir die Augäpfel hinauf,” while the roll call drew them downwards. He concludes with an expression of hopelessness, “die Knochen hingen ohne Halt nur in mir allein” (28). The depiction of an upward and downward swinging motion amplifies the previous repetitive structure heightening the sense of entrapment that characterizes the life at the labor camp.

In the next example, we witness a series of repetitive structures that fix the reader’s attention to one object before turning us to the real point of reference: there absence of relief the helpless victim. The chapter in question, entitled “Zement” invites the reader to believe that cement is subject of discussion. Indeed, the word “Zement” is repeated over 60 times in this brief chapter and has the effect of interrupting the progress of the narrative, signaling the narrator’s inability to move beyond a particular traumatic memory, which he finds particularly overwhelming. As one reads the chapter, the effect of being enveloped in a cloud of cement is created:

We get the impression that cement constitutes the threat; its ubiquity is emphasized by the numerous times it is evoked. While the narrator repeats the word Zement, as though seeking to control it, to master it, (Derrida explains that: “repetition always protects by neutralizing, deadening, distancing”), the very repetition distributes it even further choking him and the reader as well. The modals “muss,” “darf,” “soll” indicate the presence of an overwhelming, menacing, indeed lethal authority whose identity the narrator declines to specify and as is characteristic of the majority of the traumatic scenes in the novel cement is identified as a perpetrator. It shifts from a menacing object that one seeks to control or neutralize, to one that steals (hat uns gestohlen), sows (sät Misstrauen), and seals you up (klebt [...] zu). Because, as he notes, fear is the only one thing that is quicker than cement, its paralyzing effect is experienced in the repetition. This repetition, which initially serves to name the object, in reality works to mimic the

act of enveloping the victim, before finally “cementing” and presenting him as the actual passive, helpless object.

In her criticism of Caruth’s idea that trauma is unrepresentable in language,\(^4\) Linda Belau has maintained that repetition is the means through which trauma plays itself out in the Symbolic. In her own Lacanian interpretation of trauma, she notes that while trauma is located in the “Real,” the Real is not beyond or separate from the Symbolic, but rather the “very limit of the symbolic.” It therefore exists at the point where the Symbolic fails. She goes on to explain that while trauma may belong to the register of the Real, it plays itself out in the Symbolic through traumatic repetition and is therefore tied to a system of representation, however inadequate.\(^5\) A similar argument is put forward by Fink who notes, referring also to Lacan, that the Real “has to be spoken, put into signifiers” by moving (or “draining”) into the realm of the symbolic.\(^6\)

We observe this idea of the inadequacy of the signifier when the narrator tries to get the reader to grasp the full meaning of hunger in the Lager. In the absence of a signifier that points to the experience, his sentences repeat forms of the word “essen,”

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concretizing the action of eating life, and as such playing out the desire and the compulsion to eat:


The notion of being locked in the taste of food indicates an entanglement that triggers the compulsion to repeat. The location of the sentence “Ich bin eingesperrt” right between “Ich esse [...] seit ich nicht mehr hungern muss” and “Ich esse [...] gegen das Verhungern” does not just tell the reader that the narrator is locked; it shows this entrapment within the sentence structure itself.

2.3.2 Narrative Progression through Metonymy

The traumatic experience may be directly inaccessible because of the way it not only eludes but disrupts language; however as we see with Atemschaukel’s narrator, inaccessible traumatic memory is often arrived at via a series of contiguous memories. Trauma then, disrupts language, but does not annihilate it as Judith Herman has suggested in her characterization of trauma as wordless. Hughlings Jackson has also
stressed that “Speechlessness does not mean entire wordlessness,”51 while Jakobson has also gone on to add that “there is no wordlessness.”52 The trauma finds its expression indirectly, through a series of related memories.

In a description of one of his more memorable Lager experiences, Leo tells of how the inmates would dance on Saturday nights, despite their empty stomachs and the lice in their clothes. He explains in a rather matter of fact manner why one of his fellow inmates remains seated while the rest of the internees are dancing:

Weil man ohne Zehen nicht tanzen kann, sitzt die Trudi Pelikan am Rand auf der Bank und ich setze mich zu ihr. Ihre Zehen sind im ersten Winter erfror. Im Sommer wurden sie unterm Kalkwagen zerquetscht. Im Herbst wurden sie amputiert, weil Würmer unter den Verband kamen. Seither geht die Trudi Pelikan auf den Fersen.” (147)

In a simple series of factual sentences, Leo provides a description of his fellow internee, beginning with her physical appearance before methodically explaining the deterioration of her feet with the passing months at the Lager. Rather than simply explaining that she had lost her feet because of an amputation, Leo begins with the description of the dancing, which Trudi could not participate in. The unpleasant image of Trudi shuffling around on her backside is accessed metonymically via a description of a series of passing seasons—winter, summer and spring. The temporal contiguity

52 ibid.
provides the means for accessing the unpleasant memory of his village-mate’s
degeneration. Her condition is particularly unsettling for him because it stands in sharp
contrast to the memory of their first meeting as they were transported by the Russians to
the labor camp:

Ich saß neben der Trudi Pelikan... [Sie] roch nach warmen Pfirsichen,
sogar aus dem Mund, sogar am dritten, vierten Tag im Viehwaggon. Sie
saß in ihrem Mantel wie eine Dame in der Straßenbahn auf dem Weg ins
Büro. (17)

In this description, Trudi has not yet been subjected to the harsh life at the Lager, even
the transportation in the cattle wagons has not erased her homely scent. In this
particular memory, Leo speaks in terms of days: “am dritten, vierten Tag”; in his Lager
memory however his description of the passing time is rendered in terms of seasons, an
indication of the seeming endlessness of their internment. The smell of warm plums is
countered by the image of worms under Trudi’s bandage, pointing to the deterioration
of their condition. The Lager memory is rendered in a very basic sentence structure,
beginning with a causal phrase, “Weil man...”. Each thought he expresses is
contiguously dependent on an earlier declaration, a reaction to the preceding utterance.
He sits next to her because one cannot dance without toes. Her toes froze in the winter,
then they were crushed in the summer, and then they were infected and then amputated
in spring. Now she gets around on her backside. He renders his narration in a very
mechanical manner, as though he can only access his final thought via the earlier
phrases. This organization of sentences as a sequence of metonymic relationships is
characteristic of much of Leo’s narration throughout the novel. In this example we see his thoughts progress from a concrete context, that is, from his description of Trudi as he sits beside her and observes her, without toes, to more remote and troubling memories of the suffering she has undergone over time, memories which would have been inaccessible without the concrete context. Jakobson’s well-known account of two types of language impairments, the similarity and contiguity disorders provide a helpful framework for understanding how Leo’s seemingly random, fragmented thoughts are in reality a progression of ideas that come together to form a narrative of trauma.

Jakobson’s observation that the linguistic sign involves combination, i.e. the occurrence of a sign in combination with other signs, and selection, i.e. a sign can be substituted for another similar sign, leads him to identify the two types of aphasic disturbances that occur along the two modes of linguistic arrangement. The combination or contiguity disorder involves the inability, because of a context-deficiency, to progress beyond simple sentence structures or word sets that are mutually substitutable. The key characteristic of the similarity disorder is the selection deficiency, whereby one is unable to substitute one word for another with similar meaning. Jakobson notes of this disorder: “In this type of language disturbance, sentences are conceived as elliptical sequels to be supplied from antecedent sentences uttered, if not imagined, by the
aphasic himself." Words are thus used successfully in combination with other words, making context necessary to the aphasic, who will often react to prior utterances (actual or imagined), in order to produce a related thought. Following this notion of contiguity, we observe how Müller’s narrator crafts powerful matter of fact statements about the harsh reality of the internment camps, attributing their plight to a chain of causes and effects, as though their suffering were unavoidable, the consequence of events beyond their control. In a sentence long chapter comprising a lengthy chain of subordinating clauses, he explains the circumstances surrounding the death of a female internee:

Die nackte Wahrheit ist, dass der Advokat Paul Gast seiner Frau [...] 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, [...] sowie dann unsere Sängerin Loni Mich den Mantel trug und nichts dafür konnte, dass durch den Tod der Frau des Advokaten ein Mantel frei geworden war, [...] so wie auch der Winter nichts dafür konnte, [...] so konnten auch die Tagen nichts dafür, dass sie eine Kette von Ursachen und Folgen waren [...] so wie auch die Ursachen und Folgen nichts dafür konnten, dass sie die nackte Wahrheit waren. (230)

The beginning of the sentence “Die nackte Wahrheit” is telling in that even though it promises to lay out the bare or naked truth, the narrator is actually unable to name or specify this truth, because it eludes him as he gropes along the endless chain of causes and effects. When Caruth describes the trauma survivor as carrying an impossible history within them, we are presented with the image of an inaccessible truth that exists and yet cannot be named, save for a series of metonymic references that help the

\[53\] ibid. 65.
narrator point to or circulate around this unarratable truth. And yet as we see in Leo’s case, a more benign memory—a dance—leads him to more unpleasant and otherwise inaccessible memories about the Lager. In one particularly striking example, Leo’s memory process is initiated by the sound of Beethoven music from a record player in a Russian shop that he wanders into. The Beethoven transports him back in time, to the start of World War II, when his family would listen to special war reports on radio transmitted from Munich. These reports were punctuated by Beethoven music. His thoughts shift to his father’s anticipation of Hitler’s success and fixation on the radio as his link to Germany, and then to the daily physical training that his parents performed, directed via radio by their trainer in Munich. Leo had to also attend private gymnastics classes “Turnen” in order to be more soldier-like. The “Turnen” recalls a more recent event, during roll call at the Lager, where a speech was delivered by a special Russian officer about “FUSSKULTUR,” which turned out to be a mispronunciation of “PHYSISCHE Kultur,” or “Turnkultur.” Leo’s thoughts take him back to his own “Turnen” during the war and to memories of his father taking photos of female gymnasts. The poses of the female gymnasts remind him in turn of the stretched out hide of the wild rabbits, “Hasen” that his father would often hunt. A Jewish trader who was “rotblond, groß, schlank fast wie eine Hase,” would come twice a year to purchase the rabbit hide, but suddenly stopped coming. No one asked about his disappearance: “Mehr wollte man nicht wissen”. He then remembers his Jewish neighbors, who also
disappeared during the same period before repeating his earlier statement: “Mehr wollte man nicht wissen” (53-56). Four pages of seemingly random narration via associative thinking by dipping into a chain of signifiers along a vertical axis—Beethoven music-World War-radio announcements-long distance gymnastics via Munich radio-female gymnasts-stretched out hare hide-Jewish trader—lead Leo to a crucial and troubling memory; the disappearance of Jews from his community during the war. The emphasis on the fact that no one wanted to know indicates that he has arrived at a taboo subject that will not be elaborated on further although the reader has enough information to figure out what remains hidden from the narration.

The “Hase” that evokes the memory of the Jews becomes a recurring motif in the novel, a sort of Ariadne’s thread that guides Leo through his dissociated memories. As he labors in the Lager he notes that of the brands of coal that he shovels at the Lager is called “Hasoweh,”—Haso-weh sounds to him like a hare in pain (124-25). His own feelings of abandonment by his family become associated with this particular type of coal as he imagines each family member thinking of him as dead. He concludes his thoughts with a single word, “Hasoweh,” as though to express his own agony at abandonment (125).

Much later in the narrative the “Hase” motif and intense agony are once again brought together in a brief one paragraph chapter that comprises a woeful prayer-like supplication:
Vater, uns jagt der weiße Hase aus dem Leben. In immer mehr Gesichtern wächst er in den Wangendellen.
Noch nicht ausgewachsen, schaut er sich bei mir das Fleisch von innen an, weil es auch seines ist. Hasoweh.
Seine Augen sind Kohle, seine Schnauze ein Blechgeschirr, seine Beine Schürhaken [...] 
Noch sitzt er rosa gehäutet in mir und wartet mit seinem eigenen Messer, das auch das Messer von Fenja ist. (231)

In this example Leo’s prayer starts out with an inversion of the now familiar and rather harmless image of “Vater auf Jagd,” as a way of describing his and the other internees’ desperate situation “uns jagt der weiße Hase.” He is clearly not addressing his earthly father, but rather lamenting to a higher power about the hunger that is taking the lives of more and more of the inmates and is lying in wait for Leo. The chapter takes the structure of the “Vater Unser,” particularly the repeated structures “Seine Augen,” “seine Schnauze,” “seine Beine,” yet another example of the use of anaphora, which evoke the lines from the Lord’s prayer: Dein Name, Dein Reich, Dein Wille. Where the “tägliches Brot” mentioned in the Lord’s prayer, Fenja, the Russian officer in charge of the bread rations appears in Leo’s litany. The Lord’s Prayer thus functions as a kind of template, a structurally familiar guidepost through which he can bring out his own lament. The chapter’s similarity with the Lord’s Prayer is just one example of Müller’s, frequent use of religious imagery a trope that will be discussed in greater depth further on in the chapter.

We also see in another particularly revealing example how the narrator moves from benign narrative memory—he remembers himself as a child holding a stuffed
animal, ein Kuscheltier, which his mother takes away from him—to a more disturbing memory of labor camp life, which comprises no more than simple “KUSCHEN” or cowering out of fear. Finally his associative thought process leads ultimately to thoughts about food and hunger, since “KUSCHET” means “food” in Russian (152). The dissociated structure of Leo’s narration may be indicative of the effect or presence of a traumatic disturbance; however the examples given are an indication that his memories are not as random as they appear, but rather, through a process of dipping into a vertical chain of signifiers, the elusive traumatic memory finds its representation, indirectly, via a series of benign but related memories.

Having looked at the way in which Müller’s narrative progresses by linking memories that are contextually related, I would like to highlight yet another closely related feature of Leo’s narration, one that involves combining several signs into a completely new one as if to indicate that what is being retold has no precedence, that no language that exists can render what the narrator has experienced. Warhol has used the term “unnarration,” —a derivative of Prince’s unnarratable to describe the narrative process of “asserting that what did happen cannot be retold in words”54 Warhol focuses more on what is left unsaid in a narrative or on expressions by the authorial narrator—

“Never mind what happened just after that,” or “the shock she received can better be imagined than described”—phrases that emphasize the impossibility of narration.

Müller’s narrator is particularly keen to retell, and is remarkably detailed and deliberate in his descriptions. His language is on the one hand familiar, because, while the reader can form a mental image out of the individual signs that combine to form the new sign e.g. “Kartoffel” and “Mensch,” the new sign “Kartoffelmensch” (197) becomes inconceivable. The combination of the words is meant to give us an idea of what it was like for Leo, who, when desperately hungry, had a rare opportunity to frantically collect as many potatoes as his body could carry and drag them across the Ukranian steppe “wie ein Schrank durch Felder und Grasland zum Lagertor” (198-99). The 

*Kartoffelmensch* though inconceivable becomes another metonymic reference to the extreme hunger of the *Lager*. The nature of the *Hunger* is inexpressible. Several Holocaust survivors have tried to describe their own experience of hunger at the concentration camps, knowing full well that the reader can still never get the full extent of the experience. How does one communicate an experience that is alien to most readers when language has no words for such an experience? Charlotte Delbo’s memoirs describe a similar challenge when trying to describe the feeling of thirst experienced while at the camp: the lack of saliva in her mouth, her parched lips, her tongue, “a piece

55 ibid.
of wood,” her pupils dilated and her senses “abolished by thirst.” 56 At the end of her description she notes: “There are people who say, ’I’m thirsty.’ They step into a café and order a beer.” 57 With these words she signals the complete inadequacy of language to remotely describe her experience of thirst. Everyday language is unable to bridge the gap that exists between the reader and the experience of the witness. Primo Levi’s attempt at describing the hunger at the concentration camps is confronted with the same obstacle: “But how could one imagine not being hungry?” he asks. “The Lager is hunger: we ourselves are hunger, living hunger.” 58 The difficulty of course is that the reader can imagine not being hungry; moreover the description of the internees as living hunger creates a “they versus us” image that makes the reader feel that it happened to them, that they themselves are “living hunger” and not “we” who read of the event. Müller’s language reveals this inadequacy in language and yet seeks through a combination of signs to cause the reader to look at the familiar signs, while keeping the experience inconceivable. Another combination “Melde”-“Kraut,” yields the term “Meldekraut,” whose existence as a plant we have to accept because its detailed, matter-of-fact description is even accompanied by a variety of recipes: “Die Meldekrautblätter kann man, gesalzen natürlich roh essen, wie Feldsalat. Den wilden Dill fein zerrupfen und

57 ibid. 145.
draufstreuen. Oder ganze Meldekrautstiele in Salzwasser kochen (23, 24).” The
Meldekraut is tender in the spring, knee high in the summer, and so on. Once again it is
not about the plant, but the intense, unnarratable hunger that drives the internees to eat
this curious plant.

The intensity of the hunger is taken a step higher when this plant—so well
described as a source of sustenance at a time when options are few—is suddenly
presented as inaccessible in the winter, when it is most needed. When it is at its most
beautiful, it is also at its most inedible. The narrator remarks that the time of Meldekraut
eating is passed; but not the hunger, which remains greater (24). Here we encounter
what is perhaps one of the most striking features of language foregrounded in Müller’s
novel. Her use of oppositions and contradictions that take us from one pole of meaning
to its extreme opposite, in a back and forth, swinging motion, providing access to one
extreme experience via its polar opposite. Thus, when the plant’s beauty is described, its
inaccessibility is accentuated. Christian Voßhagen has convincingly argued that
oppositions function as metonymic principles, whereby the negative concept grants
access to the positive opposite. Giving the example of the oxymoron “terribly
wonderful,” Voßhagen suggests that their conceptual contiguity “provides the ground
for metonymically accepting one opposite term via the other term.”\textsuperscript{59} In the case of \textit{Atemschaukel} it is often the positive, benign concept that takes the reader to its polar negative. We find a vivid example in Leo’s account of his compatriot’s arrest, shortly before her deportation to the \textit{Lager}. Describing Trudi Pelikan’s vain attempt at hiding in a hole when the Russian authorities came for her, he explains: “Der Schnee denunzierte, sie musste freiwillig aus dem Versteck, \textit{freiwillig gezwungen vom Schnee}” (18; emphasis added). Trudi could have continued to hide in the hole indefinitely, had the snow not began to fall. The presence of snow meant that footprints of any person carrying necessary food rations to her would give her hiding place away. Choosing to remain hidden would have meant death by starvation, while giving herself up meant deportation. The choice between the two impossibilities is represented as an oxymoron, a trope that appears repeatedly in the novel. In this example “\textit{freiwillig gezwungen},” it is the positive concept \textit{freiwillig} that allows the mental access to the more difficult memory that he has to come to terms with. \textit{Freiwillig} thus functions like a map through which Leo is able to trace and arrive at his desired thought. Similarly when he uses the expression “\textit{eine Zartheit, eine monströse}” to describe his mercy killing of abandoned baby mice that he once found under his pillow, his inner conflict and struggle to name the horror of the necessary action comes forth (80). This mercy killing is in turn

\textsuperscript{59} Christian Voßhagen. “Opposition as a Metonymic Principle” \textit{Metonymy in Language and Thought}. Ed. Klaus-Uwe Peter and Günter Raden. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V., 1999), 305-06.
contrasted with a childhood memory of an incident where he deliberately and fatally applied pressure to a newborn kitten’s throat, simply because it had just scratched him: “Ich habe ganz zugedrückt, und zwar am Hals” (81). Again in that scene, the narrator uses a contradictory combination, this time inverting the words; “Monströse Zärtlichkeit,” describes this childhood memory. This combination of signs becomes crucial to the narrator because he is later able to associate this particular set of oxymorons to his most desperate moment, which he refers to as “Die Hautundknochenzeit,” the peak of starvation. Again we have the arrangement of familiar terms Haut- und Knochen-Zeit, to form a monstrous combination; Leo describes the period as one during which he wished he could simply conduct a “Rettungstausch,” an exchange whereby he would trade in his body for the line in the horizon and the dusty roads. He believes himself to be at the point of death, the breaking point or the “Nullpunkt.” He also refers to this point as the point of the unspeakable, and therefore

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60 Bettina Banasch offers an alternative interpretation of the image of the “figure zero,” (aufgesperrte Maul der Null) which she argues lays claim to “a general validity that reaches beyond the Shoah.” For Bettina, the mathematical form of the image indicates a refusal to engage in debates regarding the acceptability of comparisons with the Shoah. “The text works with equations, not comparisons” (119). The narrator’s mention of the “unspeakable” does indeed invite us to think about or remember the Shoah, but only inasmuch as this term, “das Unsagbare,” belongs to the register of the Holocaust. While acknowledging the memory of the Holocaust, Müller crafts her own language to depict trauma’s unspeakable nature. This “gaping zero-mouth” is, as I point out later in the chapter is a recurrent image of suffering to the point of death. The mathematics in Müller’s narrative, is more than simply a refusal to engage in debate. It is a direct reference to the Holocaust narrative which, given the methodical and industrialized nature of the extermination of Jews, is made up primarily of statistics (cf. Dan Diner Beyond the
the unrepresentable. And yet Müller captures the experience with her language that vividly brings out the mutism that is the trauma. Though we cannot understand or imagine it, we see it. Leo explains:

Der Nullpunkt ist das Unsagbare. Wir sind uns einig, der Nullpunkt und ich, dass man über ihn selbst nicht sprechen kann, höchstens drumherum. Das aufgesperrte Maul der Null kann essen, nicht reden. Die Null schließt dich ein in ihre würgende Zärtlichkeit. (249; emphasis added)

The image of strangling tenderness evokes a slow yet sure death. This is the limit where there is no hope for survival and yet, Auberg survives, noting that a successful exchange must have taken place because: “Mit Haut und Knochen [...] hätte ich mich nicht am Leben halten können” (249). He however points out that there are those internees who go just one drop beyond this zero point, the point of no return. When one of the female internees, Irma Pfeifer, falls into a cement mortar, her fellow inmate, with her mouth in the characteristic zero-shape “das aufgesperte Maul der Null,” that signals hunger to the point of death, utters one word: “Eintropfenzuvielglück” (247). This, according to Auberg is the last of all fortunes that could befall you at the camp, and it comes when you die.

The notion of being enclosed in a “würgende Zärtlichkeit” also brings out the idea of pressure that suffocates, that allows the breath to go only one way (einatmen) without hope for release (ausatmen). As mentioned earlier, the combination of opposing poles represents an endless swinging motion; the narrator finds himself locked even as he goes back and forth and will ultimately be suffocated in this swinging motion. In a 2010 interview, Müller makes a distinction between the terror she personally experienced while living in Romania and that of poet Oskar Pastior, whose experiences partly inform the novel *Atenschaukel*. She notes of the terror: “mir hat es die Sprache und Existenz täglich geschüttelt – aber Oskar Pastior hat es die Sprache und Existenz täglich zerbrochen.” She further notes that while for him, “[d]as Elend schien Endlos” she on the other hand underwent suffering but, “dazwischen waren Pausen zum Atemholen” 61 (emphasis added). It is interesting to also note the way she describes her own plight using a breath metaphor that recalls Goethe’s wonderful breath poem, which is characteristic of his way of viewing the world, as a combination of polar pairs with each side existing in opposition to its other side:

Im Atemholen sind zweierlei Gnaden:
Die Luft einziehen, sich ihrer entladen;
Jenes bedrängt, dieses erfrischt;
So wunderbar ist das Leben gemischt.

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Du danke Gott, wenn er dich preßt,
Und dank ihm, wenn er dich wieder entläßt.62

The duality in Goethe’s poem gives the impression of a harmonious equilibrium, a perfect balance between that which torments and that which refreshes. It also gives an assurance that when one is squeezed, release will follow. For Müller das Atemholen describes the moments of temporary reprieve or Gnadenfrist. Das Atemschaukeln however, though communicating a balance, represents the non-stop shattering experience whose firm grip presses but does not let go. Her narrator notes of the dead at the Lager, that one finally could see in them the relief because the “schwindlige Schaukel” in their breath (247), had finally found rest.

The Atemschaukel that is in each internee is mirrored externally by Herzschaufel that represents the forced labor at the camp: “die Herzschaufel wird zur Schaukel in meiner Hand, wie die Atemschaukel in der Brust” (82), endless labor and the endless experience of suffering. Long after his return from the Lager Leo he still remains a victim, and even the regular motion of suffering intensified from time to time, when he is assailed by violent nightmares: “Die Atemschaukel überschlägt sich, ich muss hecheln.” The skipped beat is associated with the threat of death, but the rhythm is restored when he rapidly opens the window and is able to breathe again:

Wenn mich nachts die Gegenstände heimsuchen und mir im Hals die Luft abdrosseln, reiße ich das Fenster auf und halte den Kopf ins Freie [...]. Mein Atem findet wieder seinen Takt. Ich schluck die kalte Luft, bis ich nicht mehr im Lager bin. (35)

As remains to be seen, Müller’s employment of oppositional structures is not only operational on a syntactical level, but also informs her understanding of trauma as having a bipolar character comprising a rational and non-rational nature.

2.4 Metaphor and the Bipolar Nature of Trauma

2.4.1 Statistics as Narrative

Referring to the unthinkable events of the Holocaust, Dan Diner notes that “Auschwitz has no appropriate narrative, only a set of statistics” (178). His so-called “metaphor of statistics” refers to the standardized nature of death at the concentration camps, a “repetition of one and the same action for weeks, months and years.” This, according to Diner, becomes the narrative that the event lacks. Diner emphasizes the uniqueness of the Holocaust over other tragic events by virtue of the extent of the mass killings over an extremely brief period of time, as does Primo Levi, who hesitates to compare the German and Russian labor camps, because of the aspect of finality that characterized the former. Levi however describes the two circumstances as “two models of hell,” where death was often the outcome—the foreseen outcome in the German

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63 Dan Diner. 178-79.
model and the byproduct of extreme suffering in the Russian model. While it is difficult to compare the two models side by side, the prolonged and repetitive nature of the harsh conditions imposed on the internees in both situations—the cold, illness, hunger and harsh labor—makes Diner’s metaphor of statistics applicable to the two instances of senseless suffering and death. Müller latches on to a similar image in her attempt to portray the bipolar nature of trauma, with one pole comprising a set of statistics and mathematical numbers that attempt to rationalize the extreme events, to explain them, and another pole, that of the non-rational, that fails to give meaning to the events. Her narrator notes for instance of the first three deaths:

Bei den ersten drei von uns, die am Hunger gestorben sind wusste ich genau, wer sie sind und die Reihenfolge ihres Todes. Ich dachte ein Paar lange Tage an jeden der drei. Aber die Zahl Drei bleibt niemals die erste Zahl Drei. Jede Zahl wird abgeleitet [...]. Denn es gab die Spuren der Mathematik, im März, im vierten Jahr schon dreihundertdreißig Tote. (89-90)

For Leo, finding a mathematical formula to explain the events also helps to distance him emotionally from the event, since in the absence of emotion or feeling, one is able to access the memory and speak clinically of the horror. Of the three deaths he then catatonically remarks:

Die Taube Mitzi von zwei Waggons zerquetscht.
Die Kati Meyer im Zementturm verschüttet,
Die Irma Pfeiffer im Mörtel erstickt. (90)

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64 Primo Levi, 388.
Leo’s endeavor to find “die Spuren der Mathematik” in the events at the camp also leads to moments of pathetic humor in the novel. When he has the rare opportunity to work in a potato field, he gathers a total of 273 potatoes and drags them back to the camp. When asked by a fellow internee why he needed that precise figure he answers: “Weil minus 273 Grad Celsius der absolute Nullpunkt ist, sag ich, kälter geht es nicht” (199). As discussed earlier on in the chapter the “Nullpunkt” is also used with reference to the lowest point, the unspeakable, that is, death. Leo therefore hopes to cheat death with his mathematical accuracy.

Even as Leo seeks to find traces of math in the unfolding events, he notes that the only math that makes sense is that of the Hungerengel. His basic equation or principal of causality as Leo repeatedly notes is one of labor for food: “1 Schaufelhub = 1 Gramm Brot” (86, 91, 144). What is remarkable is that the personification of the greatest and most constant torment is also presented as the just and fair deity. We observe a shift in Müller’s imagery from simply one of statistics and mathematics to iconic and religious metaphors. The hunger at the Lager is life threatening, and as Müller herself asserts, “Verzweiflung und Ausweglosigkeiten geschehen in Bildern.”65 The figure of the Hungerengel however has more to do with simple imagery, rather, it points to a force outside nature, one however, who can be bargained with rationally, on his terms. The narrator goes on to refer increasingly to the supernatural aspect of objects and people at

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the camp, particularly as the desperation increases and traces of math cannot fully contain the nature of the extreme events.

2.4.2. Religion: Grasping Trauma through the Incomprehensible

Müller’s use of liberal religious imagery pertaining to Christianity is remarkable, particularly because none of the characters in the narrative are portrayed as being especially religious. In fact, she goes to great lengths to depict the Romanian German community as a largely superstitious people who look for signs in dreams, elements of nature and who attribute healing powers to objects. When, for example, Leo experiences the same dream three nights in a row, he visits a fellow inmate Lommer, who is famous for his gift of dream interpretation. Lommer is able, by shaking a handful of beans, to point Leo to a future event involving a young baby boy. This later turns out to be the birth of Leo’s little brother (187-88). In another instance, Leo is saved from being declared a spy and fascist by the Russian Officers when he is found with soup stored in two small bottles in his personal belongings. His strange behavior is however explained to the Russians as “Obskurantjism,” by a translator who informs the officer that the soups served as a “Zaubertrank” for constipation and diarrhea (161). The Russian officer believes this explanation—possibly because this was a common practice among the inmates—and even keeps the bottles for himself instead of disposing of the contents (162). Outside of the Lager, in Leo’s home village we also get the sense that folk beliefs
are rife in the community when Leo’s neighbor, talks of the heavy rain during Leo’s 
grandfather’s funeral, as well as his encounter with a toad on his way home, as a sign 
that Leo had not survived the labor camp.

The frequent references to superstition would suggest that the employment of 
rhetorical tropes pertaining to Christianity is not a measure of the degree of piety among 
the community members, or of the narrator, although extreme events will often cause an 
increase in religious commitment or activity, especially when no other alternatives are 
readily available. In the face of tragic events, victims will often look for explanation of 
their situation in terms of divine providence. The attempt to try to rationalize or give 
religious meaning to an apparently incomprehensible event is not unusual. Upon fleeing 
to England in the wake of the atrocities perpetrated on the Jews in Austria and 
Germany, Freud endeavors, in his work Moses and Monotheism (1937), to map out a 
logical trajectory that leads to the reason behind the hatred of the Jews. The reason, for 
Freud, lies in Religion—in Moses’ creation of the Jewish people through his departure 
from Egypt with a group of Semitic followers in order to preserve the Monotheistic 
worship of the Egyptian god Aton. A new faith that emerged—after the death of Moses 
and the repression of his violent murder—out of the fusion of original worship of Aton 
with the worship of Jahve, the volcano god became the basis of the Jewish faith. Freud

U of California P, 2000), 90. They suggest that in the absence of a cheaper and more efficient 
alternative, humans will have recourse to the supernatural.
traces a repetitive pattern of repression and return, beginning right from man’s origin, with the murder of the primordial father, to its reenactment in the traumatic murder and cover up of the Jewish leader Moses, and the institution of a new leader also bearing the name Moses. For Freud, patterns of repression and return function as models for understanding the origins of religion. The pattern of repression and return will be a useful model for understanding other aspects of trauma in *Atemschaukel*, including the notion of collective guilt and the push toward normality after the events in the *Lager*. Freud’s model, a combination of historical facts and speculative ideas, tries to provide a rationale for the existence of religion, identifying trauma as the factor behind the emergence of religious practices. While this model regards neurosis as a model for understanding religion, it sheds light on its rational aspects, that is, the repetitive rites and ceremonies that characterize organized religion (which, though he terms as the obsessive character of religion, is one that has a logical explanation to it). Müller’s imagery however, points to the non-rational, the incomprehensible nature of religious belief. She leans, for example, on the idea of the Holy nature of God, liberally applying his attributes to the character of the female officer responsible for the distribution of bread rations at the labor camp. The narrator makes repeated reference to her cold holiness—“die kalte Heiligkeit von Fenja” (141), “die kalte Heiligkeit der lahmenden

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68 ibid.
Fenja (142), “Fenjas kalte Heiligkeit (109)—even going as far as to suggest that she, like God, had no beginning: “Über Fenjas Familie wussten wir nichts, nicht einmal, ob sie vor oder nach dem Krieg eine hatte” (107). For Leo therefore, Fenja is not simply like God, she is equal to him and bears his qualities. She is unfathomable because in his eyes, she holds the key to life and death: “Sie war das Brot, die Herrin, der wir jeden Tag aus der Hand gefressen haben” (107). Her portrayal as God is an indication that the narrator lacks the language apart from the language of the sublime to describe what Fenja represents to him. In the absence of an adequate signifier, his recourse is in religion’s highest and most divine equivalent. This however does not point to an understanding of what Fenja is like, but rather to a lack of comprehension of her nature and to the nature of his own experience of her. The holiness that the narrator repeatedly emphasizes clearly does not refer to her sanctity, goodness or benevolence—hence the qualifications lahmend, and kalt—but to what Rudolph Otto in his explanation of the meaning of God as holy, refers to as the numen, or “‘the holy’ minus its moral factor [...] minus its ‘rational’ aspect altogether.”

Otto’s idea of the holy or the numinous is significant because it maintains that there is a non-rational aspect of religion that cannot be adequately conveyed in language.

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and cannot be communicated in terms of other experiences and is hence inexpressible.\textsuperscript{70}

He sums up the experience in the form of a Latin term, \textit{mysterium tremendum}\textsuperscript{71}, defining the \textit{tremendum} aspect of the experience as a threefold one that inspires the feeling of dread, a sense of urgency and is overpowering. The mysterium character of the numinous is in turn a dual one, described as being both daunting and fascinating, a combination of a “strange harmony of contrasts.” He goes on to state that

\begin{quote}
[t]he daemonic-divine object may appear to the mind an object of horror and dread, but at the same time it is no less something that allures with a potent charm, and the creature, who trembles before it, utterly cowed and cast down, has always at the same time the impulse to turn to it, nay even to make it somehow his own.\textsuperscript{72}
\end{quote}

Leo’s description of the “Hungerengel,” the personification of extreme hunger brings out this element of dread that overpowers:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

Here he is presented as an extremely destructive force that wreaks havoc and inspires dread in the narrator. And yet, just a few lines prior to the depiction of this violent

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{70} cf. ibid p. 8.
\textsuperscript{71} It is interesting to note that he has to resort to a metonymic substitute in the Latin, which further emphasizes the inexpressible nature of the numinous. Similarly with Müller, the idea of the holy or “das Heilige” functions as a means for grasping the idea of trauma.
\textsuperscript{72} Otto, 31.
\end{footnotes}
destructive pole, the narrator shows the rational side of the *Hungerengel*, one that comprehends and can be comprehended:

Er denkt richtig,
Er fehlt nie.
Er kennt meine Grenzen und weiß seine Richtung.
Er weiß meine Herkunft und kennt seine Wirkung.
Er hat es gewußt bevor er mich traf, und kennt meine Zukunft. (144)

This description—which stands in contrast to the earlier depiction of the *Hungerengel* as awe-inspiring—follows the pattern of a Psalm of praise to a divine being.\(^{73}\) The shift from the rational to the non-rational is swift but necessary, for as we have seen in the discussion of positive poles providing access to the negative opposite, the shift to the non-rational points to the incommunicable aspect of the narrator’s experience. If we look further at Otto’s description of the numinous we continue find an uncanny similarity to some of Leo’s descriptions. Looking at the description of the shovel used at the camp for example:


The imagery appears excessive and filled with exaggeration; however, it appears as such to one who has not gone through a similar experience. When Otto begins his description

\(^{73}\) The description borrows liberally from the 139th Psalm. Note also the repetitive device of the anaphora which strengthens the link to the biblical Psalm.
of the numinous, he opens with an invitation to the reader to think back to a moment of a “deeply-felt religious experience.” Whoever cannot recall such a moment is requested to read no further since the discussion of the non-rational aspect of religion would be incomprehensible.\textsuperscript{74} Whether emotions unique to religion exist, is debatable, but Müller’s narrator seems to suggest that traumatic experience exists in a dimension beyond that of logic—not the irrational, for that would render the trauma meaningless—but the non-rational, the ineffable, yet significant. Otto also refers to it as the “Dionysiac element in the numen,” whereby the creature feels captivated and transported to a level of dizzy intoxication.\textsuperscript{75} We are able to understand the strange frenzy with which Leo describes his own extreme hunger as though he were in a hallucinatory state with no control over his being:

\begin{quote}
[D]er Hungerengel hängt sich ganz in meinen Mund hinein, an mein Gaumensegel. Es ist seine Waage. Er setzt meine Augen auf, und die Herzschaufl wird schwindlig, die Kohle verschwimmt. Der Hungerengel stellt meine Wangen auf sein Kinn. Er läßt meinen Atem schaukeln. Die Atemschaukel ist ein Delirium und was für eins. (87)
\end{quote}

Her description comes across as overly poetic, as though she were depicting a religious experience that leaves the protagonist disoriented but ecstatic: “The breath swing is a delirium, and what a delirium!”\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{74} Otto, 8.
\textsuperscript{75} ibid. 31.
\textsuperscript{76} Iris Radisch is highly critical of Müller’s poetic depiction of the Gulag experience, accusing her of trivializing the event. She notes derisively of Müller’s style in her review that: “Ihre Sterbenden haben ein ‘Totenäffchengesicht,’ ihr Tod ‘schunkelt’ zur Musik, das Bewachungslicht
The use of mathematical and religious imagery in Atemschaukel thus suggests that trauma possesses a dual nature, one whose meaning is partially grasped in the numbers, the victims it leaves behind; there is however a non-rational side to trauma, an overwhelming and inconceivable experience that cannot be understood, except by the initiated. It this unnarratable aspect of trauma that Müller tries to render via the idea of the numinous.

2.5 Representing Unnarratable Collective Memory: Trauma and Taboo

Rimon-Kenan’s study of Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved explores the ambivalence that surrounds the representation of Sethe and her family’s violent story of slavery, focusing especially on the declaration in the final chapter of the story, that “It was not a story to pass on.” She notes that this statement in particular highlights the tension between the need to tell or pass on versus the desire to forget or pass over, and concludes that even while the text speaks out against the transmission of the narrative it passes it on to its readers, the novel ultimately affirms narration as necessary both

morally and therapeutically. 78 Rimon-Kenan highlights a key feature of what can be referred to as the Unnarratable in postmodern trauma fictions, that is, taboo topics whose repression will often have the effect of returning to haunt future generations. Warhol has already identified taboo events in his definition of the unarratable, which also derives from Prince’s definition of the narratable as “that which is worthy of being told; that which is susceptible of or calls for narration.” 79 For Warhol then, “events that should not be told, because of manners, taboo, or literary convention” fall under the category of the unnarratable. 80 This is useful for understanding how Müller’s narrative confronts the imperative to forget and to remain silent about certain narratives that do not resonate with the masses. Where her language becomes cryptic and parabolic, we get the sense that she is addressing a contentious aspect of the community’s memory. The earlier discussion of Müller’s use of religious imagery in Atemschaukel focused mainly on her portrayal of trauma as a non-rational experience, one whose incomprehensibility cannot be adequately rendered in language, hence the flight to the religious in the hope of finding a comparable metonymic description. In her discussion of taboo topics Müller once again turns to Christian imagery, for obvious reasons; her emphasis on the notion of the scape-goat, both on the level of the individual—those selected for deportation to

78 ibid.
the labor camp—and the community—the condemnation of the Romanian German community for the complicity by the entire Romanian community—could not be more effectively illustrated than with the biblical image of Christ’s sacrifice. Beyond religion, however, the novel is informed by Freud’s notion of repression and the return of the repressed with regard to the denial of collective guilt, as well as repetition, which functions both as an indication of the breakdown of representation as well as desire to exorcize or eject unpleasant reminders of past events.

2.5.1 The Signs of the Times:

The parallel between Christ’s atoning sacrifice and Leo as the one elected to take away his community’s unspoken guilt and shame is one that Müller develops extensively in the novel. Leo repeatedly states of his deportation that his departure for the camp came at the right time (7). The notion of Leo as the chosen one is further developed when he recalls coincidentally wandering into a church, where he noticed a statue of Jesus with a sheep hanging around his neck. He then recounts how he had seen the signs of the times: “Ich habe die kommende Zeit gesehen,” (10) as though he had foreseen his arrest and deportation by the Russian authorities. He understands the sheep on Jesus’ neck to be a representation of silence, and his subsequent comment, “[e]s gibt Dinge über die man nicht spricht,” takes on a double meaning (10). While he is referring directly to his clandestine activities as a homosexual and the shame surrounding the
possibility of his being outing, we are also presented with the idea of the silence in the community over guilt that is unspeakable. Leo refers to his secret activities as “absonderlich, dreckig, schamlos” (8), and his own attitude during his preparation for his deportation as “dümmlichtapfer und gefügig,” (dumb and meek), emphasizing his lack of resistance: “Ich wehrte mich gegen nichts,” (11). The same descriptive adjectives are used in reference to the Christ in the bible, where the collective reaction to him by the masses is described as, “mit Abscheu,” and yet the sin he carried was not his own, and where he is compared to a dumb sheep before its shearer, and the meek lamb, led out to the slaughterhouse as he gave himself up for many. Müller extends this metaphor as her narrator observes a sign in the church that reads: “DER HIMMEL SETZT DIE ZEIT IN GANG;” he understands his deportation to be part of “die in Gang gesetzte Zeit” (11), a divinely ordained departure. Just as the biblical description of the Christ is one of as yet unfulfilled prophecy, so is Leo’s premonition as he observes these signs in the church. Müller’s emphasis on Leo’s status as an innocent sacrifice reveals her position on the notion of Kollektivschuld or collective guilt and its unfair targeting of the innocent for punishment. Her 17 year old narrator, who was too young to have participated in the war now has to pay for the perceived guilt of his community. In comparing him to the Christ, she seeks out the classic example of innocent sacrifice. As we have seen in the earlier example of Stilpo as the paradigm for displacement, this is

81 cf. Isaiah: 53.
consistent with Müller’s style of narration, employing archetypes to refer to universal experiences that are of an unrepresentable nature.

2.5.2 Displacement and Repression of Collective Guilt: Der Koffer

When Leo is picked up by the Russian and Romanian authorities on the night of January 15th, 1945, he and other fellow deportees are gathered in a hall to await their transportation to the labor camp. As he waits, Leo doses off and has a dream, where he and his mother are standing in front of a freshly dug grave. In place of a casket there is a “Koffer” with a leather handle, on which his mother suggests that they write a name, since they do not know whose funeral they are attending. She proposes the name “RUTH,” because they know no one by that name; As he writes the name Leo transposes the letters and writes “RUHT,” noting that, “[i]m Traum war mir klar, dass ich gestorben bin” (16). The use of the term “Koffer” in place of “Sarg” for a coffin is striking, more so because it takes the reader back to the opening scene of the novel, where Leo is packing his belongings into a hastily prepared Gramophone box that is also referred to as a “Koffer” made of leather. The use of the signifier “Koffer” to represent the coffin in this dream scene causes us to go back and review our earlier impressions of the seemingly innocent account of packing at the onset of the narrative.

Leo notes that because he was going to the Russians, “wollte mir jeder etwas geben [...] “Und ich habe es genommen” (7). He packs nothing of his own but takes items from his
community—his immediate and extended family as well as his neighbor; “[d]as Meinige war es nicht” (7). In the dream scene, the burial of the Koffer and the imperative inscribed on it—Ruht—is indicative of a desire that whatever lies in the box should remain where it is, resting in peace, or even possibly, remaining repressed. The dream scene, which is brief, remains disconnected from the events that follow. Its meaning is however completed by a scene after Leo’s return from the Lager where the Koffer now ceases to have a function beyond its original use as a Gramophone case, as though it had never been anything but that:

Das Grammophon war wieder in mein abgenutztes Köfferchen eingebaut und stand auf dem Ecktisch wie immer. Die selben grünen und blauen Gardinen ließen sich hängen, dieselben Blumenfenster schlängelten sich in den Teppichen, die verfilzten Fransen säumten sie immer noch ein. die Schränke und Türen quietschten beim Öffnen und Schließen wie eh und je. 272 (emphasis added)

The focus of the quoted passage is not an emphasis on the return to normality after Leo’s return, but on a complete denial of his five year absence. If collective guilt imposes harsh and unfair judgment on the innocent individual, collective repression deals an even harder blow. The statement about the possessions carried to the camps, that they were not his own, can be understood to refer to the collective guilt that Leo carried on behalf of his community. The burial of the Koffer then points to the repression of this guilt, and the return of the case to a complete denial that this guilt had ever existed. The impact of the family’s denial of the past on the individual, Leo, is presented in yet another set of opposing expressions that reveal his conflicted situation, as he attempts to come to terms
both with the feeling of the erasure of an experience that he has not even began to
comprehend, as well as the feeling of his own erasure as a result of the birth of a baby
brother during his absence: “Nichts ging mich was an. Ich war eingesperrt in mich und
aus mir herausgeworfen, ich gehörte nicht ihnen und fehlte mir” (272). The sense of
hopelessness is evoked by the hopelessness of the choices offered by either pole: he
swings from being “locked in” and “thrown out,” “does not belong to them” and
“missing (from) himself.”

2.5.3 Competing Narratives: Der Ersatzbruder

The image of the replacement of the Grammophone case in its original position is
completed by the presence of a new member of the family who inspires in Leo the
unusual feeling of repulsion; unusual because this is his younger brother whom Leo
however regards as his “replacement.” He notes of his brother:

Alles, was Robert tat, war mir unheimlich. Er war ein zusammengebautes
Kind - seine Augen von der Mutter […]. Seine Oberlippe von der
Großmutter […]. Seine gewölbten Fingernägel waren vom Großvater […].
Seine Ohren von mir und meinem Onkel Edwin. (275-76)

Leo’s use of the word unheimlich in reference to the emotions that his brother inspires
immediately points to Freud and his notion of the uncanny. It is true that much of Leo’s
sentiments can be attributed to the fact that he has been away from home for a length of
time and has not been able to find his bearing in his relatively new surroundings. Freud
notes that “[j]e besser ein Mensch in der Umwelt orientiert ist, destoweniger leicht wird
Leo feels like a stranger and notes that he inhaled and exhaled Russian, “atmete russisch” and smelled of distance “roch nach Entfernung” (273). There is however another reason his brother inspires the feeling of unease in him. Leo constantly refers to his brother as his substitute or *Ersatzbruder*, because he is a constant reminder that he should not have survived the camp, that one of them is a double, an imposter, and that the two cannot coexist. The image of Leo’s brother both as a substitute brother as well as an alternative narrative is developed long before Leo’s return home from the *Lager*.

When Leo first receives the news of his brother’s birth, it is in the form of a postcard sent to him at the camp by his mother, with a neatly sewn on photo of the baby on the front. This “angenähte Kind”, a “stitched-on child”, as Leo refers to him, stares back at him in what turns out to be a very Lacanian moment:


   Robert, geb. am 17. April 1947. […]

   Mein Puls klopft in der Karte, nicht in der Hand, in der ich sie halte […]. So wie die Mutter geboren mit GEB. abkürzt, würde sie auch gestorben mit GEST. abkürzen. Sie hat es schon getan. Schämt sich die Mutter nicht mit ihrer akkuraten Steppnaht aus weißem Zwirn, dass ich unter der Zeile lesen muss:

   Meinetwegen kannst du sterben, wo du bist. (212-13)

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The scene represents a moment of recognition for Leo, a moment where he looks at his brother and sees his own image as though in a mirror held up to him by his own mother, the image threatens him with annihilation, his pulse ‘beats’ not in his own hand, but in the image he holds, his replacement. Leo feels his own death announced: “Meinetwegen kannst du sterben,” is his interpretation of the image presented to him by his mother.

Stalin’s role in the triadic constellation described by Leo is an interesting one. This is the only time in the novel that he is referred to by name, and the only other indication of his presence would be the dates provided in the novel, during which the narrative occurs. As such it is significant that Leo should note the way Stalin stares at all of them in the face; for even with the competing forms of memory that Leo and his “Ersatzbruder” represent, Stalin stands for the Symbolic Order, he is the Law, and thus the official memory that takes precedence over both.

Leo’s interpretation of his mother’s message—that she expected him to die at the Lager—is further confirmed in the family’s reaction to his return: “der Schrecken [war] größer als die Überraschung,” (272). It also becomes clear that it is not only his family but the community as a whole that did not expect him back. His neighbor tells him in an almost accusatory manner: “Man hat ja gedacht, dass du tot bist. [...] Jeder hat ja geglaubt, dass du tot bist” (271). There is almost a sense of disappointment that makes one wonder whether the reaction of “Schrecken” to his departure (7) and the same
“Schrecken” that characterized his return had less to do with Leo’s welfare than with the community’s desire to be rid of a repressed memory that threatened to return and disrupt their lives.

The horror with which Leo’s return is met further emphasizes the notion of the uncanny, this time in relation to the return of the repressed. As already mentioned, Leo’s reception indicated that his return was unexpected, and yet, throughout the novel, Leo constantly hears his grandmother’s words echoing in his mind “Ich weiß du kommst wieder.” These are the words his grandmother speaks at the moment when he is all packed up and ready to leave for the labor camp. This moment of departure is described with an accuracy that lends importance both to the words uttered by the grandmother and to the participants in the conversation. He stands together with his mother and grandmother, “[a]uf dem Holzgang, genau dort, wo die Gasuhr ist” (14). This precise description of their location, together with the positioning of the representatives of three generations, grandmother, mother and son, lend significance to her parting words: “ICH WEISS DU KOMMST WIEDER” (14). Although they do not fully register in his mind at that moment, he later notes that the words accompanied him to the camp, serving him more than any of the books he had carried with him (14).

The idea that his grandmother promises or desires Leo’s return appears contradictory to the initial interpretation of the symbolic sendoff by the community with a “Koffer” containing their possessions as a hidden desire to have him be the sacrifice
for their own collective guilt. She however appears in this scene as a sort of archetypal figure that has the task of ensuring continuity in the community. The utterance carries meaning beyond the promise that she makes. Leo’s grandmother takes on a more mythical role of ensuring, promising that there will be continuity in the family even though he is being dragged off somewhere in the middle of a cold winter. Her desire that he return seems to find fulfillment in a twofold manner: first, in the birth of his Ersatzbruder, and second, in what is for the family an unexpected and unpleasant event, in his “return from the dead.” He is indeed more like a revenant and regards himself as such, as we see in his comment about his late grandfather, about whom he remarks that he had died and remained with the dead as opposed to the narrator who had returned from the dead (270).

As a revenant and an unpleasant reminder of the past it is left to his substitute to ensure that he leaves given that there is room for only one narrative. Müller once again turns to Freud to show how the community symbolically ejects Leo from their midst. When Leo starts going to work after his return from the Lager his grandmother asks him: “Bist du gekommen,” to which Leo responds: “Ich bin gekommen.” When he leaves for work his grandmother will ask the opposite: “Gehst du weg.” Leo’s younger brother picks up on the daily pattern of questions and answers and forms his own fort! da! game, with the only difference being the reversal of the order of words. In Freud’s notion of the fort! da! game the child figures out a way in play to compensate for his feeling of passive
victimization resulting from the feeling of being robbed of the presence of his mother, by making it into something that he has control over, through an act of repetition in play. In the case of Leo’s brother it becomes a da! fort! game, as he repeatedly confronts his brother daily with the words “Bist du gekommen, gehst du weg.” Leo notes that he always had the urge to strangle his brother, every time he heard the words: “Jedesmal wollte ich dem Ersatzbruder den Hals zudrücken, wenn er das fragte.” (267). The urge to strangle his brother recalls a previous scene discussed earlier in the chapter, where Leo remembers strangling a kitten because it had scratched his finger: “Ich habe ganz zugedrückt, und zwar am Hals” (81). The words by his brother threaten him as they appear to desire his departure, and he has the urge to lash out at him in self-defense. What is interesting is that he ultimately does leave, first to get married, before finally departing from the country and thereby the community with the promise that he would never return.

In this chapter I have looked at Herta Müller’s Atemschaukel as an example of what Hirsch has referred to as postmemory, writing that is marked by inherited traumatic memory of events experienced by earlier generations and whose effects are transmitted to subsequent younger generations. I have examined the paradoxical nature of trauma; its demand to be remembered, on the one hand, and the challenge it poses to representation, on the other. A study of Müller’s language shows how trauma is

83 Sigmund Freud. Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 9.
revealed in language, not only in traumatic repetition, but also in its failure to adequately signify. The failure to find a verbal signifier to represent the experience causes the traumatized individual to dip into a vertical chain of signifiers that are contextually related, allowing him to access traumatic memory via less unpleasant or threatening memories. In the chapter I have also suggested that Müller’s frequent use of opposing structures that simulate the swinging motion suggested by the novel’s title *Atemschaukel*, also function as metonymic concepts that serve to grant access to inaccessible memory, while also locking the individual in a traumatic clasp through its back and forth swinging motion. Müller’s iconic language, in particular her use of religious imagery, reveal trauma’s inconceivable non-rational nature which overwhelms the individual and yet remains a mystery to those who have not yet experienced it. Her choice of imagery suggests that the traumatic experience may by similar to the experience of the non-rational aspect of religion, that of the holy or *das Heilige*. The chapter concludes by looking at another aspect of unnarratable trauma, that is, taboo topics that are at the heart of collective trauma and which ultimately combine to exacerbate the situation of the individual who has undergone traumatic events.

Giorgio Agamben notes that “to bear witness is to place oneself in one’s own language in the position of those who have lost it.” He further states that poetic word “is the one that is always situated in the position of a remnant and that can therefore bear
witness.”⁸⁴ He is making reference in particular to Celan, his broken language that survives the impossibility of speaking, but the same holds true for Herta Müller’s poetic word. Her novel documents a traumatic chapter in the history of a community that has virtually disappeared because of migration and absorption into the larger German community. While the historical community is no more, Müller’s language has not vanished with it; she has written in the language that remains, articulating a traumatic moment that has eluded many who had experienced it.

3. Spaces, Dislocations and Itineraries: Tracing Trauma in Zsuzsa Bánk’s Der Schwimmer

3.1 Going Home

“Wenn wir nicht nach Vat zurückkehren konnten, wollte ich mich gar nicht mehr bewegen. Ich wollte nicht in andere Häuser, auf fremde Höfe” (Bánk 66). With this simple ultimatum, the narrator of Zsuzsa Bánk’s peripatetic novel, Der Schwimmer registers her desire to return home, a longing for a return to the stable center that the familial home symbolizes. It is a reiteration of earlier appeals to her father, amid the disorienting existence she and her younger brother have been subjected to since their mother’s departure: “Ist und ich, wir sagten, daß wir zurückwollten. Wohin?, fragte mein Vater, [...] nach Hause” (21). Going back home, as Yi-Fu Tuan describes it, is both a temporal and spatial movement, representing a return to the origin and to the familiarity of the past. In his seminal study on space and place, he gives the example of a worker, heading back home in the evening from work, “tracing his steps back in space and going back in time—to the familiar haven of the home.”¹ The movement to work—which represents a movement toward the unfamiliar—is a movement forward toward the future and uncertainty, because there is always a potential for change and surprise, while the movement home represents a return to what we remember as secure and predictable. We see a similar tension in the narrator’s utterance, between the longing for

“zurück nach Vat” (the location of the family home) and the rejection of “andere Häuser, fremde Höfe.” Her future, portrayed in the movement forward is experienced as unbearable, and in the absence of a calm center, the past, as represented by the home, the narrator threatens immobility, as if to force time to stand still. Trauma and its representation in space and time is the focus of this present chapter, which aims to address a number of questions: How does physical displacement in Bánk’s novel correlate with displacement in consciousness, and what is the implication for our understanding of trauma and memory? What do the sudden departures, the recurrent states of immobility, and the narrator’s changing perception of the progress of time inform us about space as an alternative medium for the representation of traumatic memory?\(^2\) Finally, does trauma travel through space and time? Is the trauma of one generation transmittable to future generations and does a traumatic event that affects one group impact others who are spatially removed from the event but indirectly gain knowledge of it? These questions build on discussions from the previous chapter where we looked at the problem of \textit{unnarratability}, both in terms of the inadequacy of language to represent trauma, as well as the defense against narration brought on by the community’s censorship of certain past events as taboo. We looked at how the fragmented and stunted language of \textit{Atemschaukel}, while exposing its failure to represent

\(^2\) Caruth’s arguments about the unrepresentability of trauma have already been outlined in the previous chapter.
traumatic events signifies to the trauma by its very inadequacy. As we shall see with Bánk’s novel, not all trauma fictions struggle with language in the representation of traumatic experience. The prose of Der Schwimmer is simple and the narration childlike; the narrative events are well connected, following a logical sequence and with no gap in the narration. Unlike most trauma fictions whose structures, marked by fragmented narrative and disrupted chronology, mimic the traumatic rupture they attempt to know and to represent, this novel is characterized both by its solid structure—the “tidy” weaving of events—and the remarkable clarity of the memories described. This seemingly innocuous method of rendering a narrative that is saturated with pain and suffering is particularly unsettling for the reader, because the devastating events that the narrator describes are so overwhelming as to finally claim the life of her brother and yet she seems to emerge unscathed and able to compile a coherent life story.

The question of the possibility of trauma’s temporal and spatial migration may be belated in the sense that we have already introduced the notion of transgenerational trauma in the previous chapter, when looking at how a community’s refusal to acknowledge past traumatic events—choosing instead to bury them and move on—exacerbates the already devastating effects of trauma on the individual. What is buried however returns to haunt future generations in the form of postmemory. We highlighted Atemschaukel as an example of the emergence of belated traumatic memory that surfaced after the collapse of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe following the breakup of the
Soviet Union. Hirsch’s notion of postmemory, which we touched on briefly in the introduction, remains significant for this and subsequent chapters. Her conception of this form of inherited memory will be developed further with particular emphasis on the representation and transmission of trauma as a temporal and spatial problem. The possession and the haunting suggested in the recurrent phrase in Müller’s novel, “Ich weiß du kommst wieder,” spoken by a grandmother to her grandchild hints at the return of unacknowledged, unresolved events, orienting the trauma to the future and to the possession of later generations. In this chapter, as we shift our focus from language, we continue to look at other ways in which trauma is unveiled in narratives, while attempting to develop an understanding as to why younger generations of writers from post-communist backgrounds feel the need to appropriate and represent traumatic memories that are not their own.

3.2 Der Schwimmer

*Der Schwimmer* tells the story of individual lives whose tragic fates are inextricably linked to their country’s political situation, both past and present, as well as to events around Europe during the Cold War. It is a story of loss both at an individual and national level. The euphoria over the initial success of the Hungarian Uprising of October 1956 is prematurely cut short when it is bloodily suppressed by Soviet troops, who move into the country in November of the same year. During this period, the
country has come to a virtual standstill, as over 200,000 Hungarians flee across the border, via Austria, en route to different destinations in the West. Although there is no indication that the narrator’s mother was involved in the revolt in any way, or that their hometown, Vat was affected by the revolt that crippled Budapest, as well as several mining and industrial towns of Hungary, she sees the flow of refugees to the West as an opportunity to seek a new life for herself, first in Austria and then in Germany. She leaves behind her husband and two young children, Kata the narrator and her younger brother Isti, who are stunned by the abrupt and unanticipated departure. The mother’s sudden departure westwards, prompts what is for the narrator an equally surprising counter-movement by her father, who takes his children on a train journey eastwards, the beginning of a nomadic lifestyle that adversely affects the children, resulting in devastating death of Kata’s brother. Her father’s original intention is to travel back to his maternal home, beyond Miskolc, a town at the eastern border with the Ukraine.

However, after travelling aimlessly on trains for several days, he makes an abrupt stop in Budapest, at the home of the children’s godmother, a pause in their journey that will last several months. This stay is followed by a series of journeys to the country’s eastern border with the then Czechoslovakia, then southward to Szolnok via Debrecen, before

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heading west again, this time to the lakeside town of Síofok. The family’s circuitous journey does not end there; tragic events uproot them once more, and they repeat their journey eastwards, this time first to his maternal home beyond Miskolc and finally to Serencs. As the narrator concludes her story, she mentions in passing that she finally moved away from Serencs, back west to Síofok, where she was patiently awaiting travel papers that would allow her to finally join her mother in Germany. At this time she is speaking in the narrative present. The final stretch to Germany represents the journey to her future and by this time she is no longer anxious, because she has constructed her past and time is no longer the threat it once symbolized. She concludes her narrative with the words: “Ich kann warten, ja” (367), indicating that she is in no hurry to receive her travel documents which usually require lengthy periods for processing.

For a novel involving dizzying amounts of travel and displacement, it is surprisingly lacking in plot, or rather, the plot is fairly static, describing days of idling around, swimming or simply lying down and staring blankly into the air, punctuated by periods of misfortune and displacement. As earlier pointed out, the narration appears, on the surface, to be consistent and air tight. This however turns out to be deceptive—as the reader later finds out toward the end of the narrative, when the Kata remarks:

“Wieviel Zeit zwischen diesem und unserem ersten Sommer am See lag? [...] Ob Jahre oder Monate – einen Unterschied macht es nicht, auch nicht ob alles zusammenhängt, wie ich mich erinnere, ob es wirklich uns gegeben hat, wie ich es denke, uns oder die
anderen” (267). Has she created an imaginary universe that makes sense to her in the face of the shattering of her own experiential world? At this point—even as the narrator invites the reader to doubt the reliability of her narration—we are too far gone in our reading of the narrative to question the veracity of the events because, first, the sequence of events makes sense to us, given that we have travelled with the narrator to real places via cities that we can trace on the map; moreover, the lived experiences of the people she describes correspond to the political climate of the period, and second, aside from reflections on her brother’s and sometimes her own fragile state of mind, a large part of the narrative she constructs is made up of memories she has collected from the adults she has come into contact with in the course of her family’s constant dislocation, which serves to corroborate her narrative. More attention will be devoted to a discussion of this narrative strategy that Bánek employs in her representation of trauma. Beyond her endeavor to render trauma effectively in narrative, however, she is certainly making a point about the constructedness of memory and history, one which echoes historian Peter Burke’s own observation that, “[r]emembering the past and writing about it no longer seem the innocent activities they were once taken to be. Neither memories nor histories seem objective any longer.”4 However distorted her narrative may be, it is a collection of private memories and experiences of people spatially removed from one

another from which a collective history emerges, one that fills the gap created by the Hungarian regime’s imperative to forget. As discussions in this chapter will reveal, Bánk’s story of an individual family tragedy is highly allegorical in nature. The mother’s flight westward and the father’s flight eastward together with his children parallel Hungary’s own attempt to be aligned with the west during the cold war, a effort firmly rejected by the Soviet regime that aggressively pushed Hungary further to the left.

5 Kovács and Seewan make reference to politically instituted “Denkblockaden” that prevented the remembering or commemoration of any of the traumatic events of the 20th century, beginning with the 1920 “Trauma of Trianon,” followed by the post 1945 events which included the expulsion of Hungarian Germans, the collectivization of private land and finally the failed Hungarian Revolt of 1956. Kóvacs and Seewan. 817-18.
3.3 Displacing Trauma

One vital key to Kata’s success as a narrator is in the way she undertakes to represent her life story, both as and through the story of others. Her art of skillful displacement allows her to depict pain and suffering, first as the experience of others, before reflecting the same experience onto herself. Throughout the narrative, she does not allow herself to be separated from her brother whose actions and state of mind she

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describes with great detail and acuity. In a reverse movement, she then proceeds to attribute the same experiences to herself. This way, the reader can conclude that the harrowing events that culminate in the death of her brother must have left a deep wound in the narrator—who was with him throughout his experiences—such that she should have died, but did not; this is the essence of trauma.\(^7\) Representation of trauma, as we have already seen in the previous chapter is viewed as theoretically impossible, because it is an unprecedented experience, and as such is not known, and not available to one’s consciousness for representation. Leigh Gilmore’s study on trauma and autobiography discusses this uneasy relationship between self-representation and the representation of trauma. She observes that “[w]hen self-representation and the representation of trauma coincide, the conflicting demands potentially make autobiography theoretically impossible.” How then, she asks,

> can the exploration of trauma and the burden it imposes on memory be representative? […] How can one tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, when facts, truth, and memory combine in the representation of trauma to undermine rather than strengthen representativeness?\(^8\)

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\(^7\) The chapter “Traumatic Departures” in Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experiences*, begins with a quotation from the film *The Pawnbroker*, where Sol responds to a question about the details of his elusive traumatic Holocaust. His succinct response, “I didn’t die” to the question “What happened?” accurately summarizes the incomprehensible, unbelievable nature of the traumatic event. Cathy Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 57. In Bánk’s *Der Schwimmer*, the narrator is struggling to know and to come to terms with an experience that killed her brother, but more than that, the extreme nature of her suffering can only be legitimated by the experiences of her brother.

Bánk’s narrator appears to proceed with her narrative, conscious of these limitations imposed by the elusiveness of traumatic experience, because throughout the narrative she arrives at a consciousness of herself via the consciousness of other people or things. The novel which can be classified as a fictional autobiography is a story of the young narrator, but only via the experiences of her brother and of other figures in her narrative. This way she overcomes the paradox of self-representation in the representation of trauma.

At the beginning of the novel we encounter a narrator unsure of herself and her past. Beginning the narrative with a statement about herself, in a position of lack, anxiety, and a memory deficit—“Ich hatte wenige Erinnerungen an meine Mutter” (7)—the narrator then follows a circular trajectory concluding her narrative, once more with a reflection about herself, this time calm and devoid of the anxiety with which she opened her narration, repeatedly asserting: “es macht nichts, es macht gar nichts, ich kann warten [...] Ich kann warten, ja” (367). These two opening and closing observations of herself form a frame within which she weaves a series of narratives comprising accounts about others around her and what they notice about her. While the circumstances described in the story make it apparent that she is undergoing extreme suffering, she will often not reveal her own suffering until another character betrays the same symptoms. And even then she will be vague about her own condition, often euphemizing her descriptions of herself. Maintaining a distance to suffering, she
describes the experience of the other traumatized individual, before attributing a similar experience to herself. During one of her family’s numerous journeys, for instance, she arrives at her aunt’s home in Síofok and is surprised by her uncle’s decrepit state; his skull has collapsed and it looks, she notes “als habe sie [die Stirn] jemand zertrümmern wollen” (84). Her aunt informs her that she should not be too concerned, stressing repeatedly that he is simply tired: “er ist nur ein bißchen müde. Weißt du: müde. Weißt du was das ist? Müde?” The narrator confirming her aunt’s declaration also uses repetition to signify that she understands this unique type of fatigue: “Ja, ich wußte was das war: müde, und wie es war müde zu sein, selbst ich war schon müde gewesen, befallen von dieser Art von Müdigkeit, an die Ági jetzt dachte” (84; emphasis added). The “Müdigkeit” is the euphemistic descriptor for the debilitating condition afflicting her uncle whose skull had began to cave in following the death of his own daughter. As the narrator confesses to an understanding of the fatigue, she also claims to have been afflicted with it, leaving the reader to infer that she suffers (or has suffered in the past) from a loss similar to the one responsible for the condition crippling her uncle.

The displacement of suffering is perhaps most evident in her extreme and sometimes pathological concern for her brother, which can be seen as an effort to come to terms with the suffering that she herself is experiencing. While she often comes across as psychologically balanced, we sometimes get a glimpse into her own psychological state as she reflects on her brother’s condition. She describes, for example, her loss of
consciousness of time by initially referring to her brother, stating: “er wußte nicht, wie lange wir bei Zsófi waren, wie lange wir dort blieben, und ich, ich wußte es auch nicht mehr” (56; emphasis added). She gives the impression that she is only able to access her experience via her brother. Even as she goes to great lengths to depict her brother as severely unbalanced, we are often in doubt as to who between the two of them is the troubled individual. She paints an image of her brother as a deeply troubled schizophrenic, claiming for instance, that he hears objects such as leaves and water talking, or that he is anticipating “ein Wunder.” She however follows these descriptions with a quick defense of his actions, confirming what he has heard to be real and not the product of an imagination gone rogue. She asserts: “ich weiß, Isti hat es wirklich gehört, nicht nur in seiner Vorstellung,” and spends days lying down beside him, listening for the same sounds that he hears (136). The boundary between her brother’s and her own experiences are also revealed to the reader as often blurred, as revealed in a scene where she places her fingers on her brother’s temples while he sleeps and is unable to discern whether the vibration she felt emanated from her fingers or from his temples (77).

Kata begins her family story by setting up her brother as weak and frail, as an individual likely to succumb to the effects of trauma. In contrast she presents herself as the stronger of the two: “Isti sah so aus, daß man heimlich fragte wie krank er sei. Und ich, ich sah aus wie ein Junge” (13). People would ask, not whether her brother was ill, but rather; they would inquire about the severity of his illness. The reader thus comes to
expect and accept the representations of the traumatic experiences via her brother’s
deteriorating condition and readily admit that the extreme events would also adversely
impact the narrator. Through her brother, Kata is also able to pinpoint her own elusive
traumatic moment, as well as to describe the effect that the unexpected event has had on
her. She traces Isti’s psychotic behavior to the unexpected departure of her mother
before finally tracing the two events to herself:

Seit dem Herbst, in dem meine Mutter in einen Zug gestiegen war, seit
Isti Stunden und Tage damit verbrachte, auf dem Bett zu liegen und zu
dämmern, seit er angefangen hatte, Dinge ohne Ton zu hören, hatte ich
Angst um ihn, und ich wurde diese Angst nicht mehr los. (133)

Kata however, maintains that her own anxiety is limited to her concern over the well-
being her brother. In reality, she projects her own fear and anxiety onto her brother. The
destabilization triggered by her mother’s departure is “repackaged” and “re-presented”
as an overwhelming concern for her younger brother. Kata becomes obsessed with
following his every move, even fantasizing obsessively about his own death:

Selbst wenn Isti Hühnchen aß, hatte ich Angst um ihn. Ich hatte Angst, er
würde sich verschlucken, ein winziger Knochen würde in seinem Hals
steckenbleiben, Isti würde rot anlaufen, nach Luft schnappen, husten, mit
dem Stuhl nach hinten kippen, die Tischdecke mitreißen und fallen [...].
Wir würden auf seinen Rücken schlagen, auf seine schmale Brust, Agí
würde schreien, mein Vater würde Isti an den Knöcheln fassen, ihn
kopfüber hängen und schütteln, dabei auf seine Füße schauen, die
langsam aufhören würden, sich zu bewegen. (134-35)

Her fears become so irrational that she will not let him out of her sight: “Ich verbot ihm,
das Haus zu verlassen [...] und ich sagte ihm, er dürfe nichts vom Hühnchen essen, das
Agí aufgetischt hatte, und Isti hielt sich daran” (135). As Kata’s neurosis begins to manifest itself in her seemingly subjective descriptions of her brother, her controlling fear for Isti revealed in the repeated phrase “ich hatte Angst um ihn” is exposed as no more than her own displaced anxiety over the loss of her mother. Given that her mother left the house on what appeared to be a normal day, without warning, Kata is anxious about normal everyday activities such as eating or walking out of the door. We have the sense that the narrative succeeds in its representation of trauma. Kata steps out of the isolation imposed by trauma’s refusal to be represented, via her brother’s own experiences.

3.4 Trauma’s Past, Present and Future

3.5.1 Space and Freezing Time

While we have repeatedly described Der Schwimmer as a book of displacement, the movement depicted is often purposeless and circular in nature, as if the displaced characters were forced to move and once in motion continued to do so unwillingly. As soon as they find pause, they often freeze or resume their purposless movement. This sense of paralysis betrays a reluctance to advance, to move ahead, as if the future were so unbearable, threatening, or were without prospect. A simple journey by train, for instance, which would normally entail a scheduled departure and arrival, and thus a movement toward a goal, is described in the novel as being not quite as straightforward
as one would expect. When Kata and her family abruptly leave their home in Vat, after their mother’s departure, the initial train journey is complicated when the narrator’s father avoids making a decision on a final destination. He chooses instead to subject his children to several days of riding back and forth on trains, with no goal in mind, as though trapped in space. The fixed state is only disrupted when the narrator’s brother, who has been wailing endlessly, draws the attention of other passengers on board. This functions as a signal for the father to abruptly alight with them from the train in Budapest, which marks the halfway point to their intended destination in the east. The movement back and forth in the trains captures the family’s predicament as they are portrayed as stuck in a traumatic moment, trapped not only in space but also in time. It symbolizes the moment of loss, when the children’s mother embarked unexpectedly on her own train journey to the West. The train in this situation serves as a powerful temporal and spatial metaphor, marking precisely the place and time of the missed experience.

Foucault’s fleeting remark in his essay “Of Other Spaces,” that the train is “an extraordinary bundle of relations because it is something through which one goes, it is also something by means of which one can go from one point to another, and then it is also something that goes by,” highlights the significance of the train’s temporal nature
beyond it’s obvious function as a means of physical displacement.⁹ Aside from the family’s multiple journeys by train, the children are fixated on the train timetables and commit the departure times to memory, as though this might in some way redeem them from any fault that may have led to their mother’s departure:

überall im Land, wo immer wir waren, gingen Isti und ich an Bahnhöfe, um auf Abfahrtsplänen nach Zügen zu suchen [...]. Selbst wenn wir einen Ort längst schon verlassen hatten, behielt er [Isti] die Abfahrtzeiten von dort im Gedächtnis. Wir machten es zu einem unserer Spiele. Isti forderte, frag mich was, ich nannte ihm einen Ort, und er sagte mir die Zeiten dazu. Für Abfahrt und Ankunft. (29-30)

Both the seemingly aimless rides back and forth in the train as well as the memory game involving journeys to the train station repeatedly perform a representation of the traumatic event in space. The former mimics a departure and return, as though reenact the departure of the narrator’s mother and a desire for her return, while the latter performs the knowledge of the departure times as their way of forestalling any future surprise departures. The concept of spatialization as representation has been extensively dealt with by Laclau and later by Doreen Massey, who builds her argument on Laclau’s own theories of space. Laclau uses Freud’s fort!da! paradigm to demonstrate the way in which representation occurs through spatialization, as revealed in the game through which the child in Freud’s example deals with the absence of his mother, an event he

⁹ Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec. “Of Other Spaces.” Diacritics. 16.1. (1986): 23-24. (emphasis added). The essay focuses specifically on heterotopias or real spaces that contest sites in a specific society. The mention of the train, meant as an aside, bears little relation to his main argument. His observations about the temporal and spatial aspects of the train are nonetheless fascinating and relevant.
regards as traumatic. The game, for Laclau performs not only the mother’s absence, but rather a series of presence-absences whose succession becomes “a total structure, a space for symbolic representation and constitution. The spatialization of the event’s temporality takes place through repetition.”10 Representation for Laclau involves the elimination of all temporality through space, given that he views space as the “exact” opposite of time.11 In Bánk’s novel however, we often experience a juxtaposition of space and time, as opposed to the existence of one dimension to the exclusion of the other. Whereas for Laclau time represents dislocation, while space lacks it, disrupted time in Der Schwimmer is correspondingly represented as disrupted space, while displacement in space has its respective displacement in time, both forward and backward. The game that the children create out of the train timetables functions in a similar manner to the one in Freud’s fort-da paradigm; however, it does much more. By memorizing the departure and return (“Abfahrt und Ankunft”), the children castigate themselves for missing their mother’s departure, while also performing a desire for her return.

The train as a temporal marker goes beyond framing the traumatic moment in the present; its function as a sort of time machine is revealed in the way the narrator’s consciousness is displaced into the past the moment she and her family embark on a journey by train. On one occasion, as they travel via Debrecen to Szolnok, the presence

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11 ibid.
of uniformed soldiers on the train remind her of her father’s time in the army, where he had a close call with death when he was to be executed by firing squad for sabotaging an army vehicle. Moments before the planned execution, her father received a pardon, thereby narrowly escaping death (73). The fact that the presence of the soldiers in the train would trigger a traumatic memory that is not hers to recall, would strike the reader as odd, because she was not there to experience the event. And yet, it becomes her traumatic moment to be reminded of and to describe. Via the train she is not only displaced into the past but, more specifically, into her father’s past.

In a similar manner, during another a train trip, this time to her father’s maternal home yet another family trauma is uncovered, this time the suicide of the narrator’s paternal grandfather after the loss of his property during the forced collectivization of private land shortly after World War II. The hands of the clock on the wall remain stuck, motionlessly pointing to the time of his death (314). In what appears to be a passing down of the traumatic event from one generation to another, the narrator’s brother reads

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12 This memory also recalls the experience of Dostoevsky who, accused of conspiracy and sentenced to death together with other prisoners, had his sentence commuted to life imprisonment moments before he was to be executed. The pardon had the effect of causing several of the prisoners to faint, while Dostoevskiy, who had suffered epilepsy since he was a child, experienced a worsening of his condition as a direct result of the near death experience. See Shoshana Felman. “Education and Crisis or the Vicissitudes of Teaching” Trauma: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History. Ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. (London: Routledge, 1992), 10-11. With this allusion to Dostoevsky’s encounter with death, Bánk’s narrator positions her father as a victim of state oppression, and subsequently a trauma victim. More than that, however, by travelling back in time, to his past, she identifies herself as a victim of inherited trauma.
out the time on the clock, an action that she feels has implications for them: “Viertel nach vier, als sei es neu für uns, daß diese Uhr nur eine Zeit zeigte und wir sie nicht aufziehen durften” (315).

The arrested or frozen state becomes a motif for trauma that runs through the entire novel, marking in space what, for the victim, would normally be a highly elusive moment, unlocatable in time. Right at the beginning of the novel we have a description of the narrator’s father right after his wife’s departure, lying motionless on the kitchen bench, staring at his wife’s pictures. This “diving” as Kata calls it, is his default position for the better part of her narrative: “Tagsüber dämmerte er mit geöffneten Augen auf einer Liege und war nicht ansprechbar. Er tauchte [...] und also Zsófi ihm die Uhrzeit nannte, schaute er sie an, also könne er sie nicht verstehen” (54). His children would make a language game out of this tendency to go “diving,” asking one another, “Vater taucht. Vater ist zum Tauchen gegangen. Ist Vater zurück vom Tauchen?” (8). In this trance-like state, time for him loses its objective meaning, and it is as though he were in a world where everything stands suspended in the present. His moments of immobility do not however prompt any sense of alarm for the narrator, possibly because as an adult she expects him to be resilient. Her brother, however, who since his mother’s departure constantly falls into a stupor, she depicts as the image of helplessness: “Wenn [...] uns niemand bemerkte, fiel Isti in seinen Dämmerzustand” (50). His trance-like states, which become more acute with time, reveal a sense of increasing hopelessness and loss of
perspective. She is particularly keen on framing moments when he is in this frozen or motionless state: “Wenn Isti mit seiner Jacke and einem Türgriff hängenblieb,” (72) or “Isti [...] rannte in die Felder und blieb irgendwann stehen, regungslos [...]. Er hätte alles sein können, ein Baum, ein Strauch oder ein Tier, das sich ausruht” (50). The capturing of these moments in space, represent his troubled, traumatized state, transfixed in one point in the present.

Both the stasis and the purposeless movement are very closely linked to the representation of time in the novel. It is often the action in time that prompts a similar reaction in space although it is occasionally presented as the inverse. One apt example is seen in the narrator’s experience of the city of Budapest, their first lengthy stop after their displacement from their home town. Budapest is experienced by the narrator as claustrophobic and grey, with nothing but concrete, brick walls and doors (20). This description presents the city as limiting, immobilizing and indeed, it is Budapest in late November or early December of 1956, a catastrophic time for the citizens. Kata however, makes no mention of the political events, nor of the historic date, describing instead her own inner state: “Es war, als habe jemand alle Uhren zum Stehen gebracht, als liefe die Zeit für uns nicht weiter. So, als habe man Isti und mich in Sirup fallen lassen und dort vergessen” (20). Time appears to stagnate solely for her brother and herself; the freezing of time in Budapest points however, both to the inner turmoil faced by the narrator on a personal level, as well as to the general climate in the city. The stoppage of time and the
immobility in juxtaposition to each other represent the traumatic moment both in the narrator's personal life and in the city as a whole. In his study on trauma and temporality, Robert Storolow puts forward the simple claim that “Trauma destroys time.” He is not making reference to the destruction of objective time, but rather to trauma’s disruption of one’s own consciousness of the flow of time. This observation on the relationship between trauma and temporality is not entirely new—theorists like Freud and more recently Caruth and Leys have documented the connection between time and trauma, particularly in terms of the event missed in time, only to return belatedly to haunt the victim at a later point in time. Derrida’s own interpretation of trauma and temporality projects trauma to the future (l’avenir), resulting in an anxiety in the present, expressed in a ritualized naming and repetition of the threat, as a response to the fear of and a desire to ward off what is to come (à venir). In his example, the naming and constant repetition of 9/11 in the media and in memorials in reference to the 2001 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, serves, to neutralize the fear or threat of a future surprise attack. Trauma thus, according to Derrida, refers to the repeated haunting of the victim by the threat of an event that is yet to occur in the future and inversion of the concept of Nachträglichkeit or belatedness.

Unlike Caruth or Derrida’s interpretations, Storolow’s phenomenological understanding of trauma and temporality does not regard the past, present and future as distinct or separate units, with one dimension e.g. the past coming to bear upon another. He suggests that “in the region of trauma all duration and stretching along collapses, past becomes present, and future loses all meaning other than endless repetition” (20). His arguments draw from Husserl—who has described the experienced present as “thick,” i.e. as constitutive of both the past and the future—as well as from Heidegger’s own analysis of temporality, in which he regards all lived experience as always in the present, past and future. For Storolow, it is “this sense of stretching along between past and future” that the experience of trauma disrupts. He goes on to note that “[e]xperiences of trauma become freeze-framed into an eternal present in which one remains forever trapped.” It is this sense of entrapment in an “eternal present” that, I argue, manifests itself in Bánk’s novel through the frozen states, an incapacity to project oneself into the future, because of the inability to come to terms with a loss that has occurred in the past. Storolow’s study however, is primarily concerned with the way the entrapment in the present causes traumatized individuals to be alienated from other humans, given that they are no longer part of the shared structure of temporality. We can however also view the rupture in the unifying thread of temporality, not simply in

\[\text{15} \text{ see Storolow. 19.}\]
\[\text{16 ibid. 20.; emphasis added.}\]
relation to other individuals around us, but in relation to our ability to anticipate the future. The difficulty in representing an elusive, past and traumatic event causes a blockage in the flow of time into the future.

One particular scene in the novel vividly demonstrates this rupture in time. The freezing of time and its reciprocal freezing in space are painstakingly illustrated by the narrator, revealing the way in which spatialization is effectively used to point to trauma in the novel. After the death of the narrator’s cousin from a fever the child’s mother (the narrator’s aunt) descends into state of catatonic immobility which lasts for several months:

Ági hatte ihren Mund nicht mehr geöffnet, und Virág hatte vergeblich versucht, die Lippen ihrer Mutter auseinanderzuschieben. [...] Ági hatte sich nicht mehr bewegt, sie war sitzengeblieben auf dem Stuhl [...]. Sie hatte die Uhr nicht mehr aufgezogen, sie hatte die Fenster nicht mehr geöffnet, die Blätter nicht mehr vom Kalendar gerissen, auf dem es März blieb, bis November. (117)

Once again, in what is becoming a recurrent pattern in the novel, Ági’s rigid state and the freezing of time as signified by the neglected clock and calendar are presented as related events, her petrified state symbolic of her tragic experience.

Beyond the recurrent states of immobility that run through the narrative, the fixation on the month of November is not lost on the reader. It is the month of Kata’s mother’s abrupt departure, and, as already pointed out, the period of the bloody crushing of the 1956 Hungarian Revolt by the Soviets. November is the month during
which, as the narrator remarks about herself after the loss of her mother,\(^{17}\) “man sich auch erzählte, ich säße jetzt, im November, draußen im Regen, und keiner hindere mich daran” (15; emphasis added). More remarkably, November also the date beyond which Agi’s calendar on the wall will not move, after the death of her daughter. The echoes of a national trauma, unspeakable in the novel, reverberate with unambiguous clarity in the freezing of time in space.

### 3.5 Trauma and Coping: The Swimmer

Even as time freezes for the victim of trauma, there are constant reminders that outside of one’s private space, there is a public space that one also inhabits. Because of trauma’s disruption of inner-time-consciousness, objective time (world time) manifests itself as threatening, even surprising, because of one’s inability to anticipate the future or draw from the past.\(^{18}\) Transcendent time glides by uncontrollably, further complicating

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\(^{17}\) Note the displacement in the way she frames the memory, not as an event that she was aware of, but one that others noticed about her (“man erzählte”), and thus presented to us in the form of reported speech. Because others noticed this about her, the memory is more credible, as opposed to a recollection that she, in her distressed state, would have purported to remember this about herself.

\(^{18}\) Robert Sokolowski’s *Introduction to Phenomenology* identifies the three levels of temporality: (i) world time, i.e. the time of clocks and calendars (transcendent time), (ii) internal time, i.e. private or subjective time which is internal to us (immanent time), and (iii) consciousness of internal time, which differs from the second, immanent time, in the sense that it refers to an *awareness* of this internal temporality. This awareness thus marks a step beyond. Sokolowski goes on to explain that that because we possess a consciousness of subjective or immanent time we have an awareness of transcendent time. This is because we are able both to anticipate and remember and thus order worldly processes into temporal patterns. When faced with a traumatic experience, I
the victims’ subjective perception of their state of temporal stagnation. The discord between objective and subjective time, often noted by the narrator of Bánk’s novel is revealed in the following passages that describe her feeling of claustrophobia at the long, yet recurrent winters. Describing the long winter she notes of its darkness:

Sie schien mir trüber als zu Hause, vielleicht, weil der Himmel näher war, manchmal zum Anfassen nah, manchmal so, als wollte er uns zudecken, aufsaugen und verschwinden lassen. [...] In Gedanken sprang ich metertief hinab und schwamm durch geheime Gänge, die mich wegbrechen. (52)

A little further on she remarks: “Sie gingen vorbei, diese Winter, ohne daß wir wußten, wann sie anfingen oder aufhörten. [...] Vielleicht verbringe ich die vielen Winter auch schon durcheinander” (59). Later on when her brother dies, Kata wonders to herself why the spring has descended upon her so quickly, overnight, “ohne sich anzukündigen, ohne uns zu warnen” (362-63).

Even as her perception of time appears distorted, the realization that the world outside will not stand still, as indicated objectively by the changing seasons, prompts the victim to find a way of coping with this unbearable truth. The narrator describes her mental swimming, which takes her away, providing an escape from the daily disappointments that she faces. Swimming provides a form of escape that gives the
illusion of purposeful action, movement that appears to counter time even in its indirection. Her mental swimming provides an escape from the entrapment imposed by the seemingly arbitrary nature of time, a form of coping and of regaining control. This would possibly explain why the narrator’s father is constantly engaged in actual, physical swimming, and fervently insists on teaching his children to swim as well. His cousin, perplexed by his obsession with swimming, asks, “Wozu? Wozu müssen die Kinder schwimmen?” to which Kata’s father simply responds “sie müssen eben” (105). It never becomes apparent in the novel, why they really need these swimming lessons, although these moments are revealed as the only instances when he spends time with his children. It appears to be a method of coping, a means of negating the progress of time and the demands that it makes on him, that he advances with it. As Kata secretly observes him swimming, she notices that time does indeed appear to progress at a different pace in her father’s secret universe:

Er knöpfte sein Hemd auf, zog seine Schuhe, seine Hosen aus und legte seine Kleider in den dunklen Sand. Er tat all das so langsam, als müsse er sich sich hier, auf den letzten Metern, auf eine andere Geschwindigkeit einstellen, als müsse er langsamer werden [...] Ich wußte, auch wenn mein Vater sich jetzt umdrehen, wenn er auf dem Rücken weitschwimmen und zum Ufer schauen würde, er sähe mich nicht. Es war, als nehme ihn der See auf, als könne er ein anderer sein, sobald er seine Kleider ablegte, das Wasser berührte und hinabtauchte. (98-99)

19 The relationship between swimming and an altered perception of time and reality is also thematized in John Cheever’s short story, “The Swimmer,” (1964), where the protagonist Neddy Merill’s consciousness of time is drastically altered through experience of swimming. What he thought was a clever shortcut home, in the form of casual afternoon swim through the neighborhood pools after a social event, turns out in reality to be several years of wandering
Her father’s swimming provides him with safe and contained movement, both spatial and temporal, that does not demand that he have a goal that must be attained. It is the illusion of progress, and in this sense is akin to Tuan’s description of dancing as a type of movement, which, as he observes “cancels one’s sense of purposeful action, of moving through historical space and time toward a goal.” This is because dancing is relatively non-directional and when dancing one moves while remaining at the same place. Like dancing, swimming can also (though not always) be regarded as non-purposeful movement that does not involve displacement.

One image of swimming in the novel very fittingly illustrates this notion of goalless movement. In addition to his passion for swimming, the narrator’s brother is preoccupied with owning pet fish: “Ihnen zu schauen beim Schwimmen, das wollte er” (25). The desire to watch them in their aimless swimming appears to have a therapeutic effect on him. He secretly acquires fish which, when discovered by his father, swimming around in a bucket of water, arouses a violent anger, incommensurate to the crime committed by his son (26). He destroys the fish, possibly because they are an ever present reminder that his of his own purposeless swimming.

about, cut off from all modes of sociality. It is unclear as to whether Bánk was aware of this story when writing her own novel with a similar title; however, the relationship between swimming and its effect on the awareness of time in both narratives is intriguing. *The Stories of John Cheever.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 603-12.

20 Tuan. 128.
Like all illusions swimming does not provide the permanent escape from the reality at hand. The narrator’s brother learns this when, in need of this constant escape, repeatedly has to be rescued by family members from freezing water as a result of his constant desire to be near the water: “Isti kehrte erst nach Stunden wieder, blaugefroren [...]. Er sagte, alles sei besser, als hier zu sitzen” (53). His source of escape and coping finally becomes the cause of his demise: during one cold winter, despite warnings not to do so, Isti runs out of the house and jumps into the water. He is rescued, but too late. Suffering from hypothermia, he succumbs to a fever and dies. The narrator describes how she tried to retrace her steps on the tragic day:


Her brother’s death is the only tragic event that she is unable to piece together in a narrative whose spatial sequencing of events has been faultless until then. This traumatic event is the only one that remains unrepresentable in Bánk’s novel, because of a space, or gap that would account for her arrival at the scene, one moment too late, one that would explain her inability to rescue her brother.
3.6 Tracing National Trauma

Following Isti’s fateful jump into the frozen water it is clear that his condition is precarious, telegrams are dispatched to the family’s relatives requiring them to come and be by his side (359). The narrator makes a point of confirming that her mother also received the telegram (365); however, no information is provided as to how, or even if her mother reacted to the message. Isti’s story is tragic; but the narrative that traces his decline, both mentally and physically is permeated with references to a much larger and far-reaching event which, although unspoken in the narrative, emerges as the elusive traumatic experience that the author attempts to unveil: the tracing of Hungary’s path in the wake of the failed 1956 Revolution. The tragic story of abandonment by a mother of her children emerges as an allegorical reference to Hungary’s own unresolved feelings of abandonment by the West in the wake of the brutal invasion by Russia. The country finds itself caught in a time lag as the rest of the world advances, unaware or even unconcerned about the crisis they were facing. Without pointing directly to the event, the narrator constantly makes indirect references to it in her narrative. The story of the world’s slow response to the invasion is analogized in a story she is told about the death of one of her own cousins. Her parents desperately sought the doctor’s help to alleviate their daughter’s suffering. His response was unfortunately too slow in coming which leads to the child’s death. The narrative describes his movement from his home to the
parents’ home in one convoluted sentence that stretches time and renders the events in slow motion:

Bis der Arzt das Licht angeknipst, seinen Mantel übergezogen, nach seiner Tasche gegriffen hatte, den Hang mit seinem Fahrrad hochgefahren und hinter Zoltán über den Kieselweg gelaufen war, bis er die Tür hinter sich geschlossen, Ági die Hand gereicht, Virág über das Haar gestrichen, das Kind befühlt, sein Ohr an seine Brust gelegt und der Mutter das Jesumaria, Jesumaria verboten hatte, hatte Virág’s Schwester aufgehört zu atmen, und der Arzt hatte nicht mehr getan, als ihre Lider mit zwei Fingern hinabzuziehen. (112-13)

Once again the notion of fever and delayed action emerges in the narrative—which parallels the incident of her brother’s fever and her own mother’s delayed (or lack of) response. Earlier in the narrative Kata recalls her grandmother mentioning that Budapest suffered from fever—the same fever that had killed a boy in her own home town of Vát. The recurrence of a deadly fever that was not attended to in good time points once more to the delayed action responsible for what Bánk regards as Hungary’s abandonment by the world in the face of brutal action by the Soviet regime. Later on in the novel, the narrator becomes more specific in apportioning blame for Hungary’s predicament to the rest of the world: “jemand hätte die Welt angerufen, über das Radio, aber die Welt hätte sich verweigert, als hätte es niemand gehört, als hätten sie das Radio erfunden, aber nicht für uns” (167).

21 Even though this sentence appears to point directly to the failure of the world to act upon Hungary’s plea for help, Bánk remains cryptic about the event in the novel. Beyond stating that “in Budapest war etwas geschehen” (167) the failed revolution remains unnamed.
Bánk is reluctant to delve into the politics surrounding the reasons as to why the West declined to respond to Hungary’s pleas for help during the Soviet suppression of the Uprising. What is clear to her is that an appeal was made and ignored, and any belated explanations are of no use. While her novel is replete with instances of belated actions, she shies away from coming too close to dealing with the real wound, which is the national trauma, and directs her narrator to her more pressing personal predicament, the detailed, but belated news about the fateful day of her mother’s departure and the description of the past six years of her life in the West. Kata describes her brother’s and her time lag parallel to Hungary’s own lag: “Isti und ich, wir waren in einem Rückstand, in einem Rückstand, den wir nicht mehr aufholen würden. Was wir jetzt erfahren hatten [refering to the news about their mother’s life in Austria], war längst vorbei, längst Vergangenheit” (231). We know that Bánk sees Hungary as paralyzed by the trauma of its past and as having a lot of catching up to do.

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22 After the failure of the Revolution numerous theories emerged, to account for the West’s delayed reaction to the crisis Hungary. Among them was the account that the British invasion of the Suez in October coincided with the Hungarian Revolt placed the US in an ethical dilemma; to condemn the Soviet Union and ignore the equally illegitimate British action would have revealed them as hypocritical. Other accounts list the fear of another war because of the Soviet Union’s determination to hold on to Hungary in order to maintain the stability of the Eastern Bloc, as the reason for the West’s reluctance to intervene. See: Rice et. al. eds.
3.6.1 Forgetting and Being Forgotten

Zsuzsa Bánk’s parents fled to Germany in the wake of the failed Hungarian Revolution. The memory of their traumatic escape preoccupies her as though she herself were there. And yet she is the first to admit that she is both temporally and spatially removed from the fateful event, having been born in Germany in 1965, nearly a decade after her parents, who were actively involved in the failed revolt, were displaced from Hungary. Her essay, “Da bebt etwas nach” gives us an idea of the experience of second generation exiles, born outside their parents’ country of origin and who find themselves, as Bánk puts it, first stateless and then as German children with a difference:


Bánk identifies three key elements indispensable to the formation of a stable identity: a home (both in the sense of the familial home that comprises the extended family, as well as a homeland), roots, and a past or memory (Erinnerung). Roots and a past as described in Bánk’s essay are merely expansions of the notion of home, for the home as we have seen, exemplifies the origin, and is the locus of stability. Bachelard has famously noted...
that our memories as well as the things we have forgotten are “housed,” and that memories are sounder the more securely they are fixed in place. The feeling of homelessness that characterizes Bánk’s experience thus amounts to a moment of deracination and erasure of memory. The realization that she lacks a past or history in Germany gives rise to a feeling of shattering anxiety (eine tiefe Verunsicherung), the feeling that her world has lost its stable center. Without a past there are no experiences to draw from; consequently one faces the present and future locked in a paralyzing cycle of fear that repeats itself daily, since there is no record from which one can learn from. Trauma, as we noted earlier, involves the disruption of the flow of time, caused by the absent past event hindering movement to the future, and resulting in a stagnation in the present. Kern, in his extensive study of time and space, describes a case history involving the experience of a patient of Eugène Minkowski, who suffered from a disorder that he believed caused a blockage in the flow of time from past to future. The patient, a foreigner living in France blamed himself for his failure to acquire French nationality and had convinced himself that he would execution on that very night as punishment for his failure. Each day he would relive the fear anew, due to his inability to learn from past experience. Kern states that a “normal person can draw from past experience to assuage momentary panic or a sudden sense of helplessness” but for Minkowski’s patient it was “as though each day he were beginning life anew, as though

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each day he were beginning life all over again.” Therefore, rather than experiencing a continuity between the past, present and future, the patient’s days lacked movement and were simply a succession of dull, similar and yet disconnected days. Kern uses the case history as an analogy for the sick and impotent state of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire shortly before the outbreak of World War I, a period during which the Empire, “preoccupied by the fear of internal disintegration” existed in a “pathological state of a blocked future.” The similarity of the experience described by Bánk, i.e. the rupture caused by the lack of past experiences is uncanny. Without these experiences, one is in a virtual state of limbo, suspended in a “Jetzt.” This is a traumatic moment for Bánk who can chose to respond to her situation by repressing and forgetting the knowledge of her parents’ past and of her family’s statelessness in the same way that her parents responded to their traumatic escape from Hungary, or chose to actively engage in memory. By reaching back to the traumatic events of her parents as a point of orientation, she works her way out of her own frozeness in the present by establishing an identity,—distinct from that of other German children who she perceives as stable

26 Kern. 283.
and different, by virtue of their common history—one that is founded on her parents’ unresolved trauma.

Even while establishing a unique identity as a minority, Báňk acknowledges being German; her parents always insisted that “Deutschland ist unsere Heimat” and yet she claims to be “ohne Heimat.” She recognizes that she is German: “Wir waren wie alle deutschen Kinder” and yet at the same time paradoxically feels ungerman: “Und doch waren wir anders als alle deutschen Kinder.” This ambivalence arises from the fact that as a diasporic Hungarian, and a minority, the dominant historical narrative “forgets her”. Thus, despite her desire to belong, she lacks a common narrative of belonging. Butler and Spivak’s clever formulation describes minorities like Báňk as wanting, both in the sense of lacking or falling short, and desiring (to belong). While they cannot be dropped from the nation, a certain level of illegitimacy is conferred upon them by virtue of their being found wanting. The narrative that Báňk constructs out of her own parents’ past is, as already mentioned, the basis of her own identity. It is a narrative that intervenes in mainstream memory discourses, not only competing as an alternative memory but also refusing to be forgotten. With this collective memory she—and anyone who actively engages in narrative writing—reestablishes herself in the communal flow

28 Báňk. „Da bebt etwas nach."

29 See Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak. Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging (New York: Seagull, 2007), 31. (Butler draws on Arendt’s argument that the nation-state is bound up with the recurrent expulsion of national minorities to demonstrate how the nation, which lends legitimacy to the state, expresses a certain homogenous national identity that renders certain groups ‘illegitimate’).
of time and exits the isolation she describes when she makes reference to “nur uns.” By remembering, one is also remembered because one belongs. Her reference to “nur uns [...] im Jetzt” is an indication that her struggle for the past and for belonging is not an individual, but rather a collective dilemma faced by diasporic communities in general.

The intersection between forgetting and the fear of being forgotten in Der Schwimmer reveals both a deep set anxiety over the implications of the absence of a workable past, as well as the realization that remembering begins with leaving traces that one is able to return to and to retrieve even when events have long been obscured by time. While the obsession with history has been recognized as a condition that characterizes the 20th century as a whole, Hungary has often been singled out for her extreme fixation on the past, a problem that, according to Kovács and Seewan, can be attributed to the “Trauma von Trianon,” a result of the 1920 Paris Treaty, where Hungary lost two thirds of her territory and with it 60 percent of her population. The regime’s repression of events surrounding WWII—the systematic destruction of the Hungarian Jewry, followed by the expulsion of Hungarians of German origin served to further complicate Hungary’s relationship with its own history, a problem that peaked with the bloody suppression of the 1956 Uprising. For a nation with a majority of its

31 Kóvacs and Seewann. pp 817-18.
population living outside of its national borders, the question of what is remembered is a complex one with no easy answers. Kóvacs and Seewann’s vivid image of the breaking away of a “Staudamm,” that unleashed a flood of memories and historical images after 1989, brings up a number of questions: what does one refer to when one talks of “eine Flut von Erinnerungen”? Are these memories or simply images put forward as memory to generations that had no experience of these events, and do these numerous images help a diasporic group to coalesce as a community? A more important question is probably whether this post 1989 interest in memory really represented a surge or a deficit in memory.

At the beginning of Bánk’s Der Schwimmer we get the sense that the young narrator is grappling with some of these complex issues of memory albeit on a limited scale. Her narration opens with an awareness of a memory deficit as she states that she had few memories of her mother. She goes on to confess in the subsequent sentence, “Im Grunde kannte ich sie nur von Fotos” (7). She actually has no memory of her mother save for the world she has constructed from photographs that she looks at endlessly. A few paragraphs into the novel she begins, in an almost incantatory manner to recount facts about her mother: “Als es meine Mutter für mich noch gab, erzählte sie uns Märchen” (8); “Als sie noch bei uns lebte, arbeitete meine Mutter in einer Fabrik” (9); “Als meine Mutter noch bei uns war, fuhren wir oft mit dem Zug” (12). This however is not

32 ibid. p. 818.
memory, but rather more likely an awareness that arises from recognizing her mother in
the photographs together with the setting in which the pictures were taken. The
narrator’s initial acknowledgement of a lack of memories is in actual fact a concern with
forgetting. Not wanting to forget her mother she turns her attention to a description of
the family home. The spatial descriptions of the family home not only brings back lost
memories that she had previously admitted did not exist; they also help secure these
memories in place.33 Her detailed description of the setup of the family home reminds
her of minor details such as her mother’s fitful sleeping, the smell of eau de cologne
sprinkled on her mother and herself by passers-by on Easter Sunday as well as of graver
memories, such as the fact that her mother never once contradicted her father (6-7). The
narrator marks the physical home as the center of memory in the same way that we saw
Bánk in her essay express anxiety over the lack of home, “ohne Zuhause,” and
consequently, “keine Erinnerung.” The loss of the family home that results from their
mother’s departure causes a panicked rush by the narrator to imbue the spaces that they
have lived in with memory:

Ist’ fing an, diese Dinge zu sagen. Er sagte, dieser Ort wird nichts mehr
von uns wissen. [...]. Von uns gab es keine Spuren. Wir hinterließen
nichts. Jetzt verging die Zeit plötzlich, sie lief einfach weiter, auch wenn
sich nichts bewegte, zumindest nicht so wie wir es wünschten. Wenn die

33 see Bachelard’s in-depth discussion on the relationship between the home and our memories.
He notes that “by remembering “houses” and “rooms,” we remember things we have forgotten
and also retrieve our past memories (xxxviii); also “Memories are motionless, and the more
securely they are fixed in place, the sounder they are.” Bachelard. 9.
Uhr zur vollen Stunde schlug, hatte das fast etwas Spöttisches. Später fing ich an, Steine, Federn, oder Geldstücke in den Häusern zu verstecken, in denen wir eine Zeitlang gelebt hatten und die wir wieder verließen. (48-49)

Kata is preoccupied with two concerns: leaving no trace for future generations, hence the fear of being forgotten, and having no record of past actions, past lives lived or memory. The rapidly advancing clock suggests that everything is moving ahead without them because the flow of time has to include not only the present into the future but an inclusion of the past as well—which they lack. Kata responds by moving through the various spaces marking them with memory.

Patterns of forgetting permeate the entire novel from minor instances involving the inability to retrieve information to more serious cases of dementia and mental decay. All these point to a more fundamental crisis of forgetting in the society as a whole and less to the individual problems highlighted in the narrative. In one instance, the children’s grandmother returns from a visit to the West and is finally able to give the children an account of the fateful day that their mother vanished across the border into Austria. When she mentions a signpost that indicated where their mother should alight at the border, Isti asks, hopefully: “Was stand auf dem Schild,” to which his grandmother responds, “deine Mutter hat es vergessen” (165). The selective remembering points to a censorship of memory, whereby only what is perceived as necessary, but not necessarily useful is provided as the official account. Moreover, the news of their mother was being delivered to them with a delay of nearly 6 years. The
photograph that her grandmother brings with her from Germany brings anxiety to the narrator because she fears that it represents a record of the change that has occurred in the time they have been separated ("Ich hatte Angst auf das Foto zu schauen"). To her astonishment, the image is unchanged, the photo is dated 1956 (226-27).

From the less obvious associations between individual and national memory Bánk becomes more allegorical in her writing as her narrative progresses. Hungary’s fate is depicted in the image of an ailing former hero with a rapidly fading memory. The narrator’s uncle Zoltán is described as a former famous wrestler who was once the envy of many. After the traumatic loss of his daughter to a fever, Zoltán’s head begins to cave in and he slowly begins to succumb to the ravages of dementia. The children and their father particularly enjoy playing memory games with Zoltán, who, unable to commit their faces to memory, asks them to reintroduce themselves on a daily basis:

mein Vater sagte, er sei König Mátyás oder Bartók Béla oder Horthy Miklós oder Puskás Ferenc [...], oder Maléter Pál,34 und bei diesen Namen legte Zoltán seine Stirn in Falten, als zwinge er sich, diesen Maléter in sein Gedächtnis züruckzuholen. Isti und ich, sagte mein Vater, seien Hänsel und Gretel. (96)

It is in this game of memory that Bánk comes closest to naming the event that fills the narrative by its absence. Maléter Pál’s name which is synonymous with the Uprising is

34 King Mátyás was a famous 15th century Hungarian king; Béla Bartók, a famous Hungarian composer; Miklós Horthy, the regent of the Kingdom of Hungary, who aligned himself with the Nazis; Ferenc Puskás, former top Hungarian footballer and Pál Maléter, military leader of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution.
however not enough to bring back the repressed traumatic memory. The momentous events in history, give way to fairy tale (Hänsel und Gretel), as even the narrator becomes ashamed of the attention given to them by their uncle, who believes the children’s father, when he refers to them as two children abandoned in the forest: “Als Zoltán uns daraufhin Wurst, Käse und Tomaten auf den Tisch stellte und uns bedeutete, wir sollten zugreifen, schämten wir uns” (96).

Even as the loss of memory is depicted with a hint of humor, the tragic consequences have far reaching effects for everyone involved. Zoltán’s forgetfulness leads him to leave a candle burning as he sleeps, an action that results in the burning down of the homestead that the narrator and her family had recently began to call home. Reference the loss of two thirds of the home to the fire is an allusion to Hungary’s own historical loss. The narrator notes, “wir ahnten, daß wir in einem Drittel Haus keinen Platz haben würden, wir wüßten es” (285). Their Aunt’s insistence that a place can be made for them is countered by her father’s terse response that “seine Kinder wohnten nicht mit Blick auf eine Ruine” (285). The scene not only performs Hungary’s own historical loss and displacement of part of her population; it also signals a break from that part of history. The father indicates his intention to move on for the sake of his children who should not live with their view oriented toward or fixated on past losses.

But if Bánk seems to subtly suggest in her narrative that Hungary should forget “Trianon” and remember 1956 as the country’s point of orientation—we infer this from
Zoltán’s vague sign of recollection at the mention of the military leader’s name—how does the novel’s obsession with the fear of being forgotten fit in? The narrator is constantly plagued with the fear that her father will get onto a train alone and “vergessen zurückzukommen, vergessen uns abzuholen” (55). This fear is understandable given the fact that their own mother took a train and never returned home. She and her brother however, refuse to admit to strangers that their mother is not returning, always having a story ready when asked where she was. The narrator remarks, “Wir wollten niemand sein, den man vergisst, mühelos, niemand, von dem man sich entfernen kann, ohne Abschied, ohne Hindernis” (127). The loss of their mother and home is also a loss of a sense of belonging. By claiming to still have a mother, by constructing narratives [“wir sponnen die Geschichten weiter, schmückten sie aus”] (127), they could still purport to belong somewhere; the lack of belonging or rootedness causes a fear of being forgotten.

In the midst of the story of her family’s journey, Kata digresses and includes an account that bears little relation to her main story, a memory which in the story order would have occurred several years after her main narrative. She recalls visiting the Kerepesi Cemetery in Budapest, walking along the cemetery’s endless concrete path.

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35 This is one of the oldest and most famous cemeteries in Hungary, the burial site for several notable Hungarians including Georg Lukács.
and reading the names of the deceased out loud. She would pause at graves so as to
give the impression “jemand zu sein, der jemand hatte” (31). In performing a ritual of
remembrance, Kata expresses her own desire for belonging.

The fact that the cemetery is the scene where the narrator should chose to
address the question of belonging is worth noting. So is her description of the Kerepesi
Cemetery, which is depicted as an impersonal site whose tombstones bear names with
no personal messages: “nur der Name, kein: Wir trauern um unsere geliebte, kein: Hier
ruht in Frieden” (31). In this government controlled cemetery, where Kata chooses to
acknowledge each deceased individual by name—“Namen, die ich laut vor mir her
sagte” (31)—and registers the lack of personalized tombstones, we witness a conflict
between an impersonal official history that simply records, and the desire for a more
personal collective memory that devotes attention to the individual. This image recalls
Halbwachs’s own vivid image of history where he notes that it “resembles a crowded
cemetery, where room must constantly be made for new tombstones.” The impersonal
nature of history means that events pile up one after the other without regard for the
individuals impacted. They tend instead to be crowded out, forgotten and displaced.

The national cemetery thus becomes a both a site of memory (official) and

36 The cemetery was actually closed to the public for burials from 1952 in part as a Communist
ploy to downplay the significance of contributions by past famous Hungarians. Her act of
reading the names of the deceased out loud is thus significant. Even after the fall of communism
the cemetery continues to be associated with the communist era.
37 Maurice Halbwachs. The Collective Memory. Trans. Francis J. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter. (New
countermemory (symbolized by Kata’s visit), where memory represented as being in the hands of the regime (dominant group) can be contested by refusing to forget those who came before.

Báñk’s *Der Schwimmer* is a novel that documents memory; more specifically, it records individual and national traumatic memory. It confronts and complicates doubts regarding the significance of individual narratives in public discourses of memory, showing them to be necessary, particularly for minority groups in their construction of identity. The pattern of generational trauma at work in Báñk’s novel, as well as its emergence in her own essay speaks to the importance accorded to the notion of inherited traumatic memory by minorities as well as its value in the writing of history.

The shift in this chapter away from the discussion of language to an analysis of temporality and spatialization in the representation of traumatic memory is an effort to demonstrate ways in which trauma, as an *unspeakable* event that occurs in time, can be depicted in space, through descriptions of stasis and displacement. One of the key lessons that we can take away from *Der Schwimmer* is an alternative perspective on trauma; as opposed to the established understanding that trauma is the result of an unassimilated event occurring in the past that returns belatedly to assault the victim we now view trauma not, as an unwitting fixation on a past event, but as the result of an inability to anticipate the future, because of an unresolved and elusive past event.
4. Writing with the Body: Trauma, Visuality and Corporeality in Léda Forgó’s *Der Körper Meines Bruders*

What is horrifying in Totalitarian Regimes is not only the violation of human dignity but the fear that there might remain *nobody* who could ever again properly bear witness to the past.¹

At the conclusion of Zsuzsa Bánk’s *Der Schwimmer*, the narrator makes reference to events in the former country of Czechoslovakia, where a student is rumored to have set himself ablaze as an act of protest. She is referring to Jan Palach’s historic and tragic self-immolation in January 1969 in response to the country’s invasion by Warsaw Pact nations, led by the Soviet Union. The novel’s narrator expresses doubt about the veracity of the rumors, in part because of the discrepancy in timing between the original event, which involved the violent suppression of collective dissent, and the apparently isolated protest by one individual. She wonders why, “*jetzt wo alles schon längst vorbei sei, ein halbes Jahr später.*”² While some (older people in particular) dismiss this act of self-sacrifice as absurd—who gives up his body “freiwillig, lebendig?”³—the younger people believe the rumor. Dismissed as casually as it was introduced, the incident nonetheless

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³ *ibid.*
leaves an indelible mark in the mind of the reader, because the act of self-immolation writes, or imprints, even as it erases the individual involved.

In another incident, the narrator of Léda Forgó’s novel, Der Körper meines Bruders, relates an event where a priest, whom she had grown to love and respect, vanishes without a trace, after being subjected to days of government surveillance. Upon hearing that he has been “spurlos ausgelöscht,” her naïve imagination conjures up an image of the priest being physically erased by the secret agent: “Die Beine und der halbe Arm waren schon ab, der Mützenmann arbeitete gerade am Gesicht, und er gab sich Mühe, schön und spurlos zu radieren” (238). Both episodes highlight the centrality of the individual body in totalitarian regimes, either as a site of repression and erasure, or of protest and impression of memory. In both cases, the obliteration of the bodies leaves behind a memory of the body, a visual image from which we construct a narrative of the event. Salzman and Rosenberg have suggested that the visual is the unavoidable carrier of the unrepresentable and that trauma as a phenomenon can only be “understood as or when pictured.” This is true in part, and would explain why Palach’s death in 1969 would index the failure of the 1968 Prague Spring, or in a more recent example, why Mohammed Bouazizi’s 2010 self-immolation in Tunisia would serve as the lens through which the a narrative of the events leading to the Arab Spring have been constructed.

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The idea however, of confining our understanding of the experience of trauma to the visual is too reductive, as it excludes, for example, other somatic modes through which trauma can be perceived and understood. Moreover, the notion of picturing would imply an external mental event that does not implicate the reader in any way. Picturing maintains the reader’s (safe) position in the present, detached from the past events represented in the image. In this safe distance the trauma is innocuous and devoid of meaning because it has been rendered contained and comprehensible. While the visual is a bearer of the unrepresentable, without the involvement of the body and the various senses, the visual picture remains no more than an external spectacle. The present chapter examines the ways in which Léda Forgó’s novel highlights the centrality of the body in the rendering of traumatic experience, by capturing the visual, not simply as a frozen image, but in the process of being, or doing. This means that in the narrative, the body is almost always engaged in experiencing the world via different modes of perception. Objects in turn, react in a manner that suggests an interdependency or interrelatedness that both confirms and affirms the experiences depicted. In one simple example, Forgó’s narrator describes a scene where her twin brother has just been born. She notes of the interaction between her mother and the newborn: “Sie zog das

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5 For the difference between remembering and picturing, see Robert Sokolowski. Introduction to Phenomenology. He notes that the visual image is the ‘extramental’ world, while the memory image is in the ‘intramental’ world.” Remembering he continues, is more like perceiving than picturing. 67.
Geschöpf auf die Brust. Das Geschöpf atmete jetzt ruhig und lag ausgestreckt, wie ein Frosch [...]. Mos Brüste reagierten auf den kleinen Menschen” (8). This interrelatedness also works on the level of narrator and reader, as Borka documents snapshots of a variety of moments—her own birth, the death of her father and brother, the attendance of national events, or even her own pregnancy—situations with varying significance but always imbued with a degree of physicality. The scenes often appear to be insignificant or unrelated; however they acquire meaning at a later stage, when the reader works to relate them to other scenes in the novel. Thus, the description of a private funeral earlier on in the narrative and the seemingly minor actions of individuals during the mourning process suddenly merit more attention when juxtaposed to a later depiction of the official celebration of a national memorial day. The details of the events, presented as a series of screenshots, are remembered and delivered in terms of the senses, i.e. emissions and sensations, which the reader then interprets. It is therefore through the body that a narrative of trauma can be negotiated.

Like Bánk’s Der Schwimmer, Forgó’s Der Körper is set in Post-Stalinist Hungary and records events covering roughly the same time period, between 1953 and 1968. The novel opens with a scene in a maternity ward where the narrator Borka’s mother is giving birth to twins, one of whom is the narrator herself. The graphic description of the birth leaves no doubt as to its traumatic nature, as does the ugly scar left on Borka’s

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* Bánk’s narrative time ends early 1969.
forehead after the doctor uses a forceps to force the reluctant baby out of the mother’s body. Borka’s mother, equally hesitant to take up her maternal role as expected of her, leaves the care of the twins largely to Borka’s father. After the tragic shooting death of her brother during the events surrounding the failed Hungarian Uprising, Borka’s father commits suicide, leaving her in the care of her mother, who has to juggle the responsibilities of her job with the care of her daughter. Her new live-in boyfriend is a former communist party official who is verbally and physically abusive toward Borka, and is responsible for her pregnancy at the end of the narrative. Forgó describes her novel as an “Entwicklungsroman,”7 which points to the protagonist’s physical development from birth to puberty, and from a stocky androgynous child to an expectant mother. Aside from the physical changes, all other aspects of her life remain stagnant; she makes no progress in school and her only glimmer of hope for moral development is extinguished when her beloved priest, who had taken her under his wings as her mentor, vanishes after falling victim to the regime’s repressive machine. Borka’s growing body is described relative to the general stagnation of the world around her. Our awareness of elapsing time is highly dependent on Borka’s changing body as other events remain the same. Toward the end of the narrative she experiences a rumbling sensation and is surprised to discover that it does not emanate from her body.

Instead, it is the sound of Russian military tanks rolling in the vicinity. Calculating the time period by her age, we are able to conclude that the military maneuver is related to the 1968 uprising in neighboring Czechoslovakia. Borka’s body is the cipher, the carrier of traumatic memories of the period in question.

In describing the narrator’s development during a momentous period in Hungarian (Central and Eastern European) history, Forgó is setting up the narrator and her body as a credible witness to events unfolding around her. Because traumatic events are often characterized by their adverse psychological impact, and because trauma is traditionally viewed as an injury to the mind, a first person narrative of trauma will often lack credibility, unless its structure mimics the disruption that the trauma is alleged to have caused. As Merleau-Ponty’s study on the body’s role in perception has shown, the dualist nature of classical psychology with its separation of mind and body is caught up in a dilemma because the mind’s object of study is itself. In a similar manner, the body is represented as no different from a corpse as opposed to a phenomenological body. If traumatic experience simply involves a disruption to the psyche, the same

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8 Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* suggests that the mind is protected by a defensive shield that serves as a barrier against external stimuli. In the event of a traumatic episode, the protective shield is ruptured causing injury to the mind. The notion of trauma as a wound to the mind is taken up and expanded by Caruth who argues that unlike the wound of the body which is visible and thus treatable, psychic trauma is not a simple healable event because of its unassimilated and unlocatable nature. The mind is unable to represent the event to itself because it is always recognizes it one moment too late. See Freud. *Beyond*, 23. and Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience*, 59.

psyche is not in a position to represent itself. Arguing that the body is more than just a casing for the mind, he describes the body as a “knowing-body,” a “lived body” that is one’s way of inhabiting the world. Perception therefore does not simply occur in the isolation of the mind, apart from the body, but takes place amid things. In other words, consciousness is not merely a mental process but is embodied through our experiences. It therefore follows that the disruption caused by being a witness to traumatic events does not simply involve a breach of the barrier that protects the psyche, as suggested by Freud, but that is psychosomatic in nature. An understanding of the traumatic event can therefore only proceed via the body. In the first chapter we highlighted the dilemma of trauma; that the event demands to be remembered, assailing the victim in nightmares and hallucinations, while paradoxically remaining elusive. In this chapter we see how the body’s interaction with the world around it provides the basis for a narrative of trauma. The narrator’s often naïve observations of the contradictory images around her—ceremonies, monuments, films, people—tell her own story on her behalf, even as she tells theirs. Merleau-Ponty describes this kind of interaction as follows:

10 Merleau-Ponty describes the psychologist’s task as “a psyche speaking of a psyche” since his job involves investigation of the mind, as opposed to other scientists e.g. chemists, physicists, who are not the objects of their own investigation. ibid. p. 110.
11 cf. ibid. 167 and 360-63.
If it is true that I am conscious of my body via the world, that it is the unperceived term in the center of the world towards which all objects in the world turn their face, it is true for the same reason that my body is the pivot of the world [...]. I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body.  

Forgó sets up her character as the pivot around which the events of the narrative occur. They acquire their legitimacy as historic events because of the physical interaction between the narrator and the world around her. The events narrated are not remembered as private screenings of mental events; they are perceived with the senses and are very carnal in nature—foul smells, grotesque bodies, bodily emissions—memory is retained in the body and rendered in corporeal terms.

4.1 Body Memory, Memory of the Body

4.1.1 Body Memory

In his phenomenological study of memory, Casey argues that the body is the natural center of any account of remembering. He identifies three different types of body memory: habitual, traumatic and erotic body memory. The concept of habitual memory, which he develops from both Bergson’s notion of “habit memory” and Merleau-Ponty’s argument of the lived body as a habitual body, refers to the

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13 Merleau-Ponty. 94-95.
embodiment of the past in our actions. Casey explains that this is a memory that is not contained separately in the brain but rather, it is integrated into our bodily movements, i.e. it is performative rather than simply reflected upon. Traumatic body memory he argues, is distinct from habitual body memory in that is episodic—a onetime occurrence, such as an accident—as opposed to recurrent. He further suggests that the body has coping mechanisms that aid in defending against traumatic memory by either containing it through hysteria or by locating it in a specific place and time in the past such that it no longer represents a threat in the present. Casey’s notion of a “traumatic body memory” is useful, but problematic on a number of levels. First, it limits the definition of a traumatic event to the traditional notion of a unique event that occurs unexpectedly. As Forgó’s novel, which highlights a range of traumatic events suggests, this is not always the case. Systematic subjugation of a population, or repetitive abuse, in particular child abuse, are all experienced by the lived body as traumatic and inscribed in the body as a habitual memory, albeit against the will of the victim. Narrowing the definition of traumatic bodily memory thus brackets out these instances of recurrent

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15 In his well-known example of the phantom limb, Merleau-Ponty suggests that in the case where an amputee, treats his phantom limb as a real limb, it occurs, not because of a deliberate refusal or denial of amputation, but rather because the repetitive manipulatory movements have moved over from the body “at this moment” to the level of the “habit-body”. At this level, objects appear as manipulatable in themselves and arouse habitual intentions in the amputee. See Merleau-Ponty. 95.

16 Casey. 149.
physical abuse rendering them within the range of normal human experience.\(^\text{17}\) Second, the idea that trauma can be willfully rendered innocuous by containing or situating it is also doubtful and somewhat naïve. According to his argument, situating the trauma involves attempts to “tie down the trauma by locating it fairly precisely in terms of place or time.” This way, he proceeds, we can convince ourselves that that “if the trauma I am now remembering occurred there and then, it cannot have such a devastating effect on me here and now as I remember it.”\(^\text{18}\) As we noted in the previous chapter, the very dilemma that trauma presents us with is that it is a highly elusive experience, one that disrupts our consciousness of the flow of time and therefore rendering it temporally unlocatable. Containment of a trauma according to Casey, entails restricting it to a part of one’s body, allowing it to emerge as a hysterical symptom.\(^\text{19}\) Hysteria is thus taken to be a coping mechanism that would appear to be turned on at will as a defense mechanism, as opposed to a symptom of trauma. In a closely related definition of hysteria, Lyn Marven regards hysteria as a façade that guards against accessing the actual trauma. The façade however, is not willful as suggested by Casey, but rather is

\(^{17}\) See Laura S. Brown. “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma.” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory.* Ed. Cathy Caruth. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 100-12. Here she argues that the definition of PTSD as per the APA’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual brackets out many experiences that women undergo including rape domestic violence since they are regarded to be within the range of normal human experience. 100.

\(^{18}\) ibid. 157.

\(^{19}\) ibid.
the response to the denial of a trauma, or its elision from dominant discourse. The inability to articulate an overwhelming experience results in its emergence as a somatic symptom, i.e. the hysteria.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of Casey’s concept of traumatic body memory is that, even as he argues for the centrality of body memory, he differentiates between psychical and somatic traumas, limiting the notion of traumatic body memory to the experience of the body under duress. His concept of trauma, although based in phenomenology, is caught up in the mind/body bifurcation that the majority of trauma theories are unable to overcome.

However problematic Casey’s definition of traumatic body memory, the idea that the body can retain traces of past events is useful to understanding the way memory or history can be sedimented in the body and serve as a means to access and reconstruct traumatic experience. The retention of traumatic memory must not only be limited to trauma arising from physical stress but could cover any event perceived as traumatic. Perception, as we have seen, is not simply a mental activity, but one that involves the entire body. We see, for instance, in Forgó’s rendering of the memory of the Revolution an example of the way in which body memory works in the retrieval of inaccessible traumas. The initial euphoria of the Revolution is paired with the narrator’s pleasure

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20 Lyn Marven. 46; 48. Noting that women are more than likely to develop hysteria, she argues that it is partly because they are marginalized and that their experiences are often denied or excluded from discussions on trauma.
and sense of freedom, as her body flies in the air, as jubilant adults toss the children and
down with joy: “Am Anfang war alles euphorisch. Die Großen Hände warfen uns in die
Luft, und fliegen gefiel mir” (12). The celebration continues for a brief period thereafter:
“sie tanzten und schleuderten uns in die Luft, und wir brüllten alle vor Freude” (13).
The days during the subsequent violent repression on the other hand, are experienced
by the body as constricting and uncomfortable. On the fateful day leading to her
brother’s death, Borka’s mother fastens the twins to her firmly to her back with a cloth
carrier and steps out to the streets in search of her husband who has failed to return
home after going out to forage for supplies. Borka describes the discomfort of being
confined to such a small space:

Ich spürte ihre Rippen seitlich durch den Stoff der Trage. Die harten
Muskelstränge wechselten sich ab, wie Harfensaiten beim spielen,
ährend sie sich bewegte. Ich kann nicht behaupten, dass Mo reiner
Komfort auf Beinen war. Aber auf meiner anderen Seite klebte mein
fleischiger Bruder an mir, und so konnte ich im Großen und Ganzen mit
der Beförderung leben. (16)

We read in the description of the body’s unease a sense of despair and impending
catastrophe, not just for the family but also for the general populace. When the narrator
observes shortly thereafter of her sleeping brother: “Ich sah, daß mein Bruder rot
gepinkelt hatte, weil es überall rot war” (17), it is clear that she is referring to his death.
The only indication we have that she probably understands what has transpired is
through the sensations going through her body. She tries to warm him up because he
seems cold; however, it is she who ends up freezing: “Ich fror und war kalt, wie der
Because her descriptions are limited to somatic sensations and actions—urination, sleeping, cold versus warm sensations—and avoid the mention of death, the narrator’s emotional detachment renders narration of the traumatic event possible.

Similarly, as already discussed, the Revolution is rendered as a memory of flying and laughing with joy. Where any specific detail of the event is recounted outside of the bodily experience, this is done, not by the homodiegetic child narrator, but rather; it is articulated extradiagnostically in documentary or textbook style. We are told for instance of the Revolution, that “sie soll etwas ganz Großartiges gewesen sein. Etwas, worauf die ganze Nation stolz war. Sie sollte der Beweis sein, dass Ungarn nicht sklavenselig war. 1956 sollte das Jahr der Unabhängigkeit und Selbstbehauptung werden” (12). This is what should have been; a corresponding assessment of what actually was, is however not provided. Instead, the narrator regains her homodiegetic position, commenting briefly that, “mit dem Lachen war es vorbei” (13). The Soviet suppression, the real tragedy is left unspoken, save for the narrator’s judgment on the Revolution as a whole, “dass sie vor allem aus Pisse und Kacke bestand” (12). The reference to excrement should not be mistaken for a sullying of the memory of the Revolution; rather, it is an assault on the pathos with which the event is remembered in popular accounts: instead of mourning the day for what could have been, instead of shrouding the event in myth,
a memory should be retained of what was, a brief moment of relief followed by failure.21 “Am Anfang war es euphorisch [...] da war die Revolution schon am Ende” (12). The critique targets in particular post 1989 rewritings of the Revolution (some of which were highlighted in the previous chapter), which suggest that the Revolution might have succeeded had there been more international support. Criticizing historians and journalists for their role in perpetrating illusions and legend about the Revolution, Csaba Békés writes that it would be forgivable for memoir writers to approach the event emotionally and attempt to explain the failure with myth; however, it is unacceptable for professional historians to indulge in such mythologizing.22 Forgó’s own shifting between the formal, journalistic and the childlike tone in the narrative delivers a similar critique. The very physical nature of the narrator’s remembering, a memory that is

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21 See for example Hungarian author Sándor Márai’s diary entries for that same period. We have a similar feel not only of the brevity of Hungary’s euphoric moment but also of the loss of a moment that rightly belonged to the Hungarian people. On 23rd October, the day that the uprising we have a single entry: “Gottes Mühlen mahlen schnell,” an inversion of the popular reference to God’s justice moving slowly but surely. Here again, in this brief phrase, we see the suggestion of the correction of an injustice or injury inflicted on the Hungarian people. The diary remains silent about the events between the 23rd of October and the 7th of November, by which time the Russian army would have brutally crushed the uprising and reverted to the status quo. On the 7th of November he is in Munich, having arrived from the US: He briefly registers the state of mourning: “In den Straßen Fahnen auf Halbmast; eine Trauerfeier für Ungarn, Demonstranten.” While Márai makes no record of the events between the uprising and the mourning period, he points to them when apportioning blame for the Revolution’s failure: “Wäre der Generalsekretär der UNO in der Zeit zwischen dem dreiundzwanzigsten Oktober und dem zweiten November mit einer Kommission nach Budapest gekommen, hätten die Russen das Massaker in Budapest nicht gewagt.” Tagebücher 6: 1945-1957. (Berlin: Oberbaum-Verl, 2001).

experienced through the body’s members: “Die großen Hände,” through the body’s actions: “schleudern,” “fliegen,” “lachen,” as well as through its emissions: “Pisse und Kacke,” is an argument for a down-to-earth memory of the event, as it was and not as it could have been. It is also suggestive of the fact that because memory—and in particular traumatic memory—is retained in the body, it can be presented corporeally.

4.1.2 Memory of the Body

Corporeal representation of trauma does not only help us to overcome the pathos with which tragic events are often depicted, it also allows for the accessing of an event that was apparently missed by the victim. When looking at Bánk’s Der Schwimmer, we discussed the narrator and her brother’s fixation on the train as the precise temporal and spatial marker of their missed experience: the loss of their mother. In a similar manner, proceeding via the body, a traumatic event can be traced without a direct mention of the loss.23 When Borka, the narrator, describes the death of her father and brother, she does not speak directly of their death, but rather, she remembers the body in action. Her father commits suicide in the family attic after sneaking off and gesturing to his daughter conspiratorially to keep his whereabouts a secret. Borka, who is the last person

23 Caruth makes reference to the “indirectness of [...] telling” as means of rendering a “faithful history,” arguing that a direct documentary style of telling erases the specificity of a traumatic event (Caruth Unclaimed p. 27). Here however we are concerned, not only with the moment of telling but also the moment of knowing. Forgó’s narrator comes to a knowledge of events as she describes the bodies (and their actions) around her.
to see him alive when they were playing a game of hide and seek, finds him dangling in
the attic, and believing that this is part of the game, continues to go up to the attic daily
to sit with him, wondering when he will give her the chance to hide while he seeks.
Despite her mother’s frantic attempts at finding her husband, Borka does not let in on
her father’s whereabouts, not wanting to spoil the game. After well over a week of
“dangling,” she sympathizes with her mother’s futile efforts to find her father in
hospitals and police stations, and leads her to him. Describing the scene of her father’s
death, Borka remembers trying to get him to finally stop the game: “Ich trat zu Vater
und wollte an seinem Arm ziehen, damit er jetzt aufhörte” (24). With the body having
been in the attic for well over a week the body would have been in an advanced state of
decay and the scene disturbing. The narrator however retains an alternative and less
traumatic memory of the event: “Der Dachbodengeruch war aufdringlich aber nicht
unangenehm” (24). While her memory overlooks the state of her father’s body, the idea
of a pungent smell, however inoffensive, points to its decay. Even as she tries to avoid a
description of her father’s death, her mother’s bodily response compels her to face an
alternative truth. Turning her attention to her mother’s annoying screaming she notes:
“Sie hörte nicht auf zu schreien. Genau das, was ich nicht wollte” (24; emphasis added) and
then, she looks at her mother’s body, which was shaking with “Heulkrämpfen,”
conjuring up the image of “eine verreckende Heuschrecke, die auf dem Waldweg
zertreten worden war” (25). Borka does not want her mother’s body to signify to the
truth of her father’s demise and has the urge to slap her (“am liebsten hätte ich sie geschlagen”) in an attempt to stop her body from trembling frenziedly and to force her to control herself (25). The event is retained as an olfactory sensation by her disbelieving body, and while she does not visually acknowledge the death of her father, nor the tragic scene, her mother’s bodily response forces her to recognize what her own eyes refuse to see. The scene thus involves the failure to register a traumatic event while at the same time being compelled to witness it fully in the body of her mother.

4.1.3 Der Körper meines Bruders

The title notwithstanding, Der Körper meines Bruders has less to do with her brother, who dies early in the novel, or his body, than it has to do with the novel’s narrator and protagonist. She is undeniably devastated by his loss, failing to mourn him as dead and instead incorporating his memory into her self, to the extent that when she falls pregnant, she believes that the child she is carrying is his reincarnation. His relative absence however, from a narrative whose title points to his embodied presence, represents a loss that cannot be comprehended and consequently cannot be worked through. The significance of the period of his death—during the Hungarian Uprising—suggests that the private loss depicted is symbolic of a greater and far-reaching trauma, the death of a national revolution so shortly after its birth. Der Körper could just as easily be read as the physical body, “the cold, dead body”—“kalt, wie der Körper meines
Bruders” (19). If this is the case, then plot fails or is rendered weak, because of his early exit from the narrative. It is therefore possible that reference is being made to a metaphoric death of an ideal. In contrast to her father’s death, there is no mention of a funeral for her brother, or even of a period of mourning. Her father’s death is immediately followed by a solemn communal event that is accorded special attention by the narrator. It is as if her brother did not die, but rather absented himself from their presence. The language of her narration testifies to this when she describes the effect of her brother’s death on her father: “Seine Abwesenheit machte aus Vater eine Schattengestalt,” or when she expresses regret as the surviving twin: “Ich hätte gewünscht, dass mein Bruder an meiner Stelle hier wäre, dann wären alle besser daran” (22; emphasis added). The guilt she experiences and the inability or unwillingness to refer to her brother as dead is symptomatic of melancholia as defined by Freud in his study on mourning and melancholia. He writes that as opposed to mourning, where the reality indicates that the loved object no longer exists and therefore the libido should be withdrawn from its attachments to that object, in melancholia this successful detachment does not occur, leading to self-reproach, delusions and even suicide.24 Her father’s suicide shortly after her brother’s death, can be seen as stemming from an

inability to successfully mourn the loss of his son. Borka in turn describes her own existence as the surviving twin as a “sich wiederholende Ohrfeige,” (22) because her presence continuously signifies to her brother’s absence, thereby denying her parents the chance to let go of their loss.

It is evident that Borka’s brother is elevated to an ideal in the novel, not only by Borka herself, but also by her parents, such that his attains a status that is abstract and somewhat ethereal, unlike the corporeal, down-to-earth descriptions that permeate the novel. This forces us to read Pálko’s (her brother) character as more than just a literal figure in the narrative. Reacting to her parents’ grief, she realizes that he was possibly the better twin, that her brother “etwas Besonderes gewesen war” (22). Comparing her body to his, she remembers him as “ein zartes Porzellanbaby,” he had “Seidenhaaren und Löckchen,” was “anschmiegsam und ruhig,” “weiß” and finally, he was the “weibliche Pol,” the female pole of their dyad. She on the other hand is more earthly, (“dunkel”), is active, has an “eckiges Kinn,” is referred to by her parents as “unser kleiner Panzer,” and moves about like “ein Dschungelkämpfer,” (40). The almost saintly, mythical quality accorded to her absent brother borders on the unrealistic and stands for the endless melancholy over the Revolution’s failure. Such a loss that refuses to be named as such, and instead is constantly mourned as a perpetual absence ceases to function on the level of the historic, rising instead to a transhistoric level as a
foundational trauma that becomes the basis for other traumas to follow. Forgó intensifies this melancholy with a scene where her narrator imagines seeing the image of her dead brother in a mirror as she prepares for her father’s funeral, and even momentarily believes that his death could have been a mistake. Fixing her gaze on the image in the mirror, she stands motionless so as not to disrupt the vision. Her mother intrudes on the communication with her brother’s image which disappears as soon as Borka turns her face toward her mother: ‘Mo platzte herein. [...] Pálko war weg, als ich aus der Badezimmertür zum Spiegel zurückschaute” (27). The scene invites a Lacanian reading and is suggestive not only of Borka’s traumatic loss but also of the equally distressful loss of her ideal world and her entry into a relationship with her mother. The anxiety over the ambivalent relationship with her mother is relayed in an earlier scene as a malodorous memory, where the narrator remembers sleeping beside her mother and being overcome with the feeling of nausea: “Ich hatte auch mit ihrem Mundgeruch zu kämpfen. Der Geruch meines Bruders hatte etwas Süßliches, Mos Duft war irgendwie sauer. [...] Ich wollte ihren Mundgeruch mögen” (25). The traumatic exit from the imaginary, ideal world to the real is presented as a shift from a sweet to a sour smell and reflects the unwillingness to let go of the past.

On another but still related point, the fact that the realization of her brother as the better twin comes after his death sheds light on the way we tend to view past events,

not as they were, but as we understand them in hindsight. This affects history in general, which cannot be regarded as absolute but rather as always altered by our current position. Merleau-Ponty explains that the past which we claim to recapture, “is not the real past, but my past as I now see it, perhaps after altering it.” Casting her brother in hindsight as the image of perfection speaks to the way we reinterprete past events, and in this specific instance, the way in which the Revolution is mythologized. Responding to a question about her own personal relationship to this period in Hungarian history, Forgó echoes Merleau-Ponty’s point about they way the past is constructed, and the role our position or location in the present affects the way we view the past:

[I]ch glaubte mich von Europa und der restlichen Welt verlassen und verraten als kleiner Atom eines winzigen Landes - ohne politische oder wirtschaftliche Macht den Russen überlassen. Durch meine Emigration hat sich alles relativiert, zum Glück, ich bin so froh diesen Gedanken entkommen zu sein, wenn ich die Zuhause gebliebene Freunde sehe, die sich mit solchen nationalen Gedanken aufhalten, die absolut nicht für die Einzelperson geschnitten sind. Zu groß, zu gewichtig, zu gröszenwahnsinnig sind diese Sorgen, die in Ungarn auf Privatschuftern gelegt werden, wie sollen sie nicht den Alltag und Familienleben vergiften?

The new experience of emigration frees Forgó from the traumatic fixation on the past as it could have been; her novel on the other hand criticizes those who have not moved away from that narrow view. Additionally, she raises the concern about the way such public events sediment themselves in individual lives, affecting their daily functioning.

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26 Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*. p. 80
Her critique is therefore twofold, targeting her own compatriots for what she calls “selbstverherrlichenden Geschichtserklärungen” that form the basis of their identity, as well as the socialist regime for their suppression, both of political dissent and of the literary imagination.

The losses represented in this chapter, both on a private and public level have until now centered primarily on unique experiences—death of loved ones, crushing of a revolution—that all fit the classic definition of trauma as a onetime event that causes all epistemologies to collapse. A large portion of Forgó’s narrative focuses on what is often regarded as trauma’s presentation in the non-classical sense, that is, overwhelming events that occur on a regular basis such that they no longer fit the definition of trauma as an event outside the range of human experience. The focus on Borka’s ambivalent relationship with her changing body and her suspicion that her brother was possibly the preferred twin, combined with the recurrent overemphasis of her androgynous qualities betrays some of the contradictions regarding the status of the body inherent in the communist society at the time. She experiences a desire to take on the position of her brother and perform his role such that, when her mother gives her Pálko’s trouser to wear to her father’s funeral, she obliges, even believing momentarily that she had switched places with him:

28 ibid.

Her contradictory desire for self-erasure, while still maintaining control over her auto-narration indicates her conflicted status not only as the surviving twin but also as the female narrator and prism of this historic period. The traditionally marginal role played by women in Hungarian society, coupled with the conflicting images about the status of women’s in socialist society, is responsible for the somewhat grotesque presentation of Forgó’s protagonist and narrator.

Her construction as hardy and resilient works to prevent the reader from creating any kind of emotional attachment or from experiencing pity with the protagonist, which would reduce the trauma narrative to the level of pathos and discredit her role as a female narrator. Her mother’s boyfriend describes her as “einen Stierkopf und einen muskelbepackten Körper” (160)” an exaggeration of her masculine qualities which, as already pointed out also reflects the inconsistencies within the socialist ideology of the period.
4.2 Rewriting the Socialist Body

Written in 2007, nearly 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, *Der Körper meines Bruders* demonstrates the persistence of the body as a motif in the Post-Totalitarian narrative. Under Soviet Socialism the significance of the body was amplified by ideological conceptions of the unity of the collective, personified in the image of the proletarian worker. In Hungary, popular iconography featured well-muscled male and female workers that celebrated the male proletarian ideal of the workers movement.29 Both Lynne Attwood and Susan Reid have also noted in their individual studies on sex-roles and the representation of gender in the Soviet Union that since the 1917 Communist Revolution, the main focus of social policy, education and propaganda was the creation of a New Soviet Person.30 Reid goes on to note that the responsibility of artists was to “invent convincing human types to exemplify this ideal.”31 On the literary front as well, there were demands that writers educate the masses by reflecting the revolutionary development of socialism, truthfully and realistically.32 Walter Vickery notes that the demands made on the writers in countries under Soviet control to reflect the reality of socialism in an enthusiastic and patriotic manner also meant a rejection of

31 Reid. 278.
past forms and heroes. The key descriptor of the new form was “concreteness,” which implied a centrality of the body, exemplified in the heroic image of this “New Soviet Person.” This obsession with the individual body peaked during the Stalinist era during which time, according to Keith Livers, the “fusion of private bodies and state ideology” was unprecedented. Viewing the body as the most fundamental expression of individual and collective identity, writers in the Stalinist era strove to create a uniform social body by fusing private bodies with state ideology. Lilya Kaganovsky also identifies in her monograph How the Soviet Man was Unmade (2008) familiar figures of Stalinist iconography in images of “the soldier, the blacksmith, the Bolshevik, and the Stakhanovite”, that represent what she refers to as the easily recognizable “fantasy of extravagant virility” of Stalinist culture. The body’s continued persistence in post-communist memory discourse is therefore not all that surprising. Forgó’s memory novel rewrites the socialist hero in multiple ways, exposing the apparently seamlessly constructed image of the unified collective as no more than a fractured collection of contradictions. Nowhere were these contradictions more pronounced than in the status of women in Soviet controlled countries, particularly because of their twofold potential,

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33 This image of the “New Person” who was to represent both male and female was however, fashioned in the image of the man. See Attwood, 64.
35 ibid. 92.
as part of the workforce—they were expected to be available as physical labor in the same manner that the men were—and as producers of workers. As already noted in the example of popular iconography in Hungary, images of muscular men and women were widely disseminated, associating the notion of the “good body” with that of the “hard body.” These images of the “good hard body” stood in direct conflict not only with the female reproductive role as labor producers but also with traditional notions of women that were reinforced through education. In my interview with Forgó she notes that they were taught that the women in Hungarian literature generally played a support function, “in dem sie unterstützend und entlastend den Dichtern und Schriftstellern als Zofe, Mutter und Geliebte zur Verfügung standen.” She further notes that women were traditionally seen as occupying a position somewhere “zwischen Kind und Haustier.” Forgó’s unflattering view of the role of women adds to the ambiguity concerning the status of the female body in literary representation of the period. Barker and Geith have suggested in their study of women’s writing in the Soviet Union that conflicting ideals

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37 Goven. 14. See also Vieda Skultans article “Narratives of the Body and History: Illness in Judgement on the Soviet Past.” In Empathy and Healing: Essays in Medical and Narrative Anthropology. (New York: Bergham, 2007), 145-46. Here she discusses testimonies from Latvia about the Soviet expectations of women both as as workers and as reproducers of workers. In one particular account a woman finds herself caught in a conflict between her pregnancy and the state requirement that she fulfill her normal quota of forest work despite her physical condition.


regarding the representation of women serve to explain, to some extent, the prevalence of grotesque depictions of the body in late Soviet and Post-Soviet women’s writing.40

In Forgó’s Der Körper, the grotesque body emerges as one among several ways that the ambiguity of the body’s status (in particular the female body) is revealed. The prevalence of unsanitized language referring to bodily emissions is another. The narrator’s mother for instance resists the official narrative concerning the role of women by screaming obscenities during the birth of her children. In the course of a particularly harrowing episod of labor pains, she looks at a government poster hanging on a wall in the maternity ward which reads: “Für eine Gattin ist Gebären eine Pflicht, für ein Mädchen glorreich,” and she responds by transgressing the norms of polite language, shrieking, “Ich scheiß auf eure Pflicht und auf euer glorreich,” a pragmatic response that initiates the immediate removal of the poster by one of the hospital staff (332).

Yet the use of the grotesque and the unsanitized language is framed within a narrative whose structure is equally unconventional, presenting itself, at first glance, as a unified body of text that flows, uninterrupted by chapter-breaks. What we have in reality however is a hybridized novel that comprises a series of numerous scenes of varying length as though from a film treatment. This external structure can be traced in part back to Forgó’s formal training in “Szenisches Schreiben,”—which involves a

performative type of writing, in filmic style— as well as to her experience as a playwright. Internally however, we are confronted with a multiple genres as Forgó’s narrator recites poetry, describes in detail actual films from the period in question, discusses and provides critical commentaries on pieces of artwork and sculptures. In doing so she exposing the seemingly unified body of text as a combination of contradictions that characterize the historical period that she writes about.

4.2.1 Reclaiming Past Heroes in Folk Poetry

Far from embodying the image of the Soviet hero, Forgó’s androgynous protagonist can be regarded as an “anti-Soviet hero.” She remembers her father referring to her as “ein kleiner Endre Ady,” in reference to the legendary and revolutionary Hungarian poet of the early 1900s. His writing, which comprised mainly erotic and folk poetry was contentious even during his time and would have been on the list of unacceptable writing in the Soviet period. Borka’s father however, would take his

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This does not equate performative writing to filmic description; rather, I consider her her filmic style to be an example of her performative writing. Like the camera lens, her narrator selectively captures a variety of shots from the period in question. She is however not external to the action, but rather is part of the world that she is constructing. Ronald J. Pelias notes of performative writing that “it rests upon the belief that the world is not given, but constructed, composed of multiple realities” (9). One other key aspect of performative writing that he brings up is that it “welcomes the body into the mind’s dwellings” (7). This very aptly describes Forgó’s corporeal style of writing that is both “body-driven” and fragmentary. Ronald J. Pelias. “Performative Writing as Scholarship: An Apology, an Argument, an Anecdote,” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association, 84th, New York, NY, November 21-24, 1998).
daughter’s hand and, counting the fingers on her hand (Ady had six fingers on each
hand), he would recite portions of Ady’s poetry while remarking on Borka’s uncanny
resemblance to the poet. “‘Du siehst aus wie Endre Ady’, sagte Vater immer, ‘mit seinen
unglücklichen Glupschaugen voller Alkohol und schmutziger Gedanken’” (38).

Equating the image of his innocent three year old daughter with that of a troubled,
inebriated, and womanizing poet, is a deliberate rhetorical approach aimed at
countering the perceived ideological purity of the hero in Socialist Realism. Ady
reminds us of the description of Bakhtin’s folk as “course, dirty and rampantly physical,
reveling in oceans of strong drink.”

Bakhtin’s own analysis of folk culture, written during the Stalinist era, paints an image that stands in opposition to the idealized image
of his time. This Bakhtinian technique is employed by Forgó as she assaults the ideal
with her own alternative heroes. Reciting Ady’s poems, many of which were dedicated
to his married lover Adél, anagrammatically referred to as Léda in the poems, is a
private act of dissidence. The description of Borka as a young incarnation of Ady
symbolizes a defiance by the Hungarian people against the censorship of their heroes as
does her father’s repeated recitation of the love poems that are filled with nostalgia and
desire:

Brand des Begehrens
Mag dir erhitz
en wieder das Blut:

Stories within families play a role in the formation of alternative memories by highlighting specific facets of the past. The poems, recited in the privacy of the family attic represent an act of private dissidence against Soviet sanctioned memory; the romantic poetry reflects a nostalgia for a period that the Hungarian people are not allowed to yearn for, and Borka as a little Ady, a “Panzer,” and “Dschungelkämpfer” would signify a hope for change. Ady was hailed as he “poet of the Revolution” on the day the Hungarian Republic was declared in November 1918; it is therefore no coincidence that November is also the month of Borka’s birth.

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43 cf. Vieda Skultans, p. 119.
45 Forgó’s own childhood memories also invoke the idea of a desire to be dissident, to construct alternative past. She notes: “In dieser verbotenen aber geduldeten Underground-Kultur bin ich aufgewachsen mit nihilistischen Liedern, radikalem Gedankengut, Diskussionen.” Interview with Léda Forgó.
The most crucial aspect of the inclusion of Ady and his poetry in Forgó’s narrative is the depiction of a collision between the pure and impure, which is continuously reflected in the novel on multiple levels. As her father recites Ady’s erotic love poems, Borka and her twin brother (they are no older that three at this time) dance around, responding innocently to his words with their own rejoinder, “Lelele” and “Dadada,” running across the room and colliding with one another and wailing briefly in pain (39). The pure/impure opposition is heightened when Borka’s father goes on to describe Ady’s demise to his twins. They are initially gleeful as they imagine “Syphilis” to be “eine Süßigkeit,” before their father launches a detailed and grotesque description of Ady’s
death, explaining, “wie die Liebeskrankheit Syphilis Adys Körper langsam aufgefressen hatte, mit eitrigen Geschwüren am ganzen Körper” (39).

In this portion of narrative we witness several levels of pairing: the recitation of erotic poetry and the children’s innocent singing; the poet Ady’s image with that of Borka’s; Syphilis and Süßigkeit, before we are finally confronted with the image of a body oozing with pus. This style of writing has been discussed in detail by Huttunen as a form of imaginist montage in poetry and narrative, whereby the text is produced by what he calls a “constant collisional juxtaposition of ‘pure’ and ‘impure.’” 46 In his own example of Russian Poet Anatoli Mariengof’s Cynics, Huttunen describes how flowers are juxtaposed to the description of severed heads, or love with constipation and enemas. 47 The goal is to create tension in the reader’s mind forcing the reader to participate actively in constructing and reconstructing meaning from the text. This technique, adopted by Forgó and used liberally throughout her narrative, erases the reader’s safe distance, forcing active involvement in the construction of the narrative.

The vivid image of Endre Ady’s body, consumed by syphilis is reactivated in the reader’s mind at a later stage when Borka describes her father’s reaction to her brother’s death. Referring to his death as an absence she notes: “seine Abwesenheit machte aus

Vater eine Schattengestalt” (22). Her father’s body too, fades away as a reaction to the loss, not only of her brother but also of the nation’s hope after the failure of the Revolution. Forgó pushes the body image even further as the narrator’s father is found in the attic several days later, his badly decomposed body hanging from the ceiling (24).

4.2.2 Dismantling of the Utopian Ideal in Soviet Film

The influence of the montage technique in the novel is especially clear during what I refer to as the film scene introduced into the narrative by Forgó, and which functions as yet another piece in her bricolage narrative. Shortly after her father’s death Borka’s mother becomes involved with an official of the communist party, Genosse Endre. Left at home with Borka while her mother goes to work, Endre, together with his friend Sanyu decide to take her to the movies. Forgó sets up the scene at the movie theater with a close-up shot that directs the reader to the narrator’s mouth, focusing on the discomfort on the edges of her mouth caused by over salted corn she has been eating: “Der Salz brannte in meinem Mundwinkel” (161). The narrator’s gaze then shifts from the screen to the laughing people around her and back again before turning back to the salted corn and the sore edges of her mouth. She tries to lick the salt off but

48 Compare with the description of Ady’s last days before succumbing to his disease. He was described as “more of a living corpse than a brilliant intellect.” Lóránt Czigány. The Oxford History of Hungarian Literature: From the Earliest Times to the Present. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1984), 291.
aggravates the pain because the tongue is just as salty (161). With the scene set the focus shifts to the screen. The film to be screened is a famous Russian movie, Der Amphibienmensch (Chelovek-Amfibiya)\(^4^9\), based on a 1928 science fiction novel with the same name, by Alexander Belyaev. Before the screening of the film is the customary government sponsored newsreel, featuring a series of propaganda images of a communist utopia, created by diligent workers and their machines. Taking note of the professionalism and effortlessness of the work, the narrator remarks that “eine neue Welt entstand aus dem nichts” (161). Another image quickly replaces the workers, this time the scene shifts to a shot of a man carrying a child, “das wie ein Engel lachte,” over his shoulder. In the background, the Budapest Men’s Choir sings:

‘Hier wo der Sowjetsoldat das Kind im Arme hält, dem im Schutz des roten Sterns wärmer wurde die Welt [...] Frieden ist schön, ich kann auf der Wiese liegen, Frieden ist schön, und furchtlos zum Himmel hoch sehen.’ (162)

In rapid succession, images of happy women waving at tractors, sweating farm workers with muscles of steel and a swarm of young girls in traditional costumes (162). The sequence of ideal images of peace and contentment in the tradition of montage causes the viewer to read the images in the newsreel as a coherent narrative of communism.

The newsreel is in turn juxtaposed to the main feature film, Der Amphibienmensch which, similarly, has as its central theme, visions of a utopia, this time in an underwater world,


175
where greed has no place, because the bountiful resources of the ocean are available to everyone. Between these two ideal worlds portrayed in the two films is the world of the narrator, where a real-life drama is unfolding for Borka, who is seated next to Sanya, enduring his ceaseless groping through the course of the film. Forgó leaves it to the reader to make the connections between the image of the happy, safe child in the newsreel and the uneasy, corn-eating child protagonist seated in the theater. The familiar gustatory sensation and experience of soreness created by the description of the protagonist eating the over-salted corn snack triggers possible identification with her situation, perhaps recalling a similar childhood memory of a visit to the movies, in preparation for the next series of montage images that shift rapidly between the plight of the main feature film’s protagonist Isthiander, and the novel’s narrator, Borka.

The image of the Soviet soldier holding the child in his arms also quickly brings back other images involving Borka’s own traumatic experiences as a child, which counter the idyllic propaganda images on screen. The words of the song by the Budapest choir, “im Schutz des roten Sterns wärmer wurde die Welt” recalls the protagonist’s alternative experience of freezing during her brother’s death as a result of the same Red Army: “Ich fror und war kalt, wie der Körper meines Bruders” (19). Her particularly detailed physical descriptions of her childhood render the violence she experiences palpable and the on-screen images illusory. In one particular scene she recalls being ruthlessly beaten by her mother’s boyfriend for failing a math exam. She explains:
Ein Faustregen began auf meinen Körper niederzuprasseln. [...] Ich sackte zusammen, schlang die Arme ums Gesicht. Endres Schuhsohlen bohrten sich in mein Schlüsselbein und in die Niere. Ich brüllte los.” (198).

When she wakes up in the morning and looks in the mirror, a “Zyklop” stares back at her (199), a far cry from the images of the safe child on screen. The mockery of the on-screen image is extended in an alternative scene off-screen, where we witness a performance by Borka and her friend who, during a game of make-believe, act out violence that they witness in real life. Borka’s friend convinces her to play the role of abuser and has Borka lock her in a closet beat her up and even convinces her to try to strangle her. Not happy with Borka’s performance, she is adamant that Borka exercises more violence: “Du musst schon an mir rumzerren und mir ins Gesicht schreien [...] Ich muss Angst kriegen, wenn du kommst” (189).

The feature film that follows, *Der Amphibienmensch* tells the story of a young man with the ability to live both underwater and on land after his father, a scientist, implants gills into body in order to help him overcome breathing problems caused by a severe lung infection. The scientist hopes to create an underwater world where there is abundance of underwater resources and hence no need for greed and competition for resources. This dream is destroyed when a pearl trader (a capitalist) discovers and captures Isthiander, in order to exploit his underwater skills in the harvest of pearls. Due to severe mistreatment, Isthiander’s lungs are completely destroyed, destroying any hope of ever living above water. Because some of the scenes in the film are frightening,
Borka finds herself grabbing at Sanyu or burying her face in his coat in fear. Sanyu in turn takes advantage of her fear to grope her in the darkness of the theater. Of particular interest is the rapid alternation between the on and off-screen images that suggest an interaction between Isthiander and the narrator:


The description of the film continues in detail, alternating constantly between her struggle with Sanya and Isthiander’s own fight with his captors. In the end she expresses confusion, not having a clear understanding of what had transpired in the theater: “Ich hatte den Drang zu heulen. Wegen Isthiander? Wegen Sanya?” (168). The series of images that the reader has been inundated with are overwhelming; this however is characteristic of the montage approach which aims to create tension through the collision of images that, individually may bear little or no meaning of their own but together produce meaning. The series of shots can compel the reader to make certain associations or associate certain sensations or ideas whose relationship was previously
unclear to us. Marylin Fabe explains, in her discussion on Eisenstein’s montage technique that the individual shots in montage are not the bearers of meaning, but rather, meaning evolves out of the editing process in the spectator’s mind. What is particularly interesting is the role of montage—and art in general—in Soviet ideology: as a reinforcement of socialism. Forgó employs the same technique in her own critique of the regime. The images invite interpretation, compelling the reader to draw several conclusions with the help of the associations that the trigger. First the Socialist regime, which portrays itself as the protector of children, is implicated in the narrative of abuse, as the imaginary strong and protective hero is unmasked in the weak and comically grotesque figure of Sanyu. At the end of the show Borka remarks: “Sanyu erschien mir als Trugbild, ohne dass ich ihn hätte ansehen müssen, mit mindestens fünfzehn bunten Bonbons in seinem Mund, breit lächelnd, wie ein verrückter Clown” (168). Second, is the interaction between Borka and Isthiander. Borka’s emotions waver between feelings of anxiety for Isthiander’s plight and a sense of shame because she imagines that he (Isthiander) has witnessed the incident with Sanyu. She attributes Isthiander’s disheveled appearance at in the hands of his captors to his disappointment with her behavior: “Statt Engelslocken hingen ihm fetlige Strähnen vom Kopf. Statt Feuer in den

Augen hatte er einen verschlagenen Blick und rote Augenringe. Ich drehte meinen Kopf weg, als er mich ansah” (168).

Figure 3: Isthianer at the beginning of the film, angelic, young and idealistic

Figure 4: Isthianer with his defeated look
Isthiander’s naive and angelic qualities and his physical appearance, (fragile, pale, effeminate, with curly locks), are curiously similar to Borka’s own description of her brother, which would explain why she is so drawn to him and equally ashamed to be seen by him in her condition. Watching helplessly as Isthiander is assaulted on-screen, she struggles with what she sees as her own impotence and inability to prevent her brother’s demise for a second time. Parallel to this feeling of helplessness is the feeling that her own shameful behavior is the cause of Isthiander’s defeated appearance, which is why she turns away from his gaze.

In the spirit of socialism, the film has a didactic function; it is an allegorical depiction of the assault by capitalist greed on the pure and ideal world of communism. This message is not only overshadowed, but also overturned as the characters who are carefully selected to symbolize the good of communism and the evil of capitalism assume alternative meanings. In light of the events in the theater, together with the narrator’s past experiences, the Soviet regime is now embodied in the Mephistophelian image of the pearl trader Pedro who was originally intended to portray capitalism. This image is particularly emphasized by the manner in which the reader cannot help but associate Isthiander with the narrator’s deceased brother.
4.2.3 Reimagining History in Art

In his monograph, *Constructing the Stalinist Body*, Keith Livers describes the numerous Parks of Culture and Rest, abounding in statues and monuments of bronze, concrete or steel that came up during the Stalinist period, as having both a didactic and unifying function, articulating the narrative of Stalinist ideology to its spectators while creating a sense of communality through the constant sensation of the “Other’s body.”

By their sheer size, the imposing monumental structures that littered the landscapes of virtually every East and Central European nation under communist rule served to eliminate any competing narratives and compel the public to adopt a unified alternative collective memory, one that often centered on gratitude to the Soviet regime for its liberation from Nazi terror, while at the same time educating the masses on

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Livers. 6-7.
In Der Körper, Forgó’s narrator observes these structures that populate Budapest with a mixture of suspicion and sorrow (“Verdacht und Trauer”), studying every minute detail in an effort to find some fault, some possible discord in their narrative:

Ein Mann aus Stahl saß ganz oben, sich auf die eigenen Knie stützend, und viele standen unter seinen Füssen: eine Frau mit einem Säugling, ein Greis, ein Arbeiter, der auf der einen Schulter eine Schippe trug, auf der anderen den Kopf einer Frau, und noch andere Kinder, die sich hinter ihren Vätern versteckt hatten (92-93).

Even though this collection of sculptures is not named by the narrator, the position of the individual figures and the poses they strike tell the dominant and official narrative: the image of the Russian patriarch and the grateful, adoring people of Hungary at his feet. She imagines that the sculptures tell a different narrative in the cover of darkness, that they perform “wilde Sachen,” but she cannot tell for sure. In any case, if they were simply a lifeless “Stahlmasse,” then it was a shame (93), an unusable memory.

Equally unusable and targeted for criticism are traditional Hungarian artworks that fail to capture the essence of the nation’s history. During a visit to the home of a friend of her mother’s, Borka scans the walls of the children’s bedroom where she notices a copy of a painting hanging close to the ceiling, kept out of the reach of the

54 The reference to “Mann aus Stahl” appears to make reference to Stalin. While she could be alluding to Stalin the period that she is narrating about is post Stalin after his denunciation by his successor Khrushchev. Nonetheless, the image she paints corresponds to the visual propaganda of the Stalinist period see Susan Reid’s article, “Masters of the Earth: Gender and Destalinization in Soviet Reformist Painting of the Khrushchev Thaw.” Gender and History 11.2.
children. She recognizes the painting to be one of Hungarian landscape artist Tivadar Csontváry, because he is also a favorite of her mother’s and several copies of his work hang in their living room. A symbolist and one of Hungary’s most famous painters, Csontváry’s paintings are criticized by the young narrator for depicting his homeland with the eyes of a foreigner instead of providing a realistic representation of “wie die Wirklichkeit eigentlich war” (130). Borka goes on to educate the reader on the typical Csontváry painting, which depicts the traditional Pustza motif that comprises shepherds on horseback, white dogs and the Hungarian steppe (130).

Figure 6: Csontváry, “Riders on the Sea Shore” (1909)

The reality for Borka as she walks through Budapest are large classical structures adorned with pillars, reliefs and tympana all suggestive of the fact that the city is “das Herz der Welt” (124). The historical buildings however, also tell the narrative of the brutal regime; they are bullet-riddled, showing signs of neglect, with pieces of plaster and concrete having fallen off of them (121-22). As opposed to Csontváry’s colorful Puszta-motifs, reality involves “grimmige und lustlose Gesichter” on the streets where one is forced to “ständig hüpfen, um sich nicht in den großen rissenden Knöchel zu brechen und nicht in Spucke oder Hundehaufen zu treten” (124). What is particularly interesting is the description of what is going on in Borka’s body as she walks through Budapest. As she and her mother are on their way to visit her mother’s friend, Borka is overcome with nausea and she and her mother are therefore unable to take the bus,
choosing instead to go on foot. As they walk along the Béla-Bartok Street, she notices the damaged pavement and at the same time throws up at the edge of the city park (120). She describes a second experience of throwing up before she embarks on her detailed description of the crumbling and decaying buildings around her. One particular sculpture piece comes up repeatedly in her descriptions; stone angel statues that populate the entire city of Budapest. They have bent backs and contorted, scarred faces. She figures that the purpose of the angels on the heavily damaged houses is to support these buildings: “Um die Last mitzuheben” (122). Even though these structures tell a story of loss, she remarks of most of the city’s inhabitants, that they rush past them, blissfully unaware of them. Borka’s observations are interrupted by a memory of a scene involving her twin brother and her mother walking in the city. She recalls how her mother was always in a hurry, threatening them impatiently, whereas they would have preferred to lie on the pavement “um nichts zu verpassen” (123). Her observation of the adults, as constantly agitated reflects the mood of the population, overburdened and highly strung and thus unable to take note, or be the guardians of their own history.

4.2.4 Private Commemoration and the Usurping of the Official

While we construct, via Borka’s perception of the visual images around her, a dismal narrative of struggle for memory, pitting the solid and unyielding Soviet account against the fractured and repressed national narrative, the domain of the private
emerges as site of alternative commemoration as revealed in the unwitting acts of dissidence by the various characters of Forgó’s narrative. Private bodies unwittingly stand in the way of official ceremonies, usurping them or ridiculing them, thereby making way for alternative acts of commemoration. Borka’s mother for instance, as a state employed decorator unintentionally makes a mockery of the Soviet installed National Day, by zealously over-decorating the public arena with red, the color that symbolizes the Soviet Red Army. Given her own lack of decorating experience (she gets the job not because of her skill but through her relationship with a party official), she struggles to impress her superiors by displaying an excessive number of “Bildern, Flaggen, politischen Sprüchen, Volkskunstmotiven” (75). This key holiday, Liberation Day, on April 4th, is a holiday established by the Soviet regime, commemorating the liberation of Budapest by the Soviets from the Nazis. This public holiday replaced the traditional March 15th commemoration of the 1848 Revolution. Her banner, which expresses gratitude to the Soviets, makes reference to “das Blut der Roten Armee, das für uns vergossen wurde” (79). This emphasis on the symbolic red color of the Soviet Army however, creates a problem of over-association, as she unintentionally writes over the memory of the World War II event, recalling instead a more recent memory of the blood spilled by the Red Army during the failed Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

While the main official celebration goes on without much incidence—the narrator has little to say about it, because, as she notes, she was asleep during most of the ceremony,
and the moments during which she was awake were like “ungeschickt zusammengeschnittene Filmsequenzen” (90)—the moments she is able to describe, shortly before the event, are depicted as chaotic, with the party official getting his feet wound around a telephone cable, tripping like a bumbling idiot, and the young narrator tearing wildly across the building as her mother works to complete the decorations (83). These actions, together with the decorating faux-pas do little to prevent the celebration from proceeding; however, they reveal a desire on the individual level to rebel, especially because public acts of dissidence are not tolerated.

One other remarkable aspect of the official celebration is the focus on the speaker on the podium and on his “Dröhnen,” as well as the relative absence of a description of the public. This is in stark contrast to the detailed description Borka gives of her father’s funeral, a private event that stands in opposition to the official ceremony. Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World* discusses Rabelais’ portrayal of the “extra-official” event, which serves not only to destabilize, but also to renew, by destroying the official picture of events. In his depiction of the folk outside of the official, he cites clownery, together with the use of the grotesque as the mode of representation by which this official picture is destroyed.\(^{56}\) In one notable example of Forgó’s deployment of the Rabelaisian approach, her narrator’s vivid memory of a day spent in one of the government-run day-care centers reveals the disconnect between public and private life. She describes the sterile

\(^{56}\) Bakhtin. 317-19.
running of the official day-care centers, where there is a room set aside so that the children can be divested of their “Strassenkleidungen” and clothed with “Kindergartenklamotten” (95). At the end of the day they await their parents, naked in the cloakroom, the school clothing having been locked away: “Die Türen zu den Räumen wurden hermetisch abgeriegelt, bevor man die mit Bakterien beladenen Eltern in die Garderobe hereinließ” (95). Forgó then contrasts or counters these images of cleanliness and order with an image of chaos as the parents consigned to waiting for the children in narrow corridors attempt to claim and cloth their individual children. They are described as clumsily colliding with each other due to lack of space as they bend forward creating a ridiculous scene: “Die sich bückenden Eltern stießen sich am Po. Sie entschuldigten sich verlegen gegenseitig und stießen sich bei der nächsten Bewegung noch einnmal. Einige Kinder rannten weg. Die Eltern ihnen nach” (95). There are children lying rebelliously on the ground refusing to be dressed up and others removing the shoes that have been put on for them. The scene is one of absolute chaos, a complete inversion of the organized running of the day-care center. The grotesque images of the parents’ backsides constantly coming into contact with one another because of the narrow space, disrupts the official picture of apparent order in the care of the children. This juxtaposition of order and disorder points to the discord between the public and the private, suggesting that the seemingly smooth functioning of the system is merely an illusion. Forgó has noted with concern the lack of acknowledgment of what she calls the
“(von der Gesellschaft nicht eingestandene!) - Überforderung junger Eltern.”

Echoing Rabelais’ bawdy realism, the contact of body parts in a public forum serves as a synecdoche for all that is not publicly admitted to or acknowledged.

The unofficial feast, as opposed to the official one, stands outside of official sanctioning and has a unifying force that supersedes the official. In Forgó’s narrative, the private funeral of Borka’s father becomes one such unifying event which, though not requiring government sanction is nonetheless attended by a party official as though it were an official event. Karl Benzinger has noted in his in-depth study of the significance of the funeral of former Hungarian Prime minister Imre Nagy, that funeral rites and the burial of the dead and the remembrance of historic figures are closely linked with the construction of Hungarian national identity and the notion of community. That the funeral is perceived as a possible threat by the regime is indicated by the attendance of the party secretary, who initially appears to intimidate the crowd with his presence: “Alle verharrten regungslos, wie Wachspuppen,” as though “man etwas offiziell Verbotenes getan hätte” (29). As opposed to the official ceremony however, the event cannot be sabotaged, indicating that the right to bury the dead does

57 Forgó. Personal Interview.
58 The attendance of the party official is part of the usual surveillance carried out by the government, where there exists any suspicion of anti-government sentiments. See for example earlier in this chapter the case of Borka’s beloved priest who was followed by government agents before he disappeared without a trace. 238.
not derive from the government. Instead, a series of events serve to create the sense of community that the socialist vainly regime attempts to forge through the imposition of official methods; a blind, old woman unintentionally trips the party official, embarrassing him and thereby diminishing his sense of authority, the members of the congregation paint figures on their foreheads as a mourning ritual, and, during the funeral service—in a scene reminiscent of Kafka’s Josephine, who brings the mouse-folk together through her odd singing— the young narrator is startled by a loud whistle: “Plötzlich gab es ein lautes Piepsen. Ich erschrack, und eine alte Frau begann, laut zu jaulen.” She then realizes that “dass das Piepsen eine Art Musik war.” She further notes: “zu meiner größten Überraschung fingen jetzt alle an zu singen.” She goes on to describe communal singing as a “Bunte Einheit von blassem Gesang und eifrigem Gepiepse” (33). The connection that the reader makes with Josephine’s odd but unifying “Pfeifen” is hardly coincidental and plays on a presupposition of a universal familiarity with Kafka’s works that would lead each reader to this unified conclusion. The funeral scene in turn is read as a displacement of the official ceremony, as an expression of the challenge to state imposed memory.

Bahktin notes of the “body that figures in all the expressions of unofficial speech of the people,” that it is “the body that fecundates and is fecundated, that gives birth and

\[60\] cf. Bakhtin’s reference to the sanction for carnival deriving from “a force that preexists priests and kings” xviii.
is born, devours and is devoured, drinks and defecates, is sick and dying.”\footnote{Bahktin, 319.} Forgó’s narrative positions itself as an alternative account by constructing the events via the body of her young narrator, whose development we follow from her birth at the start of the novel, to the impending birth of her own child at the end of the narrative. The traumatic memories of the upheavals during the period in question are rendered, not as events that are not readily available to consciousness, but rather, as memories that are retained in the body, experienced through the body, through its emissions and sensations, and represented by it. Because of the body’s centrality in the construction of a narrative of socialism, Forgó’s deployment of the traumatized, pubescent body as the vehicle through which we perceive the past events undoes this seamless narrative, offering instead a series of fragmented and multiple realities that radically call into question any official historical accounts of the period in question.
5. Trauma after Theory: Terézia Mora’s Alle Tage

Wir läuten die Glocke nicht für den Osten und nicht für den Westen, sondern weil die Zeit dafür ist und eine Glocke da ist.¹

5.1 Trauma as a Global Condition of the 21st Century

In Alle Tage, Terézia Mora tells the story of her time, as opposed to the story of her community. Beginning with the opening sentence in the novel—“Nennen wir die Zeit jetzt, nennen wir den Ort hier” (9)—Mora dispenses with any reliable temporal and spatial markers thereby erasing any historical specificity in her narrative. This feature distinguishes her novel from those of the three authors looked at in the previous chapters, whose individual narratives stand in the gap for the stories of particular communities, representing a national history within the framework of the story of a private life. Although memory plays a key role in Mora’s writing, on the whole she has tended to shy away from a focus on recollection and on collective memory. Mora’s mantra, “Ich erinnere mich nicht – ich erzähle,”² results, not from an unwillingness to confront the past, but in part, from being “traumatisiert.”³ The traumatized individual is

² ibid. 1.
often denied access to the past event due to its elusive nature, but even when plagued by memories of the event, it is often difficult to create the necessary distance between the event and its narration. But beyond being unable to write about her own difficult memories, Mora sees herself more as a representative of a generation, (“ein Kind seiner Zeit”\(^4\)) rather than of a specific community. This stems in part from her unique background as a German-speaking Hungarian from Sopron, a town right on the border with Austria and not far from Slovenia. She left her community as soon as the opportunity arose and as she notes, there is no specific traumatic event that officially entitles her to lay claim on any “real” losses, having suffered no persecution or forced displacement. However, she considers herself a survivor because she experienced what she calls the “Augenblick des Erschreckens” within this community.\(^5\) She distinguishes between two different moments of horror: “’darin,’” which was the moment when she began to see the dictatorial state she lived in for what it really was, and “erst hinterher,”\(^6\) the belated reaction to events that acquire meaning only later in life, after one has survived them. Futile attempts to put that horror into narrative produced two incomplete memory projects—her unpublished fragments “Lager Mira” and “Das Kreter Spiel.” Her collection of narratives, Seltsame Materie, set in a small, fictitious, communist town bordering Austria is about individuals whose lives vaguely resemble

\(^4\) ibid. 12.
\(^5\) ibid. 8.
\(^6\) ibid.
life in her own home town. This set of stories poses a challenge for the average reader because they refer to a past era, whereas their narration is strongly grounded in the present.

What is important for Mora is the fact that this moment of horror cannot be described away with simplistic blurbs that publishers use to describe her works—such as, “das Leben im real existierenden Sozialismus”\(^7\)—descriptions that attempt to contain terror in an everyday language, rendering it innocuous for the readership. The traumatic experience, according to Mora, is often a result of an intricate web of conditions that may have (socialist) dictatorship at its base, but other circumstances come into play; in her case these included the authoritarian systems such as the catholic church, the traditional farming community she grew up in, her status as a member of a German speaking ethnic minority, as well as the rampant superstition, alcoholism and violence that pervaded the community. At the first opportunity afforded her, after the fall of the Berlin wall, she ran. She notes humorously, referring to herself: “Lauf um dein Leben, Charly Brown. (Ich lief dann auch, bei der ersten sich bietenden Gelegenheit.”\(^8\) The event behind her dislocation is difficult to pinpoint—as mentioned, despite the fact that she regards herself as a “survivor,” she was a victim of neither war nor persecution. The ambiguity surrounding her victim status plays a role in the way she casts her

\(^7\) ibid. 3. Here she is critical of her publishers who in the publication’s blurb initially described her first set of short stories “Seltsame Materie” simply as a window to life under Socialism.

\(^8\) ibid. 8.
protagonist in her debut novel *Alle Tage*, as an asylum seeker, but also as a deserter, therefore casting doubt as to whether he is in a position to claim protection from another country in spite of the ongoing war in his own country.

*Alle Tage* (2004) is not autobiographical, although Mora retains imprints of her own life in the novel: the border province that her hero comes from, his displacement from his home town, and his multilingual abilities all point to the background of the novel’s author, but as this chapter will show, Nema, her protagonist is more of a type than a character in a novel. The linguistically gifted, yet peculiarly uncommunicative, directionally challenged figure, susceptible to panic attacks, and who is neither this nor the other—on the one hand “alles [ist] in Ordnung mit ihm. [...] Und gleichzeitig ist nichts in Ordnung mit ihm (13)—stands for a far reaching problem facing this present age. When asked in an interview what the goal of her writing is, in general, Mora answered: “Wenn ich formulieren müsste, worum es in meinen Büchern geht, würde ich immer sagen: um den Zustand der Welt.”

We therefore have to take at face value the hysterical declaration in the novel that, “Panik ist der Zustand dieser Welt” (19). As opposed to a condition that ails certain individuals, it is identified it as the symptom of a global epidemic, Trauma. The underlying cause is the “Chaos” that has come to

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characterize this present age. *Panik*, as one of Mora’s multiple narrators affirms, is the “unknown Quantity P” (19). This, of course, is an intertextual reference to Herman Broch’s own novel *die unbekannte Größe* (1933), whose main character conducts research into the underlying chaos in society. Part of my investigation into Mora’s novel includes highlighting how intertextual references such as this that figure in *Alle Tage* are all part of an effort to represent an experience that disrupts traditional modes of remembering and forgetting. It is in modernist writing, which emerged at a period where trauma became a mass phenomenon, that Mora finds a framework for her own representation of the condition. As Ulrich Baer notes of modernist modes of representing trauma, their uniqueness lies in “the startling difficulty of distinguishing between one’s experience and understanding of an event and that actual event.” This lies in part in the fragmented, subjective nature of representation, which closely parallels Mora’s own distorted representation of trauma as an indistinguishable mesh of individual experiences of private and public events, such that it becomes almost impossible to identify a single key trigger of the traumatic experience. The question that Mora grapples with is how to access trauma without losing focus on the individuals affected and dwelling disproportionately on the event, especially when in this present

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12 ibid. 316.
Age discourses on trauma have increased exponentially, further marginalizing the experience of those who already exist in the periphery.

One key feature that distinguishes Mora’s own trauma project from that of her modernist precursors is the transnational space within which her narrative operates. While modernist narratives have generally either operated within a national or international space, Mora’s story straddles both spaces, because it deals almost exclusively with immigrants and asylum seekers. Fassin and Rechtman note in their extensive work on trauma, *L’Empire du Traumatisme*, that this space, between the local and the distant deals specifically with foreigners and, as an additional space of inquiry, it demonstrates the ubiquity of trauma in this current age.\(^{13}\) This transnational space is a complex, elusive space, both as a geographical space and as a condition of anxiety resulting from being trapped in a state of constant mobility and the lack of permanence. As such, the transnational space is symbolic of the general median state in which exiles find themselves, which is fittingly described by Said as being “neither fully at one with the new setting, nor fully disencumbered of the old.”\(^{14}\) But perhaps the most elusive aspect of these transnational spaces is their often marginal location on the outskirts of the metropolis. They are places of crisis in the Foucauldian sense, holding areas for

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individuals that one hopes will soon depart and return to their homeland. But they can also be seen psychologically as the repressed regions of the city’s subconscious, spaces that one would rather not think about, but nonetheless haunt the city due to the incessant influx of migrants.

The voice that speaks the traumatic experience is a silent one. The silence of Mora’s hero, for all the languages he has acquired, speaks for the futility of trying to communicate the experience in normal everyday language. The problem of narration in Mora’s Alle Tage is for the most part a problem of language, because it falls short of the ability render trauma. The global nature of trauma has also caused an institutionalization of the language of Trauma thereby bracketing out individuals who find themselves outside the jurisdiction of these institutions.

5.2 Staging Trauma: Alle Tage and its Modernist Precursors

Mora’s Alle Tage begins as a narrative turned on its head, which is also the situation in which we first encounter the novel’s hero in the opening chapter of the novel. The story begins with the end, where the protagonist Abel Nema is found hanging upside down, unconscious, in a park on the outskirts of an unnamed German city, B. As noted in the introduction, Mora quickly dispenses with objective time and geographic space, identifying these simply as “here” and “now.” These two simple adverbs become recurring motifs of the transient in this highly peripatetic narrative.
careful scene setting, in the form of a flash-forward, of the tragic accident that the hero is involved in creates an expectation of a subsequent account of the events preceding this misfortune. The opening scene is spoken into being by the Godlike plural narrator (“Nennen wir…”), who has control over time and space and who is positioned external to the narration, high above, looking down. Mora lays special emphasis on the creation of this opening scene drawing from her background in film to create an establishing shot that from which the story should unfold. The cinematic scene description is very realistic, very much in line with the style of a traditional narrative, or better still, traditional film, where the opening scene begins with an establishing long shot that surveys a large area, before moving to a medium shot and finally a close-up, setting the context before moving to the detail. We begin with a long shot of the city streets, that tracks a series of warehouses and residences, before abruptly stopping at a cul-de-sac, and then finally closing in on a deserted playground:

Braune Straßen, leere oder man weiß nicht genau womit gefüllte Lagerräume und vollgestopfte Menschenheime, im Zickzack an der Bahnlinie entlang laufend, in plötzlichen Sackgassen an eine Ziegelsteinmauerstoßend. Ein Samstagmorgen, seit kurzem Herbst. [...] Plötzliche Böen frühmorgendlichen Windes – das kommt von der zerklüfteten Straßenstellung, so ein soziales Gebiss – rütteln an einer hölzernen Scheibe, einem alten oder nur so aussehenden Kinderspielzeug, das am Rande der Grünfläche steht. (9)

The narrator-focalizers’ tight control over time and space allows the reader not only a panoramic view of the events but also an assurance of a stable narrative where the reader shares the unrestricted view of the narration. With this realistic setting, the reader
is set up for a conventional narrative, but only for a brief moment. As soon as the narrator’s focus settles on the “Kinderspielzeug,” the narrative perspective and focalization change rapidly; characters begin to intrude on the establishing scene and at the same time we quickly lose this panoramic perspective and start to view the events from the limited perspective of the individuals in the novel, experiencing a shift in the narrative voice. The subsequent events are no longer as clear and as straightforward as they were when the narrative began, as we experience an abrupt shift from stable to unstable. The realistic scene is suddenly interrupted by an aberration, an unidentified figure, or possibly an object that disrupts the camera’s focus. Three women walking by the playground on their way to work happen upon this creature, hanging upside down from a jungle gym. As soon as one woman inadvertently tugs at a piece of playground equipment, there is a squeaking sound that resembles a bird’s cry. With the narrator’s mention of the bird, the focus is immediately directed toward hundreds of birds gliding across the sky, before it is turned back toward the playground, where we now view the events from the perspective of the women, as they describe what they witnessed at the playground: “Der Mann habe auch irgendwie wie ein Vogel ausgesehen, oder eine Fledermaus, aber eine riesige, wie er da hing, seine schwarzen Mantelflügel zuckten manchmal im Wind” (9). Following this report, the entire scene is revised re-narrated in a more objective manner, almost in the style of journalistic reportage, providing us with yet another shift in perspective:
An einem Samstagmorgen zu Herbstbeginn fanden drei Arbeiterinnen auf einem verwahrlosten Spielplatz im Bahnhofbezirk den Übersetzer Abel Nema kopfüber von einem Klettergerüst baumelnd. Die Füße mit silbernem Klebeband umwickelt, ein langer schwarzer Trenchcoat bedeckte seinen Kopf. (10)

What began as a seemingly controlled narrative with a unified, all seeing, all knowing point of view fragments into multiple voices as the text itself disintegrates into multiple genres. The journalistic reporting style is followed by a doctor’s report documenting the victim’s physical state, which is then followed by a police inquiry (10). The collision of multiple genres and disintegration of narrative voice in the course of the initial paragraphs of the narrative creates an impression of fragmentation, confusion and uncertainty that mimics the nature of the event at hand. This cinematic style of narration that Mora employs is linked in particular to Döblin whose expressionist “Kinostil” brings a mode of observation that is seemingly objective in conflict with the subjective nature of events and with multiple voices in the text.\(^{15}\) This “Kinostil,” is described by Richard Murphy as a strategy of the modernist avant-garde that acts as a critique of classical modes of narration by first laying them bare and then dismantling their apparent neutrality.\(^{16}\) For Mora, the form that her introduction to the narrative takes, one of initial omniscient control followed by the disintegration and uncertainty also gives an indication of the unknowable nature of the event that took place. That Abel Nema is a


\(^{16}\) ibid.
victim of a violent crime—“schließlich kann man nicht, und sei man noch so fähig, nicht selbst in so eine Lage bringen” (10)—is indisputable. The incident however, has occurred in an isolated space, with no witnesses, and the victim is an amnesiac, hence the facts surrounding the crime will remain unspoken to the authorities. The representability of trauma is jeopardized by the very fact that the event is not known to the victim. This introductory incident is presented as a concentrated form of traumatic events that unfold in the course of the narrative.

Abel Nema is “ein Trauma,”17 “ein Magnet [für] alles Sonderbare, Lächerliche und Traurige” (188). The description of her protagonist, as one who bears the sign, whose fate has gone off the rails (188), brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s own characterization of French poet and forerunner of modernist writing, Baudelaire, as a “traumatophile type,” constantly exposed to fright and engaged in defending himself against shocks.18 Chokerfahrung, which, as Benjamin notes, was at the center of Baudelaire’s art, is an experience of shock attributed to the anxiety of modern existence, in particular, of life in the metropolis. The disruptions caused by urban living—crowds, noise,—were the triggers of these shocks and were registered by Baudelaire in his poetry like no other poet before him. Baudelaire, as Ulrich Baer notes, was the “first lyric poet

17 Terézia Mora. “Panik ist der Zustand der Welt.” (Gespräch als Poet in Residence, Universität Duisberg Essen, Essen. 6 June 2007).
to address explicitly an increasingly urban readership still struggling to adjust to the alienating experiences of mass existence.”\(^\text{19}\) His recognition of the gap between lived experience and an understanding of it was what Baer assesses as Baudelaire’s most notable achievements as a poet.\(^\text{20}\) In Mora’s work, this ever widening gap between experience and our comprehension of it, is registered, not as unprecedented and therefore shocking, but as repetitive, banal, witnessed day in, day out and yet paradoxically no less overwhelming. The shock, anxiety and sense of catastrophe witnessed in the figure of Baudelaire is translated by Mora into a constant feature of this present century. Panic, the symptom of the age locks one into a vicious cycle of more panic and, as one of the narrators in the novel notes of life in this world, it is like being constantly in motion, “ohne wirklich vom Fleck zu kommen [...] aber dann nimmt auch das ein abruptes bis gewalttätiges Ende, und man findet sich in neuen Kreisen wieder” (93). The similarity then, between Mora and her modernist precursors, beginning with Baudelaire, lies first and foremost in the recognition of this traumatic condition that defies representation; Mora however, goes on to draw on the way they take stock of this new experience, using it to model her own characters’ relationship with the chaotic world they live in.

\(^{19}\) Ulrich Baer. “Modernism and Trauma.” 310.
\(^{20}\) ibid.
Baudelaire’s urban encounters, which included drug induced hallucinations and erotic escapades, and the experience of alienation in a crowded metropolis, to name a few, so closely mirror those of Mora’s hero such that one would be tempted to conclude that she modeled her own tragic character on the French poet or at least on the subjects of his lyric poetry. The image Mora paints of Nema, as always moving against the crowds in the city, evokes both a feeling of alienation as he constantly wades through mobs of revelers to and from his daily activities: “Später dämmerte es, und er ging nach Hause. In der Sackgasse schwamm er erneut gegen den Strom, diesmal als Einziger nicht von der Bar weg, sondern auf sie zu” (21). Living in a rented room above a seedy bar, “die Klapsmühle,” Nema’s crowds are revelers returning from or heading to orgies of drinking and wild parties. Mora’s depiction of Nema against the crowds not only evokes feelings of alienation, but also a contradictory sense of intoxication or illicit enjoyment of this daily encounter with crowds. As Nema walks in the direction away from his apartment to a laundromat he finds himself faced once more with the mob heading to the bar. Although he has a lot of time at his disposal, he does not consciously seek quieter moments to go about his business, choosing instead to meander through the crowds, arriving at his destination only “nach einem kurzen Slalom zwischen aufgedonnerten halbnackten Fremden” (21). The celebration of the illicit is central to both Baudelaire and Mora; for Mora, this aspect of city life represents the “real” spaces occupied by the displaced.
The notion of Baudelaire as a “traumatophile type” has been challenged by Baer who instead suggests that Baudelaire was a “prototype of modern existence.” In his study of both Baudelaire and Celan’s poetic works, he suggests that the notion of “traumatophile types” has been proven redundant by the catastrophes of the 20th century, which have made everyone a potential victim of traumatic shock. The suggestion therefore that Baudelaire was a magnet for mishaps, has less to do with the nature of the experience than with his inability to assimilate these experiences that were characteristic of modern existence. While the suggestion that Baudelaire’s experiences were inherently traumatic would appear to trivialize trauma, especially, as Baer notes, when retrospectively, the triggers of these shocks appear so mundane to us, it is the manner in which he responds and registers these events that is of interest to us. His character serves as a template for a new prototype and cipher for this postmodern age: the asylum seeker.

That Abel is a type as opposed to a character is made evident in the carefully staged opening scene of the narrative. Hanging upside down, unconscious from the playground equipment, the scene brings to mind—in a corrupted way—the image of the crucifixion. His discovery early in the morning by three women further extends the allusion to the figure of Christ. As a Christ-type Nema is presented as an innocent and

22 ibid. 4.
tragic victim with no fixed abode, who endures undeserved violence and shame on behalf of many. As a prototype of postmodern existence Nema is a decalingual, highly gifted, although this cannot be assessed by means of a visible end product, he is highly mobile and alienated—as a refugee among crowds in a large city, and highly aware that he has serious mental issues that need to be addressed. However, because he languishes in the temporary, the pressing needs of the “now,” such as the basic need for sleep and food, constantly conspire to ensure that he remains locked in the permanent state of “Panik” that is the condition of the postmodern world. This dilemma is addressed effectively in one scene in the novel where Nema is seated on a park bench the city, gazing idly around:

Sah sich um, was gebe ich hier auf. Nichts: Fluss, Beton, Fahnen, Plakate. Bis er jetzt!, endlich realisierte, was auf dem Plakat, auf das er die ganze Zeit gestarrt hatte, stand: Nächster Vormittag, ein Vortrag, Posttraumatische Belastungsstörungen, Referent: Dr. Elias B. R.

Er wachte auf der Bank die Nacht durch [...] und dann, kurz bevor es Zeit gewesen wäre, sich auf den Weg zu machen [...] schlief er ein. Er verschlief den gesamten Vortrag. (343)

In this age, PTSD is not a unique experience; yet what persists from the turn of the 20th century is the continued challenge of representing this enigmatic condition. The greatest paradox however, as Alle Tage seems to suggest, is that there is an abundance of knowledge in the field of trauma, and yet help remains out of reach for those that need it the most. Fassin and Rechtman have registered the manner in which the subject of
trauma has become commonplace both in the medical field and the social sphere has become the “theater of wars and catastrophes.”

Personne ne s’étonne plus que ces professionnels de la santé mentale sortent de leurs institutions de soins et de leurs cabinets de consultation pour se porter au-devant des ‘blessés psychiques’. On admet avec la même facilité que les événements tragiques et douloureux, individuels ou collectifs, impriment dans l’esprit des marques [...]. Qu’une victime de torture ou de persécution se prévale d’un certificat médical, attestant l’existence de troubles post-traumatiques, pour faire reconnaître son statut de réfugié apparaît a chacun comme une exposition pertinente des faits.

(It no longer surprises us when these mental health experts leave their health care institutions or practices to attend to the ‘mentally wounded.’ It is equally easy for us to accept that tragic and painful events whether individual or collective leave scars on the mind [...]. The notion that a victim of torture or persecution can present medical certification providing evidence of PTSD in order to acquire refugee status is generally accepted).

The lack of surprise or normalization that Fassin and Rechtman bring up is the element that distinguishes trauma in the present century from the past one. With the general acceptance of the condition, all that stands in the way of the victim is the elusive official paper that will grant him or her the status of victimhood. What is exceedingly troubling is that the abundance of expertise on trauma has failed to translate into a viable solution for the victim despite one’s desire to be cured. In Alle Tage, when Nema realizes that he

23 Fassin and Rechtman. 14; my translation.
25 My translation.
has missed the lecture on PTSD that may offer a way out for him, he becomes aware for
the first time that he could die, and even flirts with the idea of dying: 26 “Liegen bleiben,
bis ich austrockne wie ein zusammengerolltes Blatt” (343). After a moment of reflection
however, he resolves to get better, visits an internet cafe and looks up the PTSD expert
online. His search returns an abundance of information ranging from the expert’s
biography and photos, to his publications and conference presentations. As an
afterthought Nema types in the name of his missing father into the search engine: “0
Ergebnisse” (343). The internet chatter on Trauma is extensive; the real solutions
however, remain elusive for the victim.

The evolution of trauma that Fassin and Rechtman investigate is also traced in
Alle Tage, from its status as a “conundrum of modernity”27 to its mundane position in the
present age. Mora does this by creating points of connection between works of
modernist writers, in particular Ball, Döblin and Bachmann, and her own narrative.
These intertextual references become particularly significant as her own text levels
criticism at the official establishment for the marginalization of the undocumented
asylum seekers who she portrays as the face of our postmodernity.

The declaration in 1917 by Hugo Ball that “Gott ist tot. Eine Welt brach
zusammen [...] Eine tausend jährige Kultur bricht zusammen. Es gibt keine Pfeiler und

26 Note the irony here: by “missing” his lecture he reenacts his trauma as a “missed experience.”
27 Baer. “Modernism and Trauma”, 310.
Stützen, keine Fundamente mehr, die nicht zersprengt worden wären,” stated the sense of shock of the experience of the cataclysmic collapse of the old world order, a revolutionary impulse that swept through Europe turning everything on its head: “Oben ist unten, unten ist oben.” This sense of a world in crisis and the lack of an adequate language with which to frame this new experience is summed up in his nihilistic pronouncement about the fragmentation of the old world order: “Chaos brach hervor. Tumult brach hervor.”

This image of chaos is appropriated by Mora and almost trivialized in a bid to represent the daily realities of life experienced by asylum seekers. Her own characters take the cataclysmic events in their stride, attempting to cope with difficulties that have become the everyday. When Nema moves in with a group of refugee musicians, the narrator makes excuses for the chaotic apartment, noting that life was not bad and describes the first few weeks as peaceful, emphasizing that “[w]as nach Chaos aussah, war in Wirklichkeit eine Folge immer gleicher Tage” (153). Chaos is often understood to be the result of an unprecedented event. As Ball so vividly described it, a world order whose immutability was never in question suddenly fell to its foundations.

The traumatic event in Alle Tage is lived day in day out, Alle Tage. By the end of WWII and the beginning of the Cold War era, Ingeborg Bachmann had already sounded the alarm over the banality of the experience of war with her poem, “Alle Tage,” perhaps

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29 ibid.
30 ibid.
the most famous of her cycle, *Die Gestundete Zeit*. In the poem, Bachman refers directly to the early years of the cold war period, sounding a complaint at the start of the poem and warning of harder days ahead: “Der Krieg wird nicht mehr erklärt, sondern fortgesetzt / Das Unerhörte ist alltäglich geworden / Der Held bleibt den Kämpfen fern.”

In consciously appropriating Bachman’s poem and hero (the deserter), Mora establishes a link that traces the transformation of our notion of the traumatic event to the present day. The constant state of war and the call to resist however retains a secondary position in Mora’s writing. The state of emergency that the victim is locked into, with no possibility for escape is the primary focus of Mora’s novel. Far from accepting an imperfect or chaotic world without question, Mora’s novel lays bare this chaos while also disrupting the language that renders it so mundane.

The experience of chaos is rendered as so pervasive and inescapable that her protagonist does not simply live in chaos, it surrounds him—his neighbor is a physicist and “Chaosforscher” whose character is vaguely modeled on Herman Broch’s own protagonist and physicist Richard Hieck. Unlike Hieck however, Halldor Rose is able to free himself from demanding familial responsibilities and immerse himself in his Chaos research under the influence of hallucinogens. These drugs, he notes, render the mind free from the “üblichen chaotischen Trübungen seines Denkens und Empfindens

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Wie vor der Geburt oder nach dem Tod” (19). Rose, who claims to have been to heaven and met with God (i.e. “Gott ist [nicht] tot”), returns with the basic message regarding “die friedfertige Liebe, das durch Gott an uns verliehene höchste Gut ist” (19). Mora’s focus on drug use as the only means of transcending the chaos underlying this traumatic world sheds light on its extensive use as an alternative to professional treatment. The habit is pervasive in the novel, and at one point in the narrative Nema, links up with a group of refugees and as they are hang around smoking and mulling over the possibility of their being sent home from Germany, now that a peace treaty has been signed in their country. As the joint, (“die speichelige Kippe”) is passed around, the narrator appears to urge the next person in line to make use of it: “Hier. Cannabionade löschen unangenehme Gefühlserinnerungen” (152). The unpleasant memories of the past evoked by the reminder that repatriation in the near future is a possibility, creates the disturbing image of the precarious nature of the refugees’ “present,” which is the only time frame that is guaranteed to them. The drugs are seen as a way to maintain this fragile moment that is all they have in their possession.

The message of “peace that comes from love,” that Halldor Rose, the “Chaosforscher” declares as the “absolute moral good” is clearly an unattainable illusion, as suggested by the fact that his epiphanic moment was the result of hallucinogens. Mora’s own hero, Nema, also achieves his own moment of revelation when he, at his lowest moment, ingests some of his neighbor’s psychoactive mushrooms.
and descends into a delirious state, before falling unconscious for three days—here once
again are echoes of the “Christ” motif with Nema’s “descent into hell” to face the ghosts
of his past. During his state of delirium, Nema is able to address his past trauma—
abandonment by his father, rejection by his friend, displacement from his homeland.
The author as well takes advantage of her hero’s moment of delirium to intrude on the
narrative and make pronouncements of her own, unapologetically celebrating the chaos
and fragmentation of a culture that has failed in its attempt to regain its once glorious
past because it is founded on “rubble” of history. As soon as her hero ingests the
hallucinogens, he announces—very much like a prophet experiencing a vision:

> Als ich aufwachte, lag ich über die Erde verstreut. Was und wo bin ich?
> [...] Die Prunkbauten der Vergangenheit sind die Steinbrüche für die
> nächstfolgende unterprivilegierte, Korrektur: unkultivierte, Korrektur: ...
> Gesellschaft [...] Wer auf Schutt baut. Wo ist mein Bein, mein Kopf,
> meine Hand. Ist das versteinerte Glied meins? Dieser archaische Torso?
> (359)

The vision appears to echo Ball’s own pronouncement of the collapse of a thousand year
culture and the destruction of all pillars and supports that once held this culture upright.
Her narrator however proceeds to describe the nature of the fragmented pieces that are a

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33 This is characteristic of postmodernist writing in general. As Brian McHale notes of the
postmodern text, it “insists on authorial presence, although not consistently” and that it often
“projects an illusion of authorial presence only to withdraw it abruptly.” This is one of the
occasional moments that the author’s voice intrudes on her narrative. Brian McHale.
*Postmodernist Fiction.* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 207.
combination of his own fragmented self and those of the ancient Greek statues, trying to piece them together like pieces of a puzzle: “Das ist nicht meine Wade, das sind nicht meine Hoden, Diese Brüste nehme ich gern. Wenngleich die meisten Teile mit Styropor ergänzt worden sind. Überall Risse. I’m puzzled. Habe ich immer schon in einem Magazin alter Funde gehaust?” (359). The narrator sees a culture attempting to rebuild itself on the ruins of a once thriving ancient culture. The end-result is nothing more than a pastiche, whose “Risse” remain as a visible reminder that this constitutes no more than a recycling of the old. The narrator’s switch to the English language to express confusion, “I’m puzzled” is a play on words that metaphorically describes both the narrator’s confusion and fragmentation (like pieces of a puzzle) and provides us with a visual image of the manner in which the fragments are reconstituted. This recalls John Gardner’s cynical description of the post-modern as “New! Improved!”34 when in actual fact nothing has changed. If in fact Modernism celebrated the violent dismantling of an old dominant order, only to replace it as the dominant, as a reconstitution of the old, how does a postmodernist poetics avoid this same trap? In the context of trauma, it is the modernists who first took stock of this fragmenting condition but paradoxically also placed the experience into language through the multiplication of discourses surrounding the enigmatic condition thereby legitimizing it.

34 qtd. in Brian McHale. 4.
Deleuze’s way out of the quagmire of totalizing narratives is via the experience of the schizophrenic. Juxtaposing Nema’s schizophrenic “vision” to Deleuze’s own declaration about the dissolution of primordial totalities of the past gives us a clearer understanding of Mora’s own engagement with the modernist narrative that she, on the one hand appears to embrace through her intertextual references, only to confront and discredit it during her protagonist’s state of delirium. With regard to our postmodern age Deleuze notes:

We live today in the age of partial objects, bricks that have been shattered to bits, and leftovers. We no longer believe in the myth of the existence of fragments that, like pieces of an antique statue, are merely glued waiting for the last one to be turned up, so that they may all be glued back together to create a unity that is precisely the same as the original unity. We no longer believe in a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some future date.35

The schizophrenic state such as the one Nema descends into affords him a superior level of perception [via fragmentation], allowing him to reach what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as “unknown lands”36 and achieve a higher unity that is the direct result of his fragmentation. This section of the narrative is therefore not coincidentally titled the “Zentrum,” for it is in this hallucinatory, fragmentary state that Nema moves from his

36 ibid. 350. Deleuze and Guattari look at Proust’s A la recherche des Temps Perdus as a schizophrenic enterprise that allows the narrator to go back and successfully explore the past. In the example of the description of the narrator’s first kiss, the lady’s (Albertine’s) face fragments into “molecular partial objects” as the narrator approaches her lips, “while those on the narrator’s face rejoin the body without organs.” It is in this schizophrenic mode of perception that a higher or superior work of art is produced.
marginalized position as a victim of trauma, to come to a clearer understanding of himself.

5.3 Crisis Spaces: The Trauma of Permanent Transit

*Alle Tage* is a “Stadtroman” and is therefore concerned with several aspects of city life, in particular its darker side—the violence, the illicit, noise, crowds, the struggle for survival and most importantly with space. This section of my chapter examines how Mora grounds her narrative in shifting, transient and often peripheral spaces as a way of centering the individuals afflicted with trauma and marginalized by their constant mobility. In the “theater of wars and catastrophes,” the news of the event will always overshadow the experience of the victims, as will the event’s commemoration in the future. As Mora correctly notes, even when writing a narrative about individuals subjected to suffering in a catastrophic event, the text will always be about the event. Words such as 9/11 or the Balkan wars “dominieren einen Text, er handelt von ihnen, egal worüber er sonst zu handeln meint.”37 Her novel counters this domination by a singular event, first, by fragmenting the event, creating multiple possible triggers of trauma afflicting an individual. There is never a unique cause of anxiety and panic in the novel’s characters because the underlying chaos also has multiple sources. That her protagonist appears to be a magnet for mishaps can be explained in part by the fact that it is difficult to identify one specific event that causes his disturbance. Second, she

accords a disproportionate amount of text space and discourse time to seemingly minor events, while fleetingly mentioning the political upheavals that cause the actual uprooting of the novel’s hero from his homeland. By juxtaposing personal incidents with public events, the political event is denied dominance. This is seen for instance when Nema’s infatuation with his childhood friend, Ilia, an attraction that he has yet to confess to him, is recounted in tandem with the rising political tensions in the country: “Das Identitätsbewusstsein der Minderheiten regte sich. Ilia und Abel regten sich nicht” (29). The rising tensions among the ethnic minorities are paired up with the imminent stirring of homoerotic tendencies in the novel’s protagonist. When a civil war eventually breaks out, Nema’s displacement is presented as less than dramatic. He happens to be on a journey in the Western part of his home country in search of his long lost father when he is involved in an accident that renders him unconscious and lands him in hospital. Upon regaining his consciousness (on the third day), he receives a call from his mother who warns him not to return home and provides him with the name of a contact in city B. in Germany: “Du hast eine Einberufung bekommen. Sie nehmen jungen Männer aus den Bussen und Straßenbahnen mit” (74). This is the extent of the information we are provided with regarding the war in Nema’s country S., and of his eventual dislocation.

In contrast, Mora takes time and space to relate the personal, emotional events affecting her hero, presenting them as devastating. When Nema’s advances toward his
childhood friend are rebuffed, he experiences a shock so shattering, that his entire perspective is dramatically altered and his temporal and spatial orientation lost. As he walks away from Ilia, the boy who rejects him, we are provided with a kafkaesque description of the distorted landscape as Nema, completely disoriented by the rejection, vainly attempts to make his way through a forest and up endless stairs to a look-out tower, in order to reorient himself. The darkness around him is oppressive—

“stockfinster” (55) and he has the impression that he running in a dream: “Das ist einer dieser endlosen Traummärsche, bei denen höchstens so viel passiert, dass der Berg immer steiler wird. Er neigte den Körper nach vorn, um die Steigung auszugleichen [...]

Auf allen vieren zu gehen erwies sich als gut, er blieb dabei” (55, 56). He loses his sense of time: “Was in den nächsten Minuten?, Stunden? passierte, darüber gibt es keine genaue Kenntnis” (56). In the lengthy distortion of space and time we read the incident as traumatic to the protagonist and can trace his reaction directly to the broken relationship.

In yet another key incident directly following this episode of disorientation, Nema, still suffering from the shock of rejection undergoes what the narrator refers to as a “Herzattacke,” that violently hurls him out of his bed:

Das Bett war kein Bett, nur eine Matratze im Garderobenschrank im Flur. Er schlug im Fallen gegen die Sperrholzwand, das muss einen Mordskrach gegeben haben, kam mit dem Gesicht auf dem Schrankboden auf und blieb liegen. Er druckte die nasse Stirn auf den Teppichboden, der Staub knirschte, er atmete, so gut es eben ging, und
horchte [...] wie sein Herz, Herz, Herz pochte. Von meinem Gekeuch erzittert die Welt. (57)

The earthshattering nature of this personal event is evident; more than that, it is exaggerated at the expense of the world events that one would normally consider to be cataclysmic. Nema’s uprooting from his country to Germany should ideally be the central event, given that he does not even get the opportunity to see his family, or even pack his belongings before his escape, and has to flee to a strange country where he knows no one. The traumatizing event therefore appears to the reader as displaced.

One important function that the personal, “small story” of disorientation fulfills is to provide the reader with an understanding of Nema’s puzzling relationship with space in his new city B. Although not explicitly mentioned, we can trace Nema’s inability to find his way around B. to his deracination from his own country—even after several years in the city he must resort to using a taxi to get from one block to the next. Taking his personal event as a precedent, we surmise that this sudden uprooting must have had a similar destabilizing effect on the novel’s hero, even though this is not explicitly mentioned in the novel.

Nema’s lack of spatial orientation is therefore linked directly to trauma, which in turn causes a chain reaction of unavoidable events that can be attributed to the vulnerable state he finds himself in as a displaced person with personal issues. His encounters become the possible encounters of any other asylum seeker arriving in a new country, in particular Germany. This precarious state of the asylum seeker is presented
in a deceptively simple manner as Mora’s hero, still a teenager assesses his predicament upon arrival in B. in spatial terms. “Aus einem Schrank bin ich gekommen, auf einer Bank auf dem Bahnhof bin ich gelandet. Allein in einer Stadt, in der man niemanden kennt” (92). The “coming out of the closet” recalls his earlier accident, where he violently fell out of his closet bed and landed on the floor, “causing the world to shudder.” This new description of movement from the closet is presented as much less eventful, although we would interpret it as far more traumatic. The move from the small, fixed private space (Schrank), once experienced as familiar, to an exposed public space that represents transience (Bahnhof) entails losses on multiple levels—loss of a sense of permanence and possessions that once characterized an individual’s life, and the loss of security and prospects for the future. This all betrayed in the loss of a sense of direction.

Because of his lack of spatial orientation, Nema inadvertently assumes the shady character of a stalker as he often has to resort to following strangers in the city in order to find his way around, leading to unfortunate misunderstandings and a series of encounters with the police.38 Even when he tries to be a law abiding citizen, his condition renders him vulnerable and suspicious. When a woman he follows around the

38 This brings to mind Auden’s remarks, in his prologue to The Age of Anxiety where he describes war-time as a period “when everybody is reduced to the anxious status of a shady character or a displaced person, when even the most prudent become worshippers of chance.” W. H. Auden. The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue. Ed. Alan Jacobs. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011), 3.
city accuses him of stalking her, the policeman immediately demands to see his papers

“Kann ich Ihren Ausweis sehen? Schaut sich den Ausweis an, nicht mehr im Dienst”

(189). Even though the policeman lets him off with the simple advice to buy himself a map, he is subsequently subjected to police checks for three consecutive times, as though the first policeman’s acknowledgement of his existence by declaring that his passport was “nicht mehr im Dienst,” has suddenly brought him out of the shadows as an anonymous asylum seeker, and raised his status to that of a criminal. Oddly enough, however, each time Nema is stopped by the police, he is allowed to disappear back into anonymity in spite of his expired papers. As remains to be seen, the policeman’s response to the stalking and to Nema’s expired passport, “Kaufen Sie sich einen Stadtplan” (189), functions more as a veiled threat to Nema to be more aware the spaces that he as an illegal individual should keep to in order to maintain his anonymity. Seen from another angle however, Nema’s problems with spatial cognition allow him to inadvertently transgress the unseen city boundaries set for the asylum seeker.

In his essay, “State-centered Refugee Law” T. Alexander Aleinikoff describes a refugee as “someone who has lost the protection of his or her state” and is now “located outside of that state and in need of a new guarantee of protection.”

39 Aleinkoff further explains that this guarantee centers on the ability to provide proof of persecution in

one’s home country which as we have earlier noted comes in the form of a formal attestation from a mental health expert indicating the existence of a traumatic condition. This is a vicious circle for the refugee, as witnessed in the example of Nema falling asleep and missing the opportunity to attend a conference by the PTSD expert. The result is a life lived in limbo, stuck in the impermanent present, the “jetzt” that Mora grounds her narrative in. Aleinikoff also highlights the reluctance of states to acknowledge the existence of asylum seekers because to acknowledge their existence obliges the state to award rights—as we see in Nema’s encounter with the law—whether as criminals or as law abiding citizens. The only right that the refugee has according to Aleinikoff, is the right to non-refoulement, i.e. the right not to be returned to their home country if there is a risk of persecution. Unable to overcome the red-tape, the refugees exist in a state of provisional permanence, “not forced to return to their countries of origin but denied permanent resettlement in their countries of asylum.” There is therefore an unspoken agreement, as we see in Alle Tage of a guarantee of “provisional permanence” in exchange for anonymity or non-existence. The constant looming threat of exposure is frequently related in humorous scenes that at the same time constantly remind the reader this is not a laughing matter. During one police-check, Abel is seized by an uncontrollable fit of laughter that causes the police officer to doubt his sanity asking: “Was gibt’s da zu lachen?” (190). Nema is lucky to escape in time, just as he is

\[\text{ibid. 260.}\]
about to be subjected to a drug test. The fact that he is always able to escape in the nick of time is revelatory of the (lack of) policies that govern asylum seekers. There is clearly nothing funny about a life lived on the edge. On the contrary, it is angst inducing, as Nema’s former flat-mate, Konstantin finds out, after an unfortunate drug bust at their apartment complex lands him at the police station. He laments hysterically after the incident, where his fingerprints were taken: “Sie wissen, dass es mich gibt und dass ich hier bin” (129; emphasis added). The only way to ensure one’s non-existence is to remain on the move—Nema immediately finds a new abode after the incident—and to take the police officer’s advice to buy a city map.

A city map may reveal that the unnamed German metropolis in which Nema has sought refuge is roughly divided by a railway line, with one side containing the “eleganteren, reicher, geordneten Westen,” and the eastern exit where one finds the “Insel der Tapferen” (20). This area has in the past been home to “Nervenkranke, schwererziehbare Halbwaisen und Alte,” and after a failed attempt at renovating the area for young Snobs, it was eventually abandoned to the “Gestrandeten [...] die nicht aufhörten, hierher zu strömen, als hätte ihnen jemand gesagt: nehmt den Ostausgang” (20). These Eastern spaces are Foucault’s “places outside of all places,” that he identifies in his essay fragment on heterotopias, “Of other Spaces.” 41 In this essay he highlights two types of outside spaces: those usually for individuals in crisis, such as adolescents,

the elderly, pregnant women. These he notes are disappearing in Western society.\textsuperscript{42} He then identifies a second category, heterotopias of deviation, which he notes are replacing heterotopias of crisis. These are places where individuals with behaviors classified as deviant are placed: psychiatric hospitals, prisons and curiously in that category, retirement homes (he sees old age as both a crisis and a deviancy because of the limited ability of the elderly to work). Often, Foucault notes, these places are located, not at the heart of the city, but in suburbs; they form “the other city.”\textsuperscript{43} The new crisis spaces of our postmodern age, as seen in Mora’s narrative, are those that hold the stranded, i.e. the asylum seekers. Because the spaces are accessed via the “Ostausgang,” they remain a safe distance away from the Western “legal” part of the city. These spaces function through a process of self-policing, whereby those outside have no desire to penetrate these spaces and those inside would do well to keep inside, only moving from one crisis space to another. When Nema arrives in B., a fellow refugee provides him with accommodation at his apartment complex which he famously refers to as the “Bastille.” His flatmates include an antisocial Scandinavian and an Algerian immigrant that he never gets to see. Nema’s stint at the “Bastille” is cut short when it is “stormed” by the police during a drug bust, forcing him to move in with a band of refugee musicians who lead their chaotic lives out of a suitcase, then into a room above a butchery before finally

\textsuperscript{42} ibid
\textsuperscript{43} ibid. 25.
settling in an illegally built room above an illicit nightclub appropriately named “die Klapsmühle.” His movement through the different unregulated spaces reveals the different facets of the life of the displaced person: the temporary, the chaotic, the unclean and the illicit. His last abode is tucked away in a cul-de-sac directly on the eastern side of the railway line next to old industrial buildings (20). All these aspects of refugee life are successfully kept hidden away from the conscious, active life of the city through this unofficial form of self-regulation that requires only occasional intervention from the authorities.

The question of self-regulation brings us back to the beginning of Mora’s narrative and to the carefully staged scene, where Nema is found hanging upside down unconscious, the victim of a violent crime. As we find out at the end of the narrative, he has been attacked and left for dead by a band of gypsy boys, who tend to terrorize a specific category of individuals—they are rumored to have set a homeless man ablaze the previous winter (425)—and have been targeting Nema because, in addition to always being at the wrong place at the wrong time, they suspect him of being gay, as well as a pedophile (426). Because of his spatial problem, he constantly falls prey to this group of boys. The nature and location of the attack are not coincidental. Nema has just emerged from his drug induced delirium, during which he appears to have regained his sense of direction. Things are beginning to look up for him as he leaves his apartment to get identification papers that will finally allow him to apply for residency as well as
allow him to divorce his German wife-of-convenience. As he approaches the playground close to his apartment he encounters the violent gang of gypsy boys who beat him up, leaving him for dead. The attack can be read as functioning to sabotage Nema’s efforts at obtaining his legal status. It occurs in the eastern part of the city, within the “city outside the city.” The description at the beginning of the narrative of “Braune Straßen [...] und vollgestopfte Menschenheime, im Zickzack an der Bahnlinie entlang,” where his unconscious body is found, refers to his residential area and thus, regardless of whether he had regained his sense of direction or not, he stood no chance of getting his papers in order. Not only do the asylum seekers self-police by keeping themselves invisible; they also deliver punishment to those who attempt to emerge from their invisibility, hence relieving the official authorities of that disagreeable task. This, at least, is what the nature of the crime, its timing and location seem to suggest.

In Foucault’s study of the development of the modern prison system, he reveals the manner in which justice establishes a system of protection in order to shield itself from the shame of the punishment it imposes. By transferring the responsibility for handing out punishment to a separate Ministry, judges can feel safe in the knowledge that they have nothing to do with the unpleasant or demeaning task of punishment; rather, theirs is simply to “correct” or “reclaim.” 44 In the same vein, one can argue that

in the Nema’s case, the official authorities do not have to “discipline” him because his own kind carries out this task on their behalf, away from the visibility of the authorities and the public. The same can be said about the attack on the “Penner,” who was set ablaze by the same gypsy boys. His condition of homelessness means that he cannot be contained even within any of the crisis spaces because of his itinerant nature and is thus conveniently disposed of by the gang of boys. The deliberate nature of Nema’s attempted execution is evidenced by the time and care taken by the youth to hang him upside down from the jungle gym. The narrator comments on the struggle to cut Nema lose stating that “[e]s war nicht einfach, ihn abzuschneiden, das Klebeband war widerspenstig” (427). Nema hangs in the vicinity of the “Ostausgang” as if to caution others against emerging from the shadows.

The author, however, intrudes on this conclusion of the narrative in a classic postmodernist fashion, and rewrites what would have been a tragic end to the narrative. Nema emerges from this ordeal, albeit with severe mental disabilities. The doctors can officially attest to the fact that he suffers from both amnesia as well as decalingual aphasia as a result of the traumatic injuries to his head. Because of his condition he has to remain married to his German wife and finally regains one language, German and only a basic knowledge of it (430).
5.4 *Trauma and the Futility of Communication*

When the chaos expert and physicist, Halldor Rose is found on a bridge, after disappearing from a plane on the way home from a conference, he claims to have been to heaven and back with a message of love from God. When asked whether God had said anything else, he responds: “*Gesagt* habe er nichts, Gott bedürfe die Sprache nicht” (19). The negation of language, or the mistrust in its ability to communicate experience, is embodied in the silence of Mora’s linguistically gifted protagonist. In a text such as *Alle Tage*, which is centered primarily on the experience of displacement from one country to another, language undoubtedly has to play a central role, one way or the other, either by facilitating or complicating the migrants’ experience in the country of exile, depending on their ability to be at home with the new language. Even when language refuses to perform a communicative function, as it often does in Mora’s *Alle Tage*, language still dominates the narrative as metalanguage, given that language forms an integral part of the condition of exile.\(^{45}\) The narrative registers the futility of trying to put one’s suffering into words, when the language of trauma has become so commonplace, such that it fails to communicate the experience of fragmentation, or disorientation and destabilization. By commonplace I refer to both the overuse of the term “trauma” in everyday language such that it is robbed of its ability to signify to a

\(^{45}\) The relationship between language and exile has been discussed extensively among others by Deleuze and Guattari in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (1998) and more recently by Jessica Dubow and Richard Steadman-Jones in their essay “Language and Exile in W. G. Sebald’s Austerlitz.” *New German Critique* Volume 39, Number 1 115, (2012): 3-26.
much more acute condition, as well as the ease with which clinical diagnoses of the condition are made.\textsuperscript{46} One of Alle Tage’s characters sheds light on this dilemma when, before ultimately taking her own life, bemoans the difficulty of explaining one’s suffering, which she notes is like trying to describe color to the blind: “Wie soll ich das erklären,” she asks, “was das ist, diese Kehrseite unserer Tapferkeit. Wer das nicht selbst erlebt hat” (355). This reverse side of courage, what lies beneath the façade of normalcy, denotes the “trauma” of the individuals, a condition that has been rendered benign by its misuse in language, such that it becomes a signifier for multiple conditions. Kenneth Surin notes of trauma that:

Part of the problem of dealing with this concept (and attendant concepts like that of survivorship) is getting past the idioms that grip popular culture, now that this culture guarantees a seemingly effortless visibility to those projecting themselves as some kind of traumatized subjects. How does one escape the banalization of what is after all ostensibly an important concept, psychoanalytically and philosophically? Is ‘trauma’ going to be more than just a part of our daily repertoire of devices in the game of ‘impression management’ […] a culturally sanctioned way for people to present themselves to other people.\textsuperscript{47}

The movement of trauma as a concept from its marginal position at the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, when it was first associated by Charcot, Breuer and Freud among others with

\textsuperscript{46} As pointed out earlier, even though victims can now officially obtain a diagnosis and certification confirming the presence of trauma, as well as treatment, access to these specialized facilities remain out of the reach for a majority of victims marginalized by their status as displaced and undocumented persons.

female hysteria\(^{48}\) (traceable to a possible experience of seduction in early childhood), to a position of acceptability and even the vogue, has resulted in a disconnect between language and the catastrophe.\(^{49}\) Trauma, as Surin notes, now encompasses a wide range of everyday experiences such as inattentive parents or overbearing bosses.\(^{50}\) Victims of catastrophe or those who are “pushed beyond the limits of what they can bear,”\(^{51}\) find themselves bereft of a way of articulating their suffering, as in the case of Nema’s companion who eventually gives up and commits suicide.

In Alle Tage we encounter a struggle for voice demonstrated in multiple episodes by an attack on the German language as the dominant voice through a silence that declares language superfluous, through hysterical screaming that returns us to the original understanding of trauma as hysteria, and through a destabilization of narrative achieved by the intrusion of competing narratives and multiple narrative voices. Even as a victim of trauma, Mora’s protagonist is positioned as a destabilizing force in the novel, moving with ease between the different milieu, unintentionally upsetting and unsettling them while remaining unreachable and unaffected by them. Mora equips him with both

\(^{49}\) Fassan and Rechtman’s *L’Empire du Traumatisme* also investigates the way in which a shift has occurred over the last thirty years in the way we talk about trauma. Rather than questioning the validity or the universality of trauma, their questions center on locating, or seizing the historic moment that they refer to as “La fin du soupçon” or the “end of suspicion” (16). This is a moment when a condition that was once doubted, now evokes sympathy and compensation. 16.
\(^{50}\) Surin. 16.
\(^{51}\) ibid.
a high degree of linguistic competency, as well as an ability to assume a variety of personas at will.\textsuperscript{52} The gas accident that he is involved in shortly before his displacement mysteriously gifts him with a capacity for language, which becomes the only possession he is able to carry with him to his new country at short notice. The decalingual abilities that he possesses function as nothing more than a tool of trade that enable him to acquire student status, as well as to help him move fluidly between the different classes of immigrants—the legal and the illegal aliens. For all his giftedness however, Nema is curiously silent, to the extent that his knowledge of these languages is frequently called into question. Phrases of doubt populate the narrative, as one character after another complains about their inability to communicate with him: “In der Praxis hört man kein Wort von ihm” (13); “Da schaut er mich an als hätte er kein Wort verstanden. Dabei soll das doch, nicht wahr, seine Spezialität” (13-14). Throughout the narrative the contradiction between his knowledge and his silence creates confusion, misunderstanding and frustration. He gets everyone talking about language and questioning the relationship between language and praxis:

\textsuperscript{52} During one incident, Nema unintentionally picks up another immigrant’s jacket, leaving his own behind. He finds a passport in the jacket with an unexpired visa and remarks to himself: “Jetzt kann ich überall hin” (245). Nema also subleases room belonging theoretically to an Algerian immigrant, who has not been seen in two months (95). “El-Kantararah,” the name by which Nema goes as the lessee of the room refers to a “bridge” in Arabic and becomes symbolic for the ease with which Nema shifts between the different millieux, both legal and illicit. See Tobias Kraft for the multiple aliases that Nema assumes, including “Celine des Prados,” an incomplete anagram for “displaced person”: “Literatur in Zeitentransnationaler Lebensläufe Identitätsentwürfe und Großstadtbewegungen bei Terézia Mora und Fabio Morábito.” Magisterarbeit. Universität Potsdam Wintersemester 2006/2007. 42, 43.
Man macht sich Gedanken über ihn und ärgert sich hinterher, weil sich herausstellt, dass er einem die ganze Zeit, während man auf ihn eingeredet hat, nur den Mund geschaut hat, als besäße allein die Art und Weise, wie man Frikative bildet, Wichtigkeit für ihn. (14)

What is particularly unsettling about Nema is the fact that his giftedness allows him to achieve a level of perfection that not even a native speaker is able to achieve in their entire lifetime. His utterances are said to be "so klar, wie man es noch nie gehört hat, kein Akzent, kein Dialekt, nichts" (13), and yet most of his language acquisition occurs outside of a community of speakers, in a language laboratory, "von Tönbändern" (13): he has learnt his language outside of language. While the "nichts" that characterizes his language can refer to the absence of an accent or dialect in his utterances, it can also point to the state of nothingness, or silence into which language is rendered by his perfect command of it. The question of "pushing language to its limit, to its outside"\textsuperscript{53} is seen by Deleuze as a minor writer’s way of destabilizing a major language, and he identifies silence as the extreme limit that language can be pushed to through the process.\textsuperscript{54} In Alle Tage, Mora specifically targets the dominance of the German language for destabilization by a non-German, Nema, both through his unsettling silence and through a word play on his name: “Nema, der Stumme, verwandt mit dem Slawischen Nemec, heute für: der Deutsche, früher für jeden nichtslawischer Zunge, für den


\textsuperscript{54} ibid.
Stummen also, oder anders ausgedrückt: den Barbaren. Abel der Barbar” (14).

According to the novel’s narrator, Nema’s name originally refers to the unintelligible speech of the foreigner or barbarian and has evolved to mean “German” or “mute.” If being German means that one has a command of the language, then Nema, who has total control of it, is also in a position to silence it or render it barbaric. This is effectively demonstrated during a confrontation between Nema and a guest at one of the monthly jour-fixes organized by the community of immigrant elite. The guest, Erik, who suspects Nema of being a pseudo-intellectual because of his silence, repeatedly tries to draw him into the conversation by asking his opinion on various topics:

‘Was ist deine Meinung, Abel?
Der Zehnsprachenmann jedesmal, als tauchte er von ganz tief auf:
Pardon, was war die Frage?
Erik wiederholte die Frage, woraufhin Abel - aber wirklich jedes verdammtes Mal - Damit kenne ich mich nicht aus, Ich habe keine Ahnung oder Ich weiß es nicht sagte.
Das ist auch nichts zum Wissen! […] Das ist keine Wissensfrage! Wonach ich frage ist deine Meinung!!!
Scht. (Maya).
Warum schreist du so mein Junge, tut dir was weh? (Alegria im Vorbeigehen.)
Inzwischen hatte Abel sich schon zurück zu Omar gewandt, und damit war die Diskussion gestorben. Als gäbe es mich gar nicht. (322)

As the conversation continues (or disintegrates further), Erik is rendered speechless and literally wordless as he, the native speaker, mumbles and spurts out meaningless sounds, before he eventually has to be physically removed from the party:

“Was bist du den für ein … für ein …? Ha? […] Ein Freak … Mercedes steht auf Freaks. Sammelt sie wie … wie … diese ganzen (fuchtelt)
Not only does Erik become the barbarian as his speech fragments into gibberish, the German language is attacked and its rules contravened by one of its own. In his tirade Erik addresses Nema in the “du” form and repeatedly bumps his potbelly against him, while Nema, during the rare moments that he does address Erik, always attempts to keep his distance by taking a step back, and refers to Erik using both the “Sie” and the subjunctive form: “Verzeihung, flüsterte er zurück, könnten Sie mich bitte nicht berühren?” (324). As Erik comically flails his arms around, helplessly spouting gibberish, language is exposed as a mere game that Nema is adept at playing. In a complex linguistic paradox “Abel der Barbar” effortlessly turns language on itself by rendering the native speaker, Erik, the barbarian. Rimmon-Kenan suggests that silence in narrative, can often function as a tool in a power struggle.55 Referring specifically to Sutpen’s silence the main character in Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom, she demonstrates how his unforthcoming nature allows him to gain the upper hand or maintain control by keeping his past hidden from others.56 Nema however, is not cast in such a manipulative role. While Mora positions the confrontation between Nema and Erik as a humorous

56 ibid. 44.
power play that breaks down the dominant language it also lays bare the predicament of involuntary exile.

The tragedy is demonstrated in the inability of her hero, an interpreter by profession, to translate his suffering for others to understand. Language bears no relation to one’s personal experience. During Erik’s verbal attack on Nema, one of the novel’s many narrators observes Nema’s countenance during the confrontation, describing it as “traurig. Die Augen sind gerötet. Gesoffen oder geweint?” (323). One can only speculate on his inner state given that he remains opaque as a character throughout the narrative. Erik’s main plaint against Nema is that he is an outsider who has all the tools at hand to penetrate the group of legal residents and yet remains an enigma, unreachable. While Erik’s rage is directed against Nema, it actually represents the attitude of the locals toward the refugee community as a whole as evidenced in the shift in Erik’s address to Nema from “du” to “ihr.” Accusing Nema of carrying his foreignness around like a badge he asks: “Warum must ihr so kompliziert sein? So dunkel? Als wärt ihr permanent beleidigt? WER hat euch beleidigt?” (323). What troubles Erik is the fact that Nema’s presumed language skills fail to transmit any of his lived experiences or opinions. He thus remains a stranger, uncanny and threatening. In her study of narration and representation, Rimmon-Kenan puts forward that “‘trying to
tell’ implies some faith in the possibility of communication.” Through her protagonist’s reluctance to speak, Mora makes known her distrust of language beyond its function as a frame or system of rules that can be manipulated or dismantled at will.

What is interesting though is the way in which Nema’s silence serves to engender narrative. Right from the fundamental discussion about the etymology of his name, the characters and narrators in the novel talk about him and for him, writing his story on his behalf. The misunderstandings caused by his lack of interest in language, except outside of its communicative context, do not alienate him or cause him to become an outcast. On the contrary, he is a regular invitee at the monthly jour-fixes organized by the immigrant elite, and even when he falls out of status he is always able to acquire a letter of recommendation to get him readmitted as a student (177). As already pointed out, he is not manipulative; rather, his silence seems to draw others to him and desire to help him and talk about him. Despite his lack of interest in women, being gay, they fall head over heels in love with him — “irgendwas hat er! Dieser Blick, dieses Schweigen” (180)—and he even earns him a marriage proposal that is eventually his key to a legal status.

In another encounter, Nema’s flatmate Konstantin is complaining as usual about his abnormal silence. As his lament about Nema progresses — “Sprach keine drei Worte am Tag, man (Konstantin) bekam ihn so gut wie nie zu Gesicht (100)—so does a

57 ibid.
description of Nema’s personal life, including news about his homeland and his family.

As Konstantin concludes his tirade, he complains to Nema:

Es kann dich nicht interessieren, was in der Fremde und zu Hause los ist. Hast du etwa nicht deine Mutter ein ganzes Jahr lang nicht wiedergefunden? Wie geht es ihr?
Es geht mir gut, sagte Mira. (103)

Konstantin’s monological tirade about Nema is frequently punctuated by information from other narrators who constantly provide answers to Konstantin’s questions about Nema’s odd behavior. When he poses the personal question about his mother, Nema’s response is not anticipated since he is excluded from the narration and instead the narrative voice switches smoothly to that of Nema’s mother as though she were present in the conversation. This technique not only collapses space and time, but also allows for a coherent narrative to emerge out of diverse perspectives through a plurality of voices.

This example contrasts well with yet another scene where Nema, when asked about the situation in his homeland, responds with silence as though to refuse his interlocutor any information about himself. This occurs when when Nema first arrives in B. and he manages to locate a fellow landsman, a university professor and émigré who has not been home in 50 years. The professor, who has since given up his ties to his country, asks Nema: “Wie geht es dort?” (88), to which Nema simply shrugs his shoulders, and the professor responds with a smile, “Verstehe” (88). An absence of 50 years would trace the professor’s dislocation from his homeland to the events following World War II. Nema’s retreat into silence, results, on the one hand, from his own
inability to communicate about that which he has left behind. On the other hand, his silence also denies the professor access to his homeland, which appears so close because of Nema’s recent arrival, and yet remain so out of reach for him. The denial of information can be seen as part of the power play that Mora engages her protagonist in as a way of delivering her critique on this settled class of émigrés who are presented as comfortable and out of touch with the plight of the new class of immigrants. Their attitude is reflected in their talk which attempts to create a distinction between the voluntary migrant who belongs and involuntary migrant who constitutes a problem. During one of the jour-fixes (or “salons”) one of the guests referred to as the “Mutter aller Emigranten” (109) discusses how she had to stop, providing assistance because there were just too many of them. The unsettling nature of the refugees lies in part in the fact that they are a constant reminder that despite all efforts at adjusting to their adoptive country, they do not truly belong; what is more troubling is that the constant flow also reminds them that their homeland is so close and yet at the same time unreachable.58

The stories created about Nema are also complemented by the stories others tell him about themselves. Nema’s silence implies that he is willing to listen. The novel is

58 Said notes of the sad fate of exile that while you are “forced to live away from home” you continue to live “with the many reminders that you are an exile, that your home is not in fact so far away; and that the normal traffic of contemporary, everyday life keeps you in constant but tantalising and unfulfilled touch with the old place.” Said. “Representation of the Intellectual 3.”
populated by random stories that various immigrants eagerly relate to Nema about their own lives as foreigners in Germany (cf. 236-39). The random “small stories” appear meaningless in relation to the overall plot, ranging from that of a female immigrant who suffers at the hands of cruel policemen, to a black immigrant who has a banana plant in his back garden, discussions that distract from the main narrative, serving to decenter it and deliberately cause disruptions in the flow of events.

One small story however, is of particular significance. It is not narrated to Nema but is instead arbitrarily embedded into the main narrative and is, as we later find out, a biographical short story of the grandfather of one of the novel’s characters. The story, as we are informed by a narrator, was submitted for publication in a German magazine but rejected by the publishers as “Zu weit von unserer Erlebnisweltentfernt” (289). The story recounts violent wartime events that saw its protagonist, Gavrilo abandon his family and escape to the hills, in order to avoid being drafted into the army. The family he leaves behind suffers unimaginable abuse at the hands of the army in retaliation for the Gavrilo’s desertion. The narrative, which curiously mirrors Nema’s own story of displacement is perceived by the publishing company as being too fantastic, too distant for the German readership, “nicht sexy genug” (289). This deployment of *mise-en-abîme*, nearly halfway through the main narrative is an arbitrary technique utilized by the author to highlight the crisis of representation of the refugee experience. The root cause is located in the anxiety surrounding the acceptability of narratives that present a world
alien to that of the dominant readership. Stories removed from the readers’

“Erlebniswelt” cannot be accommodated within the framework of their language and
are experienced as unfamiliar, and, consequently as “unheimlich,” as opposed to “sexy.”

Mary Layoun’s “(Mis)trusting Narratives” provides a convincing analysis of this anxiety
toward refugee stories. She rightly notes that:

[t]he refugee experience of the community or nation in crisis as it is
represented in cultural and oral narratives potentially challenges
established boundaries of community or nation. [...] Thus the telling of
refugee stories is sometimes also a radical reconceptualization of the very
definitions and ground rules and ground rules of community or nation
and of the roles of those who claim to speak for and from them. Refugee
stories reconstitute [...] boundaries.\textsuperscript{59}

The fear of expanding or opening up the boundaries to include the experience of the
marginalized because it may redefine the norm therefore underlies the rejection of
Kinga’s true story by the publishers. A redefinition of the “ground rules” would
essentially also involve a redefinition of language governing the handling of genuine
trauma. Surin has also highlighted the need for a reevaluation of the disconnect between
“speech and catastrophe,”\textsuperscript{60} noting that notes “by turning trauma into a commonplace of
popular culture, an approach to ‘genuine’ trauma is foreclosed.”\textsuperscript{61} A narrative such as
Kinga’s resists banalization and is therefore not fit for public or popular consumption.

\textsuperscript{59} Mary N. Layoun. “(Mis)Trusting Narratives: Refugee Stories of Post-1922 Greece and Post 1974
California P, 1995), 84.
\textsuperscript{60} Surin. 16.
\textsuperscript{61} ibid. 34.
Mora’s use of *mise-en-abîme* to present the raw uncensored story right in the middle of her novel insists on the centrality and validity of this narrative.

The rejection of Kinga’s narrative represents a refusal to listen, a silencing that induces symptoms of hysteria and has her howling repeatedly like a wolf and crying uncontrollably as she roams the city streets (289-90). Mora links this hysteria directly to the repression of her narrative, relating it to the loss of voice or of representation. Silence and hysteria are thus juxtaposed to each other in the novel both as a symptom of trauma and as a form of protest or destabilization. Kinga is not the only hysterical character in the novel. Nema’s silence is contrasted with his companion and flat mate’s constant bouts of hysterical yelling and non-stop lamenting. Konstantin’s default mode of communication is the hysterical as he comments tirelessly on a wide range of topics, in particular on the state of affairs in the world:


His endless babbling often provides the narrative with the much needed context, but more importantly, it also mimics the frantic pace of life in the postmodern world and especially highlights the disorienting effect on the alien who status is dependent on the quotas imposed on immigration.
Konstantin’s and Kinga’s hysterical behavior takes us back to the original definition of trauma and its official entry into language. Initial investigations into hysteria by Charcot and later Freud in the late 19th century traced the condition of the hysteric, often a woman, to a traumatic episode (of a sexual nature) experienced early in the patient’s life, which was then repressed and whose memory was triggered at a later stage by a separate, often unrelated event in life giving rise to hysterical behavior. Both Freud’s postulation as well as the suggestion that hysteria could be viewed as a medical condition has been called into question at some point or the other in the history of trauma. Mora’s focus on hysteria as a facet of trauma takes us back to its origins, its moment of invention before its inclusion into the dominant discourse. She also combines the ranting of a female hysteric with the lighthearted commentary of a disconnected narrator to bring out serious issues regarding the mental health of refugees. When Kinga is advised to see a doctor she explodes in rage:


The voice of the narrator, one of the men observing the outburst, understands the
dilemma of being undocumented and not having medical cover, but shifts the language
to reinterpret the symptoms of what is clearly a mental issue to a less acute female
condition that one hopes will disappear given time. Sadly though, Kinga’s condition is
far more critical, resulting in her suicide. The decision to cremate her body and send her
ashes back to be dispersed—“Sie wollte verstreut werden” (353)—in her homeland
speaks to the tragic nature of displacement and dispossession, even in death.
6. Conclusion

Over the past twenty years there has been an increased tendency toward normalizing Germany’s past, a task that has involved working toward both the integration of former East Germany, as well as revisiting German wartime suffering. This normalizing imperative has had the effect of eliding difference in the construction of the German past, effectively relegating alternative histories to the periphery. In this dissertation I attempted to foreground the predicament faced by writers from the former Eastern Bloc both in dealing with the legacies left behind by totalitarian regimes and in trying to find a place for these memories in the German literary imaginary. While this work does not seek to highlight the commonalities in their writings, I am interested in the way these writers employ easily recognizable tropes of trauma and the body, as well as the structuring of language, space and time as methods of intervening and claiming space in German cultural memory through their diverse narratives of disrupted lives. The steady increase in body of work by German speaking writers from East and Central Europe, with emerging writers like Marjana Gaaponenko (Ukraine), Anila Wilms (Albania) and Olga Martynova (Russia) coming to the fore, suggests that there remains a vast amount of research to be carried out, both in the genre of trauma fiction, as well as works specifically by authors from the former Eastern Bloc.
The theoretical approaches employed in this study have included among others psychoanalytic as well as phenomenological theories. An understanding of trauma cannot be limited to one single method, nor can the diversity of the narratives analyzed in this dissertation. Through the different methods I have attempted to illustrate the enigmatic nature of traumatic suffering while demonstrating through the novels that there exists ways in which this suffering can be captured. More than simply laying bare the suffering and isolation imposed by trauma, these theoretical approaches reveal that the writers own conscious appropriation and use of the predictable tropes associated with trauma is an indication of our own present predicament, living in the age of trauma, and struggling to wrest it from normal everyday language.

Over the past two years, in the course of writing this dissertation, there has been an growing interest in narratives that document other people’s trauma and suffering as part of a growing, broader global concern over questions of genocide, the increasing number of social upheavals and the resultant displacement of people worldwide. The collection of essays, Other People’s Pain: Narratives of Trauma and the Question of Ethics (2011) is an example of the continued interest and relevance of trauma theory and of second hand accounts of suffering for memory studies as a whole.

The proliferation of Holocaust monuments and memorials in Germany is an indication that even with the recent efforts to open up discussions on German wartime suffering, the Holocaust continues to figure as the lens through which trauma is
captured. I have shown how these writers demonstrate an awareness of this tendency to
view trauma and in terms of the Holocaust and even adopt images of Jewish suffering as
their protagonists struggle with the challenge of accessing their own elusive experiences.
They however challenge the notion of the unrepresentability of traumatic experience
through their fictions, providing a convincing way of rewriting histories through the
representation of individual psyches.
Appendix A: Fragen an Frau Léda Forgó

02/12/2012

1. Haben Sie immer den Wunsch gehabt, Schriftstellerin zu werden?


_Dann bin ich Schritt für Schritt auf eine praktischere Weise zu diesem Kindheitstraum zurückgeschleudert worden oder ich könnte auch sagen, mir blieb nichts anderes übrig, das war, was ich am besten konnte oder das Einzige, was mich auf Dauer als Tätigkeit fesseln konnte._

2. Wie wichtig war es für Sie, sich in Ihrem ersten Roman mit der Zeit des Ungarn-Aufstandes zu beschäftigen? Oder war das reiner Zufall?

_Es war mir natürlich sehr wichtig, keine zufällige Epochenwahl, sondern irgendwie musste ich die Revolution auch erleben, über die alle in meiner Kindheit redeten. Ein großer Teil meiner frühen Identität bestand aus den selbstverherrlichenden Geschichtserklärungen über diese Zeit. Ich dachte die Freiheit, die Unfähigkeit sich unterdrücken zu lassen mit meiner nationalen Zugehörigkeit gefressen zu haben. Und ich glaubte mich von Europa und der restlichen Welt_
verlassen und verraten als kleiner Atom eines winzigen Landes - ohne politische oder
wirtschaftliche Macht den Russen überlassen. Durch meine Emigration hat sich alles relativiert,
zum Glück, ich bin so froh diesen Gedanken entkommen zu sein, wenn ich die Zuhause
gebliebene Freunde sehe, die sich mit solchen nationalen Gedanken aufhalten, die absolut nicht
für die Einzelperson geschnitten sind. Zu groß, zu gewichtig, zu gräßenwahnsinnig sind diese
Sorgen, die in Ungarn auf Privatschultern gelegt werden, wie sollen sie nicht den Alltag und
Familienleben vergiften?

werden die Angehörigen der Generation der Menschen, die etwa zwischen 1953 und
1973 in der ehemaligen Sowjetunion geboren wurden, als “Kinder der Stagnation”
bezeichnet, da sie in einer Zeit aufwuchsen, in der die Sowjetunion unveränderlich und
ewig zu sein schien. Glauben Sie, dass diese Bezeichnung auch auf Ihre eigene
Generation in Ungarn zutreffen würde?

Ich war noch relativ jung – 16, als die Wende eintrat, ich habe an eine Unveränderlichkeit
politischer Systeme nicht geglaubt. In diesem spätpubertären Lebensabschnitt ist man von
Weltveränderungsphantasien beseelt und denkt omnipotent alles zu können. Die politischen
Änderungen fielen auf den gleichen Tag mit meinen hormonellen, so war die Wende ein Teil
meiner allgemeinen Aufruhrs, normal die Revolution.
Wenn ich mich aber an meine Kindheit entsinne und an den Gemütszustand der Erwachsenen, so mag diese Definition stimmen. Alle waren so zu leben bis zur Ewigkeit eingerichtet. Sie kannten es nicht anders, sie sind da hineingeboren und die dünnen zugelassenen Kanäle des Widerstandes haben eine wunderbare geistige Subkultur-Schicht entstehen lassen.

In dieser verbotenen aber geduldeten Underground-Kultur bin ich aufgewachsen mit nihilistischen Liedern, radikalem Gedankengut, Diskussionen und Westenträume.


4. Der Körper Meines Bruders ist aus vielerlei Gründen fesselnd. Was mich am meisten fasziniert ist der bildhafte und der rein „körperliche“ Stil, der Ihr Schreiben kennzeichnet. Ich möchte eine meiner Lieblingsszenen erwähnen, die für mich sofort Kindheitserinnerungen hervorgerufen hat. Die kleine Borka sitzt im Kino und beschreibt folgende Wahrnehmung:


Wie hat Ihre eigene Ausbildung Ihren Stil beeinflusst?
Meine Ausbildung und mein Sprachwechsel hat meinen Stil grundlegend beeinflusst.

Die bewusste Auseinandersetzung mit den sprachlichen Mitteln wirkte auf die Gedankenlegung aus. Die fremde Grammatik hat mir eine Gedankenstruktur geschenkt.

Der endlose Gedankenfluss hat eine hübsche Hülle bekommen, - wenn man darüber nachdenken muss, wie man etwas sagt, wird man auch darüber nachdenken, was man eigentlich sagen will, ob man das wirklich will, ob es wichtig genug ist, in welcher Reihenfolge, etc. So hat ein gesprochener Satz, eine geschriebene Zeile schon einen langen inneren Weg hinter sich.

5. Die Protagonistin erlebt außergewöhnlich viel körperliche Gewalt, scheint diese aber relativ gut zu verkraften. Vielleicht ist “verkraften” nicht das treffende Wort, aber es wird wenig über ihre psychische Verfassung erzählt. Wie schwer war es, die körperlichen und psychischen Aspekte des Leidens in Ihrem Roman auszubalancieren?

Mich beschäftigte auch bei meinem ersten Roman die nicht eingestandene – und vor allem von der Gesellschaft nicht eingestandene! - Überforderung junger Eltern. Der Schock, wie es in der Wirklichkeit ist, über das alle reden, aber was man sich nicht vorstellen kann ohne es selbst erlebt zu haben.

Ich habe eine Variation dafür in den Fünfzigern Ungarns ausgedacht.


Die Auflösung hängt auch dann davon ab, was die Zeit an psychologischen Erkenntnissen als Hilfeleistung anbietet. In den Fünfzigern Ungarns bekam man noch weniger Unterstützung auf dem Gebiet: in dieser Geschichte wird dementsprechend das Bild der eigenen Eltern, auch ihre körperliche Macht auf sich und das eigene Kind übertragen. Ein zeittypisches Zuschlagen aus Bequemlichkeit – statt gedankliche Auseinandersetzung, die auch als Verweichlichung gelten könnte - wird hier beschrieben aus Kinderperspektive.

Mädchen beispielsweise ist ein wiederkehrendes Thema in Ihrem Roman. In Ihrem zweiten Roman steht auch eine Frau im Vordergrund.

Das Thema „Frau“ ist mir sehr wichtig auch in Hinblick auf meine die Frauen aus dem Geistesleben ausschließende Prägung durch mein Heimatland.

Dort wurde uns im Unterricht die Rolle der Frau in der ungarischen Literatur beigebrachtformuliert, in dem sie unterstützend und entlastend den Dichtern und Schriftstellern als Zofe, Mutter und Geliebte zur Verfügung standen.

Es ist kein Wunder, dass ich als ehrgeizige Träumerin nur männliche Vorbilder hatte.

Zu meiner Zeit lachten die Frauen in Ungarn über den Feminismus - weil sie dachten, dass die westliche Frau dadurch das Urweibliche verlor – und spuckten eine es für die Männer bequem eingerichtete Perspektive wieder, benutzen eine frauenfeindliche Terminologie - gegen sich selbst gerichtetet!


All die geistigen Kräfte der Frau wurden belächelt, als Spielerei, die man ihnen ab und zu gönnt, als wären sie etwas zwischen Kind und Haustier.

Daran wollte ich keineswegs teilnehmen, allerdings wer weiß, ob ich je diese Dinge je von Außen hätte sehen können, hätte ich nicht emigriert?
7. Gibt es irgendwelche AutorInnen, die Sie beeinflusst haben oder an denen Sie sich orientieren, wenn Sie schreiben? Gibt es irgendwelche Vorbilder?

Ich habe keine sprachliche Vorbilder außer des zwingenden eigenen inneren Ton, aber jede Lektüre wirkt und beeinflusst und Vieles lese ich von befreundeten Autorinnen, so wird man zu einem gemeinsamen seelischen Geflecht und reagiert auf einander.

8. Woran arbeiten Sie zurzeit?


Vielen Dank!

Ich danke für das Interesse!
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Biography

Lynda Kemei Nyota was born in Nairobi, Kenya on 2nd May 1971. She earned her Bachelor of arts Degree, 1st Class Honors in French and German from the University of Nairobi in 1994, and her Masters in German Studies from the same University in 1998. She has received a number of Fellowships and Awards for advanced study and research, including the Julian Price Graduate Research Fellowship (2011), the John Hawkins Noblitt Summer Graduate Research Fellowship (2011), the Judy C. Woodruff Summer Research Fellowship (2010), a Graduate School Travel Fellowship to present a paper in Montreal, Canada at the North East Modern Language Association (2010), as well as a fellowship to participate in an exchange program with the University of Duisburg-Essen (2006). Her M.A. in German Studies was funded through an In-Country Scholarship from the German Academic Exchange Program (DAAD).