Kindheitsmuster
Adult Children in Herta Müller's *The Land of Green Plums*

The notion of childhood is frequently mentioned in connection with Romanian-German author Herta Müller's writings, in which it plays an important role. This is true especially for her early work, which is dominated by two autobiographically inflected subjects: the Banat-Swabian village, in which she grew up, and the Romanian dictatorship, whose secret police haunted her as an adult. Müller’s novel *The Land of Green Plums* belongs to this group of writings that relate childhood experiences in German-speaking rural Romania to adult life under Nicolae Ceaușescu’s communist regime, which she endured until 1987, when the 34-year old author left to emigrate to West Germany. Müller memorably characterized her upbringing in Nitzkydorf as her first experience of a dictatorship, pointing to the suffocating nature of her existence in the Banat, where German communities coercively maintained their ethnic identity, resisting assimilation into Romanian society while preserving outdated notions of Germanness “completely divorced from the social and political reality of life in post-war Germany.” In addition to the cultural fossilization, the memory of the Nazi past, when most ethnic Germans had joined the ranks of the party and the German *Wehrmacht*, loomed large over the postwar period. Müller’s own father had been a member of the *Waffen-SS* and was thus complicit in some of the worst crimes of the Third Reich – hardly a sound basis for the innocent continuance of German cultural traditions.
The author’s childhood, as represented in her first independent publication, a collection of short stories called *Niederungen* [*Nadirs*], seemed to have been a time of a fairy-tale like existence in nature to which the village’s socially violent climate provided the counterpoint. “The Funeral Sermon,” the lead story of the collection, which depicts the father’s funeral, ends with the narrator’s dream of her murder by a community that will not allow itself “[to] be slandered.”\(^4\) In another story, “Village Chronicle,” Müller pokes fun at the ideological village discourse, whose formulaic labeling of types of people, experiences, and institutions exhibits the villagers’ parochial mindset and their desire to conform.\(^5\)

Although the atmosphere of coercion and intimidation permeated her life in the village, the fourteen-year old Herta did not feel liberated when she moved to the city of Timișoara in Southwestern Romania to attend high school but actually longed to return to Nitzkydorf, where she thought herself safe and protected. Lost in a world of similarly authoritarian rule, this time dominated by the Romanian state and a language she had not yet mastered, it took time, new relationships and books to develop critical distance toward her provenance, which later, not surprisingly, appeared frightening to her.\(^6\)

Müller’s political consciousness emerged following her graduation from the *Nikolaus-Lenau-Lyzeum* in 1972, when she enrolled at the University of Timișoara to pursue studies in Romanian and German and began to associate with the *Aktionsgruppe Banat*, a collective of young writers from the German-speaking region. All in their early twenties, and all but one students of *Germanistik* at the university, the *Aktionsgruppe* members called for literary innovation and social reform. Initially, they were neither dissidents nor members of a formal opposition, but rather young authors interested in socially committed literature – Western style – and a reform-oriented Marxism.\(^7\) The group was radicalized, however, when their literary forays into the world of political engagement were met with disapproval by Ceaușescu’s oppressive regime, which opposed freedom of speech and sought to squash any demand for change. Though as part of the German minority the *Aktionsgruppe* enjoyed a measure of

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freedom at first, the group’s public questioning of the political status quo quickly became intolerable for the Romanian authorities, leading to the surveillance of its members by the secret police, followed by arrests, interrogations, and short-term imprisonment. Predictably, the group was banned in 1975. Müller graduated the following year.

*The Land of Green Plums*

It is largely her experience as a student, aspiring writer, and translator – an occupation she held until 1979 when she was dismissed following her refusal to collaborate with the Securitate – which Müller recounts in her novel *The Land of Green Plums*. To be sure, the text makes no attempt at literary realism. Müller rather explores, “what a dictatorship does to the individual, what it destroys in a person,” in a form that she calls *autofiction*, a term denoting her attempt to recast the experience of political oppression in scenes of fictionalized trauma. Linking the alienation and fragmentation of the subject directly to the political oppression of the totalitarian state, the novel also possesses a distinct ethical dimension.

In addition to the female narrator, *The Land of Green Plums* features three male characters, Kurt, Georg, and Edgar, all reminiscent of members of the *Aktionsgruppe Banat*. Throughout the novel, the four friends are seen struggling to establish a meaningful life in communist Romania, first as university students, then as working adults. The narrative focuses on the pivotal experiences of all characters, but especially on presenting the narrator’s fragmented identity. A compilation of self-contained and often discontinuous segments rather than a contiguous story narrated chronologically from a single point of view, the narrative recalls her precarious existence as an incomplete account, signaling “gaps in the syntax of memory,” so that her “experience can be communicated, while its effects – the evidence of having been damaged and thus the guarantor of criticism – are preserved.”

Alternating between first and third person perspective, the text includes what appear to be involuntary memory flashbacks from the narrator’s childhood. As remnants of trauma, they emerge without being actively recalled, introducing an unattributed voice, which combines the

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11 Marven, “‘In allem ist der Riss’,” 399.
auctorial vantage point of an omniscient narrator with the child’s perspective. Most memories are comprised of scenes of profound emotional ambivalence, in which parental love is inextricably linked to acts of cruelty, and the desire to escape the parents’ grasp paired with irrepressible feelings of guilt.

A father hacks away in the summer in his garden. A child stands next to the garden bed and thinks: Father knows something about life. Because Father stashes his guilty conscience inside the damn stupid plants and hacks them down. [. . .] [The hoe] sees a child filling her pockets with green plums. Standing among the hacked-down, stupid plants, Father says: You can’t eat green plums, their pits are still soft, and you’ll swallow your death. No one can help then – you just die. The raging fever will burn up your heart from the inside. The father’s eyes swim, and the child can see her father loves her like crazy. That he can’t stop himself. That he, who has made graveyards, the child wishes death on. That’s why the child later eats up all the plums in her pockets. [. . .] The child eats and thinks, This will kill me.12

Parental prohibitions are frequently expressed in sententious statements demarcating the parents’ unquestionable authority by harking back to an imagined tradition. Where the narrative includes the habitual repetition of conventional wisdom, it highlights a use of language that encourages submission and discourages reflection, insinuating that language itself can possess a dictatorial undertow.13 Even where adults aim to form strong emotional attachments they do so in the form of commands or through veiled or direct threats, making their love appear as frightening as their chastisement. Punishment, in either case, is never far away.

A child refuses to let her nails be cut. That hurts, says the child. The mother ties the child to a chair with the belts from her dresses. The child’s eyes cloud over, and she starts to scream. [. . .] Blood drips onto one of the belts, the grass-green one. The child knows: if you bleed, you die. The child’s eyes are wet; they see the mother through a blur. The mother loves the

child. She loves it like crazy, and she can’t stop herself, because her reason is as tightly tied to love as her child is to the chair.

(7)

Passages like the ones quoted above provide evidence of the trauma that links “the frightened non-conformist child” to the “adult dissident.”

“It is a part of the narrator in the novel,” Herta Müller herself explained in a 1997 interview, “like a kind of parallel which arises.”

Through this childhood, in which things for the most part were based on coercion, control, supervision, prohibition, it seems to the narrator later that these things are continued in the form of the state, even though they are continued in a completely different manner. And, despite the fact that they can also be explained completely differently, they have a similar impact on the narrator. [. . .] And sometimes it seems to the narrator that what happened in childhood is just a preparation for what happens in much stronger and naturally fatal measure later on.

Müller’s paratactic prose, both simple and dense, has been characterized as a way to resist the political logic of the totalitarian state, as here she refuses to submit to the instrumental and utilitarian thinking presumed to be embedded in the hierarchy of a subordinating syntax. Describing events on the surface, her style allows for the combination of discrete impressions whose relationship remains often unexplained. In addition, the parataxis accentuates the vivid imagery and striking metaphors the author employs, such as the notion of the heart-beast, the novel’s original title, a neologism Müller created conflating the Romanian inima (heart) and animal (animal). Characteristic of the kafkaesque agnosticism that pervades Müller’s writing, the notion, oscillating in different directions, evokes an image both potent and impenetrable. Hence, it can serve as the positive expression of a person’s vitality, or as the exact opposite, a spirit destructive of the self and others, such as when the narrator imagines the

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15 Provincetown Arts, 45-46.
heart-beast of one of the secret service agents. “I could imagine myself a transparent man standing by the open fridge. He was sick, and in order to live longer he had stolen the organ meats of healthy animals. I could see his heart-beast. It was shut up in the electric bulb, coiled and tired.” (62)

Lola

The beginning of the novel is centered on a student named Lola, a colorful and irreverent character, hailing from one of the poorest provinces in the state. Lola, the narrator, and four other students share a dorm room in the girl’s dormitory, “a little cube of a room, one window, [. . .] six beds, under each a suitcase.” (4) A student of Russian, a subject not “high on many people’s wish list,” (4) Lola seems to conceive of her studies mainly as a form of social advancement, as she wants “to become somebody in the city” (3) and dreams of marrying a “man with a white shirt,” (37) someone with “clean fingernails” who will come back with her, “because a man like that knows he’ll be respected in the village.” (4) With this goal in mind, she is drawn to figures of power and authority, however limited, such as the gym teacher and the department head. She also joins the party, proudly presenting her red party book to the other students. When one of them asks whether she doesn’t attend church, Lola’s response is typically immune to theoretical reflection: “The others do too. You just can’t let on that you recognize them there.” (20) Similarly, Lola’s attempts to understand the party literature remain unsuccessful due to her inability to abstract. Sitting on her bed reading “a leaflet about delivering the Party’s message more effectively,” Lola underlines so many sentences, that “it was as if her hands were taking over.” “The pile of leaflets beside her bed grew like a crooked nightstand,” the narrator describes Lola’s failure at her own political education, to which she herself adds in her notebook: “I don’t throw wool away [. . .] even though it is all tangled.” (21) More successful than the critical reading is her weekly cleaning of the party’s display case, a task she carries out with the diligence and abandon of someone utterly indifferent to the content of the dictator’s new pronouncements.

Lola’s utilitarian approach to life also comes through in her disrespect for the other students’ property. Poor and seemingly unconcerned about how she is perceived, she frequently helps herself to her roommates’ clothes, and when confronted about it, seems unperturbed:

Someone said, That’s my blouse you are wearing. Lola said, I am not going to eat it, I only need it for today, I’ve got

something planned. Every day someone in the cube would say: Those clothes, you know, don’t belong to you. But Lola put them on and went out into the city. Day after day she put on the clothes. They were wrinkled and damp with sweat or from rain and snow. Afterward, Lola stuffed them back inside the closet. (18)

Even though she does not openly oppose the regime – on the contrary, she is actively trying to fit in – Lola’s actions challenge the socialist dictatorship in both concrete and ideological ways. This is also true with regard to what is probably her most striking character trait, her overt display of unfettered sexual desire. For in addition to an affair with the gym teacher and masturbating in the dorm room, Lola has random late night sexual encounters with factory workers coming off the late shift in the “scruffy park,” a location frequently mentioned in the novel which serves as a metaphor for the dilapidated physical and mental landscape of 1970s Romania.

Although Lola receives what could be considered compensation for her sexual favors – gifts of stolen goods the workers carry home from the factory – she is not acting as a prostitute. Rather, she seems to receive some form of gratification from offering herself to the men, trying to meet her own longing for pleasure and exulting in the power she holds over her suitors. Always following the same routine, Lola initiates the encounters in ritual fashion. She boards the tram late at night, and, after a while, establishes eye contact with one of the male passengers who at this late hour appear like “nothing more than a shadow in clothes.”(12-13) Once the man looks at her, Lola lights “a fire in a tired head.”

They don’t shut their eyes after that, writes Lola. One stop later, a man would follow Lola out. In his eyes he carried the darkness of the city. And the greedy desire of a starved dog, writes Lola. I lie down in the grass, and he puts his bag under the longest, lowest branch. There’s no need to talk. (13)

Lola is a distinct character in Herta Müller’s novel, but she is also a type who by virtue of her name is linked to two famous Lolas in German film history, Marlene Dietrich’s Lola Lola in Joseph von Sternberg’s The Blue Angel (1930) and Barbara Sukowa’s eponymous Lola of Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s 1981 feature film.19 Sexually self-confident, the cinematic

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Lolas, both bar singers, are aware of the temptation they represent, and while the object of male fantasies and the repressed desire of those who claim to be virtuous, they are figures that transgress the societal limitations set for women. The relationship between the frivolous Lola Lola and the stodgy Professor Rath in the Blue Angel, for instance, is not just the tale of an *amour fou*, but presents a constellation that reflects the challenge the modern woman posed to German society of the 20s and 30s. For the independent Lola Lola is a figure at odds with the “traditional division of gendered spheres, and the respective roles men and women were to play in those spheres.”

In addition to signifying women’s “freedom from restrictive social norms,” she embodies “the seductive promises of the new age and progress,” the lure of mass culture vis-à-vis the bourgeois notions of high culture embodied by Rath. His devotion to her signals the decline of nineteenth-century social and cultural values. Incidentally, the advent of the Lola persona coincided with “the origins of cinema and the new woman at the beginning of the twentieth century,” a fact underscoring her important role in representing the culturally transformative function of mass media and its effect on gender relations.

Fassbinder’s Lola is equally aware of her transgressive power and beyond that unambiguous about her desire to climb the social ladder, using her sexual appeal to advance past those who disparage her. “Lola is the story of an independent women who [. . .] has to balance her options very carefully and pick her way through a treacherous world by being ruthless and resolute, yielding and ultra-feminine at one and the same time.” According to Thomas Elsaesser, her relations with the male dignitaries of a small West-German city are based on an “ethics of intransigence,” which he considers “the 'cold' side of romantic yearning and of idealized self-denial.” Her claim to “equality and irreducible singularity,” in other words, goes hand in hand with the matter-of-fact way, in which she seeks to manipulate men’s sexual attraction to her. Understanding the connection between the two sides of the character helps explain Lola’s behavior in Herta Müller’s novel as well, as in this dialectic her sexual licentiousness stands not in opposition to, but is an expression of, her romantic longing for the man in the “white shirt.”

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24 Elsaesser, *Fassbinder’s Germany*, 125.
Lola, the student, shares in the ambition and sexual prowess of her cinematic precursors and possesses similar power over those who desire her – in her case party functionaries and members of the working class. Her confident agency in sexual matters is as transgressive as theirs, and this not only because, as the author herself once pointed out, gender relations in 1970s Romania resembled those in Germany between the wars, but also because in a society whose economy is based on want, on the shortage of goods and deferred pleasure, the mere realization of desire and the gratification that accompanies it seems subversive. Although, in the end, the Romanian Lola fails to achieve her goal of marriage and social ascent – her affair with the gym teacher ends in her suicide, after her lover denounced her to his superiors – her voluntary submission to women’s sexual reification can still be considered an effective way to subvert the regime’s comprehensive hold over its subjects. Doubtless, Lola’s fate points primarily to the marginalization of women and the limited room women had for self-determination in Romania’s patriarchal society, where they were forced, to use “their bodies as objects of exchange,” but Lola’s disregard for existing norms also allows for a limited form of agency and points to the way in which power relations can be challenged in relations of gender.

The narrative unequivocally links the political oppression of the totalitarian regime to the sexual exploitation of women, most powerfully perhaps in the metaphor of the green plums, which denote not only an association with death, but whose consumption also symbolizes male dominance over female sexuality. Male military guards and secret police, who “knew where the plum trees were in every precinct they policed,” pursue and consume the fruit day and night. It is, it appears, what the regime feasts on to sustain itself.

Young men with yellowish teeth standing guard at the entrances of big buildings, outside shops, on squares, at tram stops, in the scruffy park, in front of the dormitories, in bodegas, outside the station. [...] The guards filled their pockets with green plums. They picked them fast, their pockets bulged. One picking was supposed to last them a long time. After they had filled their jacket pockets, they quickly left the trees behind. Plumsucker was a term of abuse. Upstarts, opportunists, sycophants, and people who stepped over dead

26 Haines and Littler, “Gespräch mit Herta Müller,” 19.
27 Bauer, “Patterns of Consciousness and Cycles of Self-destruction.”
bodies without remorse were called that. The dictator was called a plumsucker, too. (50)

In Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s film, Thomas Elsaesser notes, women “circulate according to the most archaic patriarchal law as objects of exchange between men.” Their status as objects of desire, however, also “frequently allows them to initiate new modes of exchange by suddenly upending value systems.” Müller’s Lola similarly shows Romanian socialism to be a system whose totalitarian logic is expressed most explicitly in the misogynist way, in which women are turned into objects. Conversely, her manipulation of the men who desire her allows her temporarily to turn the table and utilize those who objectified her. Among the many male voices of the narrative, including the perspective of the regime as a whole, which frames the narrative, Lola’s notebook entries, repeatedly quoted in the beginning of the novel, articulate a genuinely female perspective. It is a perspective that insists on an emphatic subjectivity, and in this sense as well, Lola is a figure of opposition.

**Adult Children**

Her transgressive sexuality is not the only thing Lola has in common with her precursors in film, because just like with them, there is clearly a childlike quality to her. Her desire for immediate gratification, the lack of abstraction in her thinking, her disrespect for her fellow students’ property are all traits that point in this direction, as is her apparent need for approval and acceptance. The tone and style of the observations recorded in her notebook furthermore link her to the memories recalled from the narrator’s childhood. What binds the two together is a profound sense of disorientation in a world marked by the absence of an ethical code the child can learn to adopt.

Seeing Lola as the disobedient child, one could easily consider her solely as a figure of opposition, as her behavior is, as mentioned earlier,

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29 Elsaesser, *Fassbinder’s Germany*, 126.
incommensurate with a political system that is based on the abstraction of
the individual and the negation of sensual pleasure, and, ironically, also
unable to integrate the genuine socialism she practices. Yet Lola also seeks
the approval of those in power and is trying to endear herself to them.
Hence, what makes Lola so compelling as a character is what she shares
with the child of the narrator’s memory flashbacks, the fundamental
moral ambivalence she feels toward parental authority, which in the adult
world is displaced by political power. Nicolae Ceaușescu, who like all
dictators sought to fashion himself as a father figure, is to Lola what the
Nazi father is to the narrator-child, a hated authority one has to resist and
a loving father figure one wants to please.

The first part of The Land of Green Plums culminates in a crucial scene,
when following Lola’s suicide a vote is taken during a student assembly
“to expel Lola from the party and exmatriculate her from the university.”
(28) Much to her chagrin, the narrator admits to having joined all others
in raising her hand in favor of the motion. “Lola would have raised her
hand, too,” (29) she notes, acknowledging the concomitant desire to resist
and to conform. The childlike state of Lola reflects precisely this moral
ambivalence. It is the fundamental condition of relations in The Land of
Green Plums, a universe of ubiquitous guilt, where all, even the seemingly
innocent, are accomplices and have a part in the oppression of the regime.
For in the totalitarian state, all citizens are children.

The Land of Green Plums features two other childlike adults whose
behavior betrays similar forms of ambivalence: the narrator’s best friend,
Tereza, and her demented “singing grandmother.” The latter has “slipped
back into her childhood,” enjoying a mental state equivalent to that of “a
three-year old girl chewing the corner of her mother’s apron.” (130)
Living close to nature and unrestrained in thought and person, the
grandmother’s memory loss has allowed her to fully withdraw from
society – an enviable position, given the quotidian madness of life under
the dictatorship. The narrator, in fact, suggests that the grandmother
started singing as a form of escape, following the shock of expropriation
by the government after the war. While her state of mind may seem
desirable, there is another, less covetable side to her illness, a nervous
restlessness, which signals that her current state of childlike innocence
may have merely displaced a less virtuous self still haunting her.

My singing grandmother is the dark one. She knows that
everyone has a heart-beast. She steals another woman’s
husband. He loves the other woman, he doesn’t love my
singing grandmother. But she gets him because she wants him.
Or not him so much as his field. And she keeps him. He
doesn’t love her, but she can control him by saying: Your heart-beast is a mouse. (72)

Interestingly, the grandmother is associated with government control, such as in one passage, where she is depicted as singing with a member of the secret police searching for incriminating evidence against the narrator in her parents’ house. “Grandmother mistook him for your father,” the mother relates the incident in a letter to the narrator, “she wanted to comb his hair. He took the comb away from her, then she started singing. He was struck by how beautifully she sang. He even joined in on one song: Home now, children, for the night / Mama’s blowing out the light.” (68) Innocuous as the scene may seem, the song lyrics’ double entendre and the revealing case of mistaken identity squarely place the grandmother with the political power of the authoritarian state.

In the wake of Lola’s suicide, the narrator herself paces the streets of the city like her grandmother the countryside, considering only the demented as morally sane, since they alone, having exchanged “fear for insanity,” (41) seem to refuse to consent to the regime’s destructive rationale. To a degree, the “singing grandmother” also personifies this refusal, a limited form of resistance. For the narrator, however, withdrawal is ultimately not an option, not least because, as one could see, the grandmother’s migration into childhood, rather than inoculating her against the regime’s oppressive politics, leaves her vulnerable to association with the dictatorship, if only by singing.

Not by accident, the lullaby sung by the grandmother is intoned later in the text by the narrator’s best friend Tereza, a character featured prominently in the novel’s second part, who is both childlike and suspect of collaboration with the regime. Tereza most closely resembles Lola with whom she shares a number of character traits including a pragmatic outlook on life, a certain naïveté and an element of irrepressible individuality.33 Employed in the same factory as the narrator, Tereza enjoys a somewhat privileged position because her father is a party functionary who is said to have “cast every monument in the city.” (107) Variously described as a “city child,” (107, 168) “childish,” (173) “spoiled,” (143) “lightheaded and wild,” (114) Tereza seems oblivious to a political reality that has come to affect every aspect of the narrator’s existence, exhibiting the carefree personality of someone mainly interested in diversion and consumption. Accordingly, the narrator first meets her at the seamstress’s, where Tereza goes to have her fortune told and buy a

floral-patterned dress, one of the many items in her possession that suggest a life of relative luxury and comfort.

[Every day Tereza wore a different dress. She only wore the floral-patterned dress one day. She had dresses from Greece and from France. Sweaters from England and jeans from America. She had powder, lipstick, and mascara from France, jewelry from Turkey. And whisper-thin nylons from Germany. The women who worked in the offices didn’t like Tereza. You could tell what they were thinking when they saw Tereza. They were thinking: All those things that Tereza has are worth fleeing for. (108)

Already during their first encounter, the narrator feels drawn to her. Tereza reciprocates her feelings, beginning to pay her daily visits in her office and over time their relationship develops into an intimate friendship. The amicable bond is of great significance to the narrator, as it forces her to confront her own mistrust and try to recover the ability to attach emotionally to another person. How strong the emotional draw toward the forbidden fruit of friendship is, is indicated by a reference in the text which parallels the relationship with Tereza to the child’s prohibited, eroticized play with “the woolen tassels on my father’s slippers.” (99, 64)

In spite of such strong attraction, however, she can never fully cease questioning her friend’s sincerity. One attempt to place trust in Tereza involves asking her to hide a package of illegal books she had previously stashed away in a summerhouse, an amicable gesture, which is immediately undermined by the conflicting feelings that accompany it. “Tereza took the parcel on trust, and I did not trust her,” (114) the narrator comments, referring to her inability to maintain close friendships in a society where deception and betrayal are common occurrences and surveillance and interrogation present a constant threat. As the novel’s motto, an excerpt from a poem by Romanian surrealist poet Gellu Naum, indicates, no friendship can transcend the political reality of the totalitarian state: “[E]ven my mother said, that’s how it is / friends are out of the question / think of more serious things.” (n.p.)

Her privileged status notwithstanding, Tereza exhibits distinct characteristics of someone intent on resisting the regime, such as when she is asked to join the party the day of the narrator’s dismissal from the factory. At the meeting, instead of praising her father, as was expected of her, she insults the attending party members.

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I bowed, as if I were a performer, Tereza said later. A few people laughed, a few even applauded. Then I started to swear. [. . .] Why don’t you all stand on your heads and see how many flies you can catch with your assholes? [. . .] Whoever has the most flies can be Chairman, unless you have a better idea. (171)

Tereza’s verbal assault shows her willingness to defy political expectations, and though the consequences of her behavior are not severe – she is merely reassigned to a different factory – the audacity of her act is indisputable, signaling her solidarity with the narrator. In the same vein, Tereza helps the narrator find work as a German tutor following her dismissal from the factory and one night aids her in defacing the factory manager’s private residence in revenge for her firing.

Yet Tereza is also linked to the state’s secret police. Initially, the connection is established through her father, the “official,” (107) then by a number of other hints that foreshadow her ultimate betrayal. Tereza’s final act of treason takes place when she visits the narrator following her emigration to West Germany. When asked why she was permitted to travel abroad, Tereza volunteers that she agreed to relay information about the narrator’s new life to the Romanian secret police in exchange for the permission to visit her. Confronted with the narrator’s outrage over allowing herself to be used by the Securitate, Tereza offers a disarmingly naïve rationalization for her behavior. “But it wasn’t such a bad thing that I want to see you, said Tereza. I’ll make up something to tell Pjele [the police captain, M.K.], something of no use whatsoever. We can make it up together, you and I.” (148) In spite of this display of innocence, her complicity actually extends beyond mere passive compliance to active participation, as the narrator finds out shortly thereafter, when she discovers that Tereza copied the key to her apartment. Unable to explain her deception, Tereza acquiesces to leaving Germany the same day. True, Tereza maybe “childish, not political,” (173) but ultimately, she as well ends up an accomplice in the regime’s persecution of the narrator.

In the narrative, Tereza’s association with the Securitate is symbolically connected with a cancer she develops and of which she eventually dies. “I’m not a child,” (186) she exclaims, proving the opposite, when she denies the bad news she received from her doctor. Moral culpability and childlike innocence appear joined in her fatal illness

35 Marven, “Herta Müller’s Herztier,” 183.
that shows her to be vulnerable and defenseless and yet receptive to the
tumor that is the police state.\footnote{On cancer as literary metaphor cf. Susan Sonntag. *Illness as Metaphor and Aids and Its Metaphors*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990. 50ff.}

I remember looking at the door handle in the birch tree. And how, still invisible to the eye, the nut was already there, under Tereza’s arm. It took its time, it swelled and grew. The nut grew against us. Against all love. It was ready to betray us, it was impervious to guilt. It devoured our friendship before it killed Tereza. (147)

Lola’s suicide and Tereza’s fatal illness are marked as violent deaths resulting from their association with a system that is inherently destructive. Their childlike persona offered little defense against it. If anything, the child’s desire to please authority facilitated their complicity with the regime. Innocence in the totalitarian state, the narrator’s portrayal seems to insinuate, is never a given, but has to be acquired on the basis of accepting the fact of inescapable complicity. Adorno’s well-known statement from his *Minima Moralia* about the comprehensive grasp of capitalist society, that “wrong life cannot be lived rightly,” can surely also be applied to the totalitarian regimes of postwar socialist Eastern Europe.\footnote{Theodor W. Adorno. *Minima Moralia*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986. 42.}

Resistance to the state, Müller seems to suggest, has to begin with this insight.

**Patterns of Childhood**

*Kindheitsmuster [A Model Childhood]*, the 1976 novel by East German author Christa Wolf, is a text whose discussion can further elucidate the function of children and the child-like persona in the literary critique of the totalitarian state. The intertextual relationship is intriguing not only because the notion of *Kindheitsmuster* offers itself as a suitable concept to apply to *The Land of Green Plums* but also because Wolf’s account, in which she revisits events of her childhood growing up under the Nazi regime, also inquires into the moral ambivalence of children and its correspondence in adulthood. Moreover, beyond shared concerns about forms of thought and behavior inculcated by authoritarian rule both authors attempt to put forward a literary ethics reflecting their responsibility in the political world of the totalitarian state.\footnote{Friedmar Apel. “Wahrheit und Eigensinn: Herta Müllers Poetik der einen Welt.” *text + kritik: Herta Müller*. Ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold. München: text + kritik, 2002. 41.}
At the time of its publication, Wolf’s autofictional novel drew critical attention and acclaim, as she here turned to a subject not readily acknowledged by East German authorities, the lasting effect of the socialization under National Socialism on a generation that was to play a central role in shaping postwar East German society.\(^{39}\) Replacing the GDR’s foundational myth of anti-fascist roots with a story more complex and contradictory, Wolf called on her readers to take a different approach in dealing with the immediate past, one that included the critical reflection on mentalities developed under the Nazi dictatorship and probe the continuation of behavioral patterns from childhood to adulthood, from the fascist to the socialist state.\(^{40}\) “What is past is not dead,” the novel sets out, “it is not even past.”\(^{41}\)

In addition to a historical narrative of development, Wolf’s novel systematically explores the relationship between children and the dictatorship, presenting a female protagonist named Nelly Jordan who, as she comes of age in Landsberg an der Warthe in Western Prussia, feels not only absolute loyalty to the Führer but harbors common anti-Semitic sentiments instilled in her by her beloved teacher. While not surprising, the open admission of the influence of Nazi ideology on the young girl and of its psychological and behavioral residue in the adult narrator certainly presented a challenge to state-sanctioned accounts of East Germany’s past. It also displayed a fragmented self whose identity was formed at a time when the child’s competing desires to please and question authority had a most profound dimension.

Kindheitsmuster differed from the more common postwar literature calling “an elder generation to account” in that it “investigates a child’s guilt.”\(^{42}\) Shifting the focus onto the child was astute insofar as it avoided all presupposition of culpability and, for that matter, the temptation of facile judgment. Instead, the depiction of Nelly’s natural selfishness vis-à-vis her lack of control invited a more differentiated view of questions of responsibility, as the child is concurrently shown to be “a creature in thrall to an evil power” and a powerless youth that can hardly be blamed for the crimes of the regime.\(^{43}\) That “evil and innocence co-exist within the child,” is implied by the term “Muster” itself, a notion that, in addition to

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its meaning of “pattern” or “sample” is, as the narrator herself points out — alluding to the protagonist’s darker side — cognate with the word “monstrum.”

As the narrative recounts Nelly’s experiences, it reveals her susceptibility to totalitarian thinking and provides the social context for the libidinal cathexis of a powerful authority, which, as Wolf’s more recent exploration of her past self in Stadt der Engel (2010) has shown, extended beyond the child and the persona of the Führer to the adult and authorities of the East German socialist dictatorship. Incidentally, the latter novel, similar to Kindheitsmuster in structure and style, can readily be considered a sequel to the former, except that the author here omits the child’s perspective, resulting in a narrative that reveals little and denies much. The desire to comprehend the “black box” mind of the Nazi follower, which fueled the inquiry in Kindheitsmuster, has in Stadt der Engel been displaced by the narrator’s “black-out,” a reaction emblematic of her inability to fully confront the past, which, ironically, “describes exactly the process she had sought to overcome” in her earlier novel.

Intricately structured, Kindheitsmuster is part prose, part essay and interweaves three different time periods, the time of the writing, which ends in May 1975, the time of Wolf’s visit to her now Polish hometown, which took place a good four years earlier, and the period she is describing, the years 1933 to 1947. The open structure allows the author not just to recollect but also to discuss the nature of memory and probe the process of remembering, which in turn resulted in the novel being “widely recognized for its innovative impact on the development of German memory culture.” Wolf’s reflections also comprise thoughts about the role literature plays in the context of coming to terms with the past. According to the narrator, literature forms the apparatus “that deals with the perception and processing of reality.” In Nelly’s case, she comments, it was “badly damaged” because of what she had been taught

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to read. These texts, so the implication, had to be replaced with texts like Wolf's own, whose goal it was to "resist the limits of that which can be said."\(^50\)

Assigning literature an ethical function in societal discourse was indicative of Wolf’s explicit ambition at the time. In a 1973 interview with Hans Kaufmann, the author insisted on the role of writing as accompanying, enhancing, and, to some degree determining actual experience, with the overarching aim of producing "new structures of human relations in our time."\(^51\) Wolf’s novel, written in a “Modernist literary idiom” that included a high degree of narrative self-reflexivity and the creative use of different time frames is trying to model precisely that role, offering a deeper understanding of breakdowns in human relations and “a sense that what literature had to offer social progress was advice about what can be said and what cannot.”\(^52\)

Yet Wolf’s attempt at literature as intervention, summed up in the narrator’s statement, that “[w]e should gradually cease to be silent about that which we cannot speak of,” appeared to be at least partially compromised by the author’s own position in the GDR.\(^53\) Accordingly, in his review of the novel, former East German literary scholar Hans Mayer, then living in the West German city of Tübingen, maintained that the unspoken subject of Wolf’s novel was, that it was a text about a writer concealing the truth rather than revealing it. Wolf, Mayer maintains, conveys to the reader that “a truthful account of that which she experienced was neither possible nor desirable.”\(^54\) Hence, the author may have insightfully reviewed Nelly Jordan’s lack of resistance to Nazi ideology, but she did not openly draw the parallel to the narrator’s behavior in the adult world of the GDR, a concession to the political reality of her time that undermined the critical effort of the novel. “Remembering with limited liability,” as Mayer put it polemically.\(^55\)

More recently, Anke Pinkert has argued similarly that Wolf’s criticism of the GDR present, which plays a role in both structure and content of her novel, was a form of “soft dissidence,” in that it largely reiterated the conditions of subordination it was trying to overcome.\(^56\)

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\(^{50}\) Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster*, 407.


\(^{52}\) Michael Minden. “Social Hope and the Nightmare of History,” 196-97.


According to Pinkert, *Kindheitsmuster* shows, “how Wolf’s revisionist critique of the state’s antifascism engendered a particularly symbiotic, yet contingent and mutable, relationship between dissident writer and state: Wolf needed the state to allow her to point to its wrongdoings and the state needed Wolf to learn some truth about itself.” The conflict brought forth by the political parameters of this symbiosis is reflected in the incongruous nature of the text, which diegetically asserts that “the subject can liberate herself from the (self) imposed constraints of power, if at least given the right psychological and political circumstances,” while mimetically displaying “the postliberatory insight that power is not simply what we are opposed to but what we depend on for our existence, what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are.”57

Wolf’s failure to resolve the conflict is not just a reflection of a personal dilemma but also of the literary form she chose. In other words, the innovative structure of her reflection on the behavioral patterns developed in childhood, while displaying “modernism’s anti-authoritarian quality,” did not force her to question the given constitution of political relations itself.58 Perhaps inevitably, therefore, the positive trajectory of her literary intervention resulted in the denial of uncomfortable truths in the present. The child had to grow up and in doing so succumb to the political rationale of the socialist state.

In *The Land of Green Plums*, Herta Müller likewise reflects on a literary ethics and does so in similar terms. Notably, the statement with which her narrator opens and concludes the novel – “When we don’t speak, said Edgar, we become unbearable, and when we do, we make fools of ourselves.” (1, 242) – is reminiscent of the lines from *Kindheitsmuster* quoted above because it describes essentially the same psychological and political condition: the strongly felt moral obligation to speak out – here notwithstanding its perceived futility – versus the overwhelming internal and external pressure to remain silent. Hence, Müller continues Wolf’s inquiry into how literature could challenge totalitarian thinking by extending it to the Romanian present.

In Herta Müller’s novel, Wolf’s initial insistence on an ethical stance of the writer has evolved in several important ways. First of all, as pointed out at the beginning of this essay, Müller not only narrates but also replicates the trauma that haunts the protagonist in her text through a number of literary devices and stylistic means. In this way, she is able to communicate a profound sense of disorientation resulting from “the force

57 Pinkert. “Pleasures of Fear,” 34.
of an experience that is not yet fully owned.” 59 Her novel is therefore not just about the understanding but also about the incomprehensibility of her existence under the dictatorship, negotiating “the reality of a history that in its crises can only be perceived in unassimilable forms.” 60 Secondly, Müller continuously reflects on and exhibits the fremde Blick, the internalized gaze of the regime on the individual. 61 In addition to highlighting its gendered character, she documents the fragmentation it causes, an identity never fully at home with itself. Finally, as the beginning and end of her novel show, her narrative is circular rather than developmental, emphasizing the synchronic over the diachronic. Therefore, the child represents not a stage in the development toward liberation but a position vis-à-vis the dictator, one that, in addition to acknowledging the child’s status as innocent victim, delineates the conditions of the subject’s self-driven submission to authoritarian rule. Demonstrating that moral ambivalence is a fundamental condition in modern life, the novel ultimately advocates for a postmodern ethics not rooted in a universal code but in the subject itself. 62 To articulate “the solitude of the moral subject,” which constitutes itself by resisting “codification, formalization, socialization, universalization” could be considered its intervention. 63

In Wolf’s Kindheitsmuster, the child’s experiences may still resonate with the adult but the assumption is that continued reflection on the past, though it may not recover all of it, will ultimately lead to working through both trauma and moral inadequacy and help assimilate past experience in the present. There is no such enlightened optimism in The Land of Green Plums. In the narrator’s world of the ubiquitous presence of the totalitarian state, the child or child-like adult merely testifies to the fact that there is no unvanquished form of opposition.

There are children in Herta Müller’s novel who are – as a matter of category – adults, as they have already submitted to the regime’s destructive rationale and aspire to nothing more than to emulate those who hold power or those who conform to its demands. “They want to be officers or policemen when they grow up,” (87) says Edgar, one of the narrator’s friends who has become a teacher, about the elementary school children he instructs. Kurt, now an engineer in a rural slaughterhouse, comments equally disillusioned: “The children are already accomplices.

60 Caruth, “Introduction,” 156.
61 Müller, “Der fremde Blick,” 130ff.
63 Bauman, 53f.
When their fathers kiss them goodnight, they smell the blood on their breath and they can’t wait to go to the slaughterhouse themselves.” (92)