

# The Trope of Silence in the Work of Herta Müller

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## Notes on Contributor

Pavlo Shopin is in the final year of his PhD in German at the University of Cambridge. In his dissertation, he uses conceptual metaphor theory to examine how language is represented in the works of Herta Müller. His articles have appeared in *Slavic and East European Journal*, *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, *Modern Language Review*, and *Monatshefte für deutschsprachige Literatur und Kultur*.

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## The Trope of Silence in the Work of Herta Müller

Herta Müller's fiction and non-fiction use the trope of silence to make sense of more abstract concepts. Drawing on conceptual metaphor theory, I argue that Müller employs silence as a means to personify phenomena and to realise the communicative potential of the environment. Language and meaning become inherent in the nature of things. Müller humanises the world when she ascribes to its inanimate entities the ability to keep silent. Silence can also metonymically stand for the mental states of those keeping silent or for their complex social actions; it serves as a central reference point for trauma, fear, guilt, suffering, writing, and collaboration. Metaphor and metonymy can interact, and contribute to the understanding of silence. Müller consistently highlights the figurative meaning of silence by estranging the trope linguistically and conceptually. Silence refers to the absence and failure of (but also implies the potential for) language and communication; and its use as a trope brings to the fore the search for meaning, expression, and social interaction.

Keywords: Herta Müller, trope, metaphor, silence, metonymy, personification

### Introduction

Herta Müller has discussed silence extensively in her poetological essays and literary works. It is a vital motif in her writing. Literary scholars have previously explored the meaning of silence and its thematic role in her poetics. They have expanded Müller's interpretations and contributed to the understanding of silence in her texts. Speaking about Müller's views on language expressed in her poetological essays, Katrin Kohl remarks that Müller reflects on 'the significance and power of language [...] when language gives way to silence in response to a life-threatening situation'.<sup>1</sup> According to Kohl, Müller sees silence as a psychological response to danger and implicitly

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<sup>1</sup> Katrin Kohl, 'Beyond Realism: Herta Müller's Poetics', in *Herta Müller*, ed. by Brigid Haines and Lyn Marven (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 16–31 (p. 28).

associates it with death and suffering.

Brigid Haines recognises the centrality of silence in Müller's writing, positing that 'the silences surrounding the Third Reich' have defined the author and her literary works.<sup>2</sup> From childhood, Müller has witnessed people's silence in the face of past atrocities committed by totalitarian regimes. Haines suggests that 'Müller's initial motivation to become a writer had been to overcome the silences with which she grew up'.<sup>3</sup> In the essay 'Wenn wir schweigen, werden wir unangenehm – wenn wir reden, werden wir lächerlich. Kann Literatur Zeugnis ablegen?', Müller says her writing began not as witness testimony, but as an exercise in silence, since she could keep her views to herself in her texts. In the beginning, she recalls, she could freely express herself in writing and yet keep silent: 'Ich habe das Schreiben gelernt vom Schweigen und Verschweigen. Damit begann es.'<sup>4</sup> Müller thus began her writing as a confrontation with the silences surrounding her; but writing also provided a safe space to express social criticism that she could not voice in public. Given that writing made possible and occurred along with 'keeping silent' ('das Schweigen'), it could itself be regarded as a mode of silence. Hence both overcoming and engaging in silence can be understood as constitutive of Müller's motivation to write.

In her essay on trauma in Müller's novel *Herztier* (1994), Beverley Driver Eddy emphasises the importance of overcoming silence through writing and considers the conflict between silence and writing as the central dilemma of the novel:

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<sup>2</sup> Brigid Haines, 'Return from the Archipelago: Herta Müller's *Atemschaukel* as Soft Memory', in *Herta Müller*, pp. 117–34 (p. 119).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>4</sup> *Text und Kritik*, 155 (2002), 6–17 (p. 6).

The dilemma [...] is whether to preserve silence and thereby grant victory to the forces of terror, or to speak out from a standpoint of incomplete knowledge, and thereby risk betrayal of their victims. *Herztier* confronts this issue head-on in the ways the narrator of the novel relates her personal story of trauma to her testimony about the damage done to her friends.<sup>5</sup>

Silence is contrasted with narration and figures the loss of the ability to speak on the part of the person suffering from trauma. Sophia Richman associates losing one's voice with trauma: 'The shame that follows trauma and the despair about ever being understood leads to a profound sense of isolation and inability to express one's feelings.'<sup>6</sup> Silence, then, is one possible effect of trauma: 'one of the common reactions to traumatic events is the inability to talk about what has happened'.<sup>7</sup> That makes narrating a way to overcome trauma: 'Telling one's story is a healing experience for anyone who has suffered and longed for a witness to that suffering.'<sup>8</sup>

The interplay between silence and telling is often seen as foundational for Müller's poetics. Thomas Roberg argues that 'das konstruktive Spannungsverhältnis zwischen Sprache und Schweigen, Mitteilung und Auslassung' constitutes 'ein Kernpunkt von Müllers Poetologie'.<sup>9</sup> In this context, silence is associated with the limitations of literary writing. It stands for the things that remain unsaid, or are left out

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<sup>5</sup> Beverley Driver Eddy, 'Testimony and Trauma in Herta Müller's *Herztier*', *German Life and Letters*, 53 (2000), 56–72 (p. 58).

<sup>6</sup> Sophia Richman, 'Finding One's Voice', *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 42 (2006), 639–50 (p. 641).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 648.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Roberg, 'Bildlichkeit und verschwiegener Sinn in Herta Müllers Erzählung *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt*', in *Der Druck der Erfahrung treibt die Sprache in die Dichtung: Bildlichkeit in Texten Herta Müllers*, ed. by Ralph Köhnen (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1997), pp. 27–42 (p. 30).

of the text because it is impossible to express them in writing.<sup>10</sup> Müller, however, is aware of the limitations of writing and foregrounds the space left by the absence of those things.<sup>11</sup> Anja Johannsen points out that Müller consciously highlights the interaction between speech and silence: ‘Das beschriebene Spannungsverhältnis zwischen Sprechen und Schweigen, zwischen geschriebenem und nicht geschriebenem Satz muss hergestellt werden, um die Unruhe fühlbar zu machen – letztlich auch für den Leser.’<sup>12</sup>

Scholars who regard silence as one of the key motifs in Müller’s poetics find support for their argument in her poetological writing, and often borrow her own vocabulary and metaphors. Literary critics follow Müller when writing is implicitly conceptualised as speech, or when the things that are left out of her literary texts are presented as silence. Holger Bösmann, for example, uses silence and speech as tropes for Müller’s writing. In his essay about the collection of short stories *Barfußiger Februar* (1987), Bösmann conceives of silence as something that can be heard during

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the inadequacy of language as a means of expression in Müller’s writing, see Graziella Predoiu, *Faszination und Provokation bei Herta Müller: Eine thematische und motivische Auseinandersetzung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2001), p. 161: ‘Aus Bildern setzt sich nach den Aussagen der Autorin die Wahrnehmung zusammen, sie bilden die Grundlage ihres Schreibens. Bei der Transposition der Bilder in Sprache, stoßen diese auf die Unzulänglichkeit des Wortes als Kommunikationsmittel, auf die Verarmung der Sprache.’

<sup>11</sup> See Lyn Marven, ‘“In allem ist der Riß”: Trauma, Fragmentation, and the Body in Herta Müller’s Prose and Collages’, *Modern Language Review*, 100 (2005), 396–411 (p. 400).

<sup>12</sup> Anja K. Johannsen, *Kisten, Krypten, Labyrinth. Raumfigurationen in der Gegenwartsliteratur: W.G. Sebald, Anne Duden, Herta Müller* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008), p. 210.

the reading process: ‘Das Schweigen, die verweigerte Kommunikation, [...] ist gerade dasjenige, was durch die geschriebenen Sätze gehört werden soll.’<sup>13</sup>

I do not adopt Müller’s metaphors of silence to explain her texts; instead I dissect her figures into their constituent parts, in order to explore how she uses silence as a trope. To that end, it is helpful to follow George Lakoff and Mark Johnson and distinguish between target and source domains.<sup>14</sup> The source domain, also known as the vehicle,<sup>15</sup> is the more concrete concept (such as ‘silence’) which may not be similar to the less concrete concept of the target domain (e.g. ‘trauma’), but which makes the latter meaningful (‘trauma stays silent’). In the framework of conceptual metaphor theory, metaphor is a constitutive part of cognition and plays a significant role in human reasoning.<sup>16</sup> The study of metaphor facilitates the interpretation of literary texts because writers engage with ‘vital issues in our lives and help us illuminate those issues, through the extension, composition, and criticism of the basic metaphoric tools through which we comprehend much of reality’.<sup>17</sup> Conceptual metaphor theory assumes that writers use concrete concepts, often related to sensorimotor experience, as source domains through which readers are helped to access more abstract ideas. Notably, silence as the

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<sup>13</sup> Holger Bösmann, “‘Hermetisches Rätselreich’? Das Suchen einer Reiseroute in *Barfüßiger Februar*”, in *Der Druck der Erfahrung*, pp. 43–52 (p. 51).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of conceptual metaphor theory, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). The authors first proposed the theory in *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>15</sup> See Ivor Armstrong Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936; repr. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 96–97.

<sup>16</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, p. 128.

<sup>17</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 215.

embodied experience of refraining from vocal sound production is a concrete concept, and can serve as such a source domain (e.g. ‘das Schweigen der Liebe’).

Silence can be conveyed through a wide range of German expressions, and my analysis adopts an inclusive perspective on it as a contextually constructed trope. I will analyse the metaphorical conceptualisation of both ‘das Schweigen’ and ‘die Stille’ when they explicitly or implicitly relate to the absence of speech. While ‘das Schweigen’ stands for the experience of keeping silent, ‘die Stille’ generally refers to the absence of sound – but can also be associated with the absence of human speech.

Where silence is a source of meaning for more abstract phenomena, I categorise these figurative associations according to their target domains: materials, physical objects, body parts, language, complex social actions, and mental states. These categories are necessarily imprecise, and silence as a source domain can simultaneously elucidate several of them: in Müller’s literary and non-literary texts, silence stands for different things depending on the context. The trope is carefully used, and seems deliberately protean. This resonates with Kohl’s argument that ‘Müller’s theory of language is characteristically unsystematic’,<sup>18</sup> because silence is a core part of the writer’s meticulous work with language.

First, I examine how the trope of silence is used to personify inanimate entities (materials, physical objects, body parts, and language); in the second part, I consider the metonymic and metaphorical associations between silence, complex social actions, and mental states.

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<sup>18</sup> Kohl, p. 28.

## Personifying Inanimate Entities

### *Materials*

Müller personifies inanimate entities by ascribing to them the ability to keep silent. In the autobiographical essay ‘Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel’, she remembers her mother’s comments about the snow preserving people’s footprints: ‘Demnach hätte jedes Material geschwiegen, außer dem Schnee.’<sup>19</sup> Silence stands for keeping no human traces that might communicate a message to those who find them. Sand, grass, earth, and even air are said to keep silent about the people who walk on or through them; but snow cannot keep silent, because it retains footprints and thus reveals a person’s location. Müller uses her mother’s metaphor in her novel *Atemschaukel* (2009): one of the main characters, Trudi Pelikan, recounts how she tried to hide in a hole in the ground in her neighbour’s garden in order to escape deportation to the Soviet labour camps; but when the snow fell, every step became visible and her mother could not bring her food in secret: ‘Der Schnee denunzierte, sie musste freiwillig aus dem Versteck, freiwillig gezwungen vom Schnee. Das werde ich dem Schnee nie verzeihen, sagte sie. [...] Wegen dem Schneeverrat bin ich hier. [...] Alles, außer dem Schnee hätte geschwiegen.’<sup>20</sup> In foregrounding the personification of snow, Müller weaves her mother’s memory of deportation into the fabric of her novel. Her mother too tried to hide from the Soviets to avoid deportation, but the snow made it impossible: ‘Meine Mutter saß schon vier Tage in einem Erdloch im Nachbargarten. [...] Doch dann kam der Schnee. [...] Man konnte im ganzen Schnee, im ganzen Dorf zu jedem Versteck den

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<sup>19</sup> *Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel* (2011; Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2013), pp. 96–109 (p. 101).

<sup>20</sup> *Atemschaukel*, 3rd edn (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2013), p. 18.

Weg sehen. [...] Der Schnee denunzierte.’<sup>21</sup> In real life and in the fictional world, the snow cannot keep silent and gives away the victims to their pursuers.

Likewise in her essay ‘Hunger und Seide. Männer und Frauen im Alltag’, Müller describes how people carry chunks of frozen meat from the butcher’s while the animal’s blood is dripping on the hot asphalt: ‘Dann war der ganze Gehsteig voller Tropfspuren. Die trockneten so rasch, als wolle der heiße Asphalt verschweigen, was hier geschah. Wie hätte die Straße sonst ausgesehen: rotblaue Tropfen wie Regen.’<sup>22</sup> She personifies the asphalt, ascribing to it a motivation to hide the traces of blood, and endowing it with the human ability to keep silent; it becomes a subject capable of mental states such as volition and complex social actions such as keeping a secret. Müller thus creates a vivid image of the environment.

In *Herztier*, she confers the ability of keeping silent on the earth (ground) when one of the characters recounts how his co-workers at the slaughterhouse silently watched him suffering from a work-related injury: ‘Die schweigen wie die Erde, auf der sie stehen.’<sup>23</sup> The earth is thus personified, while the people keeping silent are dehumanised, because compared to the inanimate earth; the speaker thereby expresses his frustration and dissatisfaction with their reaction. The personification of ‘die Erde’ through the trope of keeping silent is both salient and original, without being arbitrary, since the earth is usually perceived as an entity that does not produce sound and hence can be imagined to keep silent. The metaphor communicates the complex social context of the scene, as well as the absence of sound in a situation when speech is desired and expected. It is interesting that the association between the earth and keeping silent,

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Immer derselbe Schnee’, p. 100.

<sup>22</sup> *Hunger und Seide* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1995), pp. 65–87 (p. 66).

<sup>23</sup> *Herztier*, 5th edn (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2009), p. 134.

while unconventional in German, is an established metaphor in Romanian<sup>24</sup> and, more specifically, can be found in the fairy tale ‘Capra cu trei iezi’ (‘The Goat with Three Kids’; 1875) by Ion Creangă.<sup>25</sup> It could be coincidence that the same metaphor is employed by two different writers, but Müller regularly uses fairy tale motifs in her texts<sup>26</sup> and would be aware of this classic work of Romanian children’s literature. Personification, of course, is deeply entrenched in the magical thinking of fairy tales, as well as in the ‘magical’ dimension of Müller’s language.<sup>27</sup>

Even cotton wool can be personified. In the essay ‘Die Anwendung der dünnen Straßen’, Müller describes the effects of fear induced by death threats and persecution in the totalitarian state: ‘Übermüdete Wachheit, Raserei, ausgestopft mit Watte. Man lernt, dass die Watte nicht still, sondern bloß unerbittlich ist.’<sup>28</sup> Cotton wool could stand for psychological and physical weakness (e.g. ‘die Beine wie aus Watte’), as well as loss of sensitivity (e.g. ‘wie in Watte gepackt’), including the sense of hearing (e.g. ‘wie

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<sup>24</sup> I thank James Morris for clarifying this point in personal communication: Müller adopts the uncommon Romanian idiom ‘a tăcea ca pământul’ (to keep silent like the earth).

<sup>25</sup> Ion Creangă, ‘Capra cu trei iezi’ [The Goat with Three Kids], in *Amintiri din copilărie* [Childhood Memories], ed. by Anatol și Dan Vidrașcu (Chișinău: Litera, 2002), pp. 19–27 (p. 21): ‘tace ca pământul’ (‘keeps silent like the earth’). Here is the relevant excerpt from the German translation by Gerhardt Csejka: ‘[Das mittlere Geißlein] schweigt wie die Erde, und vor Angst schlottert ihm das Fleisch auf den Knochen’, see Ion Creangă, *Die Geiss mit den drei Geisslein und andere Tiermärchen*, trans. by Gerhardt Csejka (Bucharest: Ion Creangă, 1984), pp. 3–36 (p. 17).

<sup>26</sup> See for example, Jean Boase-Beier, ‘Herta Müller in Translation’, in *Herta Müller*, pp. 190–203 (p. 191): Müller’s ‘images are often those of childhood and fairy tales are a favourite source’. See also Lyn Marven, *Body and Narrative in Contemporary Literatures in German: Herta Müller, Libuše Moníková, and Kerstin Hensel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp. 111–12.

<sup>27</sup> See Kohl, p. 30.

<sup>28</sup> *Immer derselbe Schnee*, pp. 110–24 (p. 119).

Watte im Ohr’). But Müller emphasises that in this case the cotton wool does not alleviate the victims’ suffering. Rather than bringing calm or silence, it relentlessly heightens the victims’ perception of sensory stimuli and induces them to see danger lurking everywhere. It can be imagined as a human being spreading fear and suspicion. Its personification and unconventional function shed light on the effects of fear and the impact of death threats made by the secret police. Müller uses a complex multisensory metaphor to explain the experience of fear under the totalitarian regime, and silence is one of the facets of this figurative image.

### ***Physical Objects***

When Müller uses the adjective ‘stumm’ to describe inanimate objects, she is aware of the association between keeping silent and the absence of sound. In the novel *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt* (1986), the narrator speaks about the mill where the protagonist Windisch works, and emphasises silence as its key characteristic:

Die Mühle ist stumm. Stumm sind die Wände, und stumm ist das Dach. Und die Räder sind stumm. Windisch hat auf den Schalter gedrückt und das Licht ausgelöscht. Zwischen den Rädern ist es Nacht. Die dunkle Luft hat den Mehlstaub, die Fliegen, die Säcke geschluckt.<sup>29</sup>

Regarding this passage, Lyn Marven observes that ‘[s]imple repetition [...] contributes to the density of the text’.<sup>30</sup> The repetition of the polysemous word ‘stumm’ activates its various meanings – muteness, absence of sound – and draws attention to its figurative potential. Müller invites her readers to think about possible interpretations. Muteness is mapped on to the absence of sound, and this mapping enables the author to personify

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<sup>29</sup> *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt*, 2nd edn (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2009), p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Marven, *Body and Narrative*, pp. 100–1.

the mill. Darkness and silence might be associated with death, and hence the mill can be imagined as a dead person.

In the novel *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger* (1992), a hill is assigned a human quality of muteness. The narrator describes the military training of Ilije, who is the lover of the protagonist Adina, and how Ilije attempts to run away from the military camp at night: ‘Die Hügelspitze wird stumm dastehen und nicht mehr wissen, daß sie die Nacht in einer Stirn verbracht hat, daß sie es war, die einen durchsichtigen Schädel vor Angst zur Flucht getrieben hat.’<sup>31</sup> The hill provides Ilije with an opportunity to hide from the view of the military, and the personification of the hill leads to the shift of subjectivity from the character to the landscape. The metaphor allows the narrator to imagine that it was the landscape that forced Ilije to flee; responsibility is transferred from the character on to the environment.

In the autofictional short story ‘Das Fenster’, Müller describes dancing with different partners, and personifies the clarinet playing the music through the vehicles of voice and silence. At first, she evokes the trope of voice to characterise the sound of the clarinet: ‘die schwarze Klarinette schreit’.<sup>32</sup> Later in the scene, the silence of the clarinet is voluntary: ‘Die schwarze Klarinette schweigt.’<sup>33</sup> The association between the absence of music and keeping silent is a relatively conventional metaphor in the German language (it is common to speak about musical instruments keeping silent). Yet the author foregrounds the figurative nature of the association by using both voice (‘schreit’) and silence (‘schweigt’) as source domains to conceptualise the music in the

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<sup>31</sup> Herta Müller, *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger*, 2nd edn (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2009), p. 206. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>32</sup> *Niederungen* (2010; repr. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2011), pp. 118–21 (p. 118).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

scene. The alliteration and assonance of the words ‘schreit’ and ‘schweigt’ further accentuate the personification of the musical instrument. In that context, keeping silent becomes salient as a trope. The clarinet is imagined as a being that can both shout and keep silent. Personified through metaphor, it covertly acquires a degree of independence from the musician and becomes one of the focal points of the scene.

At the beginning of the essay ‘Wenn etwas in der Luft liegt, ist es meist nichts Gutes’, Müller observes that the wind can only be seen or heard through the things with which it interacts. When the wind comes into contact with physical objects, they can move and produce sound: ‘Den Wind selber sieht man nicht, sondern das Schlagen oder Fliegen der Dinge, die er anfaßt. Sie werden stumm oder lauthals WINDIG.’<sup>34</sup> First, the author implicitly personifies the wind, ascribing to it the ability to touch objects and attributing to it the role of the human subject. Secondly, the things moved by the wind are presented as capable of speech and keeping silent. Müller creates a multisensory image where physical objects are metaphorically conceptualised as human beings capable of speech and keeping silent. Furthermore, the adjective ‘windig’ can relate to the psychological trait of unreliability, which means that these objects are implied to have mental states. Müller accentuates the figurative meaning of ‘stumm werden’ and defamiliarises this conventional expression to present a lucid metaphorical image. She personifies both the wind and the objects with which it interacts; she uses speech, silence, and mental states as vehicles to characterise the impact of the wind.

### ***Body Parts***

In *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger*, Müller personifies the characters’ eyes as

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<sup>34</sup> *Der König verneigt sich und tötet*, 6th edn (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2010), pp. 186–99 (p. 186).

able to keep silent when the mothers and children interact after the children come back home late from the fields where they were picking tomatoes:

Sie [die Mütter] streicheln ihren Kindern eine Weile übers Haar. Sie schlagen ihnen mitten im Streicheln ins Gesicht. Dann schauen die Augen der Kinder und die der Mütter eine Weile stumm ins Kerzenlicht. Die Augen sind schuldig, vor der Kerze sieht man das nicht. (p. 61)

The eyes can be imagined as human beings, who keep silent because they feel guilty. A similar case of personification through silence occurs when the protagonist Adina is silently crying in front of her friend Paul: ‘Sie trinkt nicht, sie weint nicht, ihre Augen rinnen und ihr Mund ist stumm’ (p. 196). Adina’s mouth acquires the independent ability to keep silent. As in conventional language, however, body parts can metonymically stand for the whole body and the people to whom they belong; hence the eyes and the mouth can also be interpreted as metonymic reference points. It is, after all, the characters who keep silent in both passages. If the eye and the mouth stand for the people keeping silent, then silence is not a metaphorical source domain but the literal absence of speech. Although the metonymic reading is more conventional and informative in both scenes, it is still possible to interpret silence as a metaphorical vehicle.

### ***Language***

In the poetological essay ‘Das Auge täuscht im Lidschlag’, Müller invokes silence as a trope to describe the sentences left out of her texts: writing challenges perception ‘[b]is die verschwiegenen Sätze zwischen den geschriebenen Sätzen überall ihr Schweigen hinhalten. Bis man das Gefühl hat beim Schreiben, daß der Text jetzt atmet, daß der

Satz, jeder, so ist, wie er sich selber sieht.’<sup>35</sup> She personifies the sentences that remain unwritten as able to keep silent. Since the sentences keep silent, they might also speak and must be human. Müller relies on the experiences of vision, hearing, and breathing as metaphorical source domains to shed light on writing, and silence is one element in a complex multisensory image she uses to characterise her work.

In *Herztier*, the narrator-protagonist and her friends correspond with each other using a secret code in their letters because they know that the letters are read by the secret police. The code of the letters allows them to communicate freely about state persecution and surveillance. The protagonist describes how she uses a comma to send a message that she hopes will be overlooked by the secret police:

Das Komma sollte schweigen, wenn der Hauptmann Pjele die Briefe las, damit er die Briefe wieder zuklebte und weiterschickte. Aber wenn Edgar und Georg die Briefe öffneten, sollte das Komma schreien. Ein Komma, das schweigt und schreit, gab es nicht. Das Komma hinter der Anrede war viel zu dick geworden.<sup>36</sup>

The narrator personifies the comma. If it keeps silent when read by the secret police, they will not notice the hidden message; but the narrator’s friends will see it. Her fear is that the comma after the greeting stands out, and the secret police will recognise its function as a hidden message. Silence is associated with secrecy, and the author foregrounds this figurative connection with the help of the extended metaphor.

In the essay ‘Auf die Gedanken fällt Erde’, Müller discusses the meaning of the word ‘Bürgerkrieg’ and implicitly personifies it by granting it the ability to keep silent:

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<sup>35</sup> *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel: Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1991), pp. 75–88 (p. 81).

<sup>36</sup> Müller, *Herztier*, p. 107.

Von der großserbischen Landkarte, von der modernen Staatsarmee der Serben und den leeren Händen der Moslems schweigt das Wort 'Bürgerkrieg'. Schweigt auch von der Eroberung als Staatserhaltungsidee. Auch davon, daß eine jugoslawische Diktatur und Machtelite aus Betonköpfen weiter handlungsfähig bleiben will, daß eine korrupte, von sich selber besessene politische Klasse ihre Ideologie nicht revidiert, sondern verschlimmert hat.<sup>37</sup>

Silence is conventionally associated with the absence of information: it is common to speak about the silence of books or documents on particular issues. Müller defamiliarises this association by anthropomorphising the word 'Bürgerkrieg' and focusing readers' attention on its ability to keep silent. Keeping silent serves as a metaphorical vehicle mapped on to the absence of contextual information. The conventional meaning of the word does not offer the details about the civil war she discusses. Silence is a trope to explain that the word does not express the many concomitant meanings and associations that are established in the context of war. In other words, it stands for the failure of the word to communicate relevant information about the war.

At one point in the essay 'Wenn wir schweigen, werden wir unangenehm – wenn wir reden, werden wir lächerlich', Müller discusses the prevalence of silence in her family and personifies words as able to keep silent:

Unter Schweigenden hatten unser aller Augen gelernt, welches Gefühl der andere mit sich durchs Haus trägt. Wir horchten mehr mit den Augen als mit den Ohren. Es entstand eine angenehme Schwerfälligkeit, ein in die Länge gezogenes Übergewicht der Dinge, die wir im Kopf herumtrugen. So ein Gewicht geben die Wörter gar nicht her, weil sie nicht stehenbleiben. Gleich nach dem Sprechen, kaum zu Ende gesagt, sind sie schon stumm.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Hunger und Seide*, pp. 164–71 (p. 169).

<sup>38</sup> *Der König verneigt sich*, pp. 74–105 (p. 74).

Silence stands for the temporal limitations of speech: after the speaker utters the words, they are said to become silent. Müller uses silence to anthropomorphise communication and present it as the subject of action. Words speak only during the conversation, whereas the silence prevalent in the family is a constant presence and conceived of as a physical force.<sup>39</sup> Words are personified as able to speak and keep silent; they can also refer metonymically to the people uttering them. Consequently, metaphor and metonymy can interact and thereby help readers grasp the meaning of the text.

### **Metonymy and Metaphor: Actions and States as Silence**

#### ***Collaboration***

Silence can refer to complex social actions. In the essay ‘Schmeckt das Rattengift’, Müller distinguishes between Hitler’s willing executioners and those who remain silent about Nazi crimes: ‘die Täter und Schweiger Hitlers’.<sup>40</sup> She considers the latter group to be implicated in Nazi crimes through their silent support. Silence is collaboration and guilt; as a metonymic vehicle, it refers to the more complex social action of political and moral support. It is a more concrete concept than the socially complex idea of collaboration. Müller gets at the meaning of collaboration by associating it with the silence about the crimes of the Nazi regime. Metonymy thus allows her to identify and morally judge a complex social action and its agents.

#### ***Life and Death***

In the poetological essay ‘Der König verneigt sich und tötet’, Müller reflects on the

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<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of physical force as a source domain, see Leonard Talmy, ‘Force Dynamics in Language and Cognition’, *Cognitive Science*, 12 (1988), 49–100.

<sup>40</sup> *Hunger und Seide*, pp. 39–49 (p. 42).

nature of the Ceaușescu regime and describes how people were persecuted and killed by the state. She uses silence to explain the consequences of the murders perpetrated by the dictatorship: ‘Wo ein Mensch verschwand, blieb Stille.’<sup>41</sup> The absence of sound is the absence of life. Death is implicitly construed as silence. Müller uses silence to engage the reader’s imagination and make the atrocities of the totalitarian regime tangible. She does not delineate the meaning of silence, and readers can freely establish associations between silence, absence, and death to empathise better with the victims.

In *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger*, the narrator invokes the trope of silence and personifies death when she describes how one of the characters kills cockroaches in the kitchen: ‘Bei den großen knackte der Tod, bei den kleinen blieb er stumm. Ilije zählte nur die rotbraunen Kakerlaken, die knackten’ (p. 113). Müller presents death as the subject of action: the death of the small cockroaches can be imagined as someone keeping silent. Although the metonymic association between death and silence is rather conventional, the author defamiliarises it through the unusual context and creative use of personification.

In her 1994 Kleist Prize speech, Müller discusses writing and uses silence as a metaphorical source domain to conceptualise life and experience:

Ob man was das Leben ausmacht, durch sich selber oder durch andere erfährt, ob man es als Schweigen für sich behält oder als Satz aus dem Schädel hinausschickt, es kann seinen Ausgangspunkt nicht behalten, seine eigene Absicht nicht einlösen. Es gibt für das, was das Leben ausmacht, keinen Durchblick. Nur gebrechliche Einrichtungen des Augenblicks. Und Zurechtlegungen, die nicht bis zum nächsten Schritt halten.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Der König verneigt sich*, pp. 40–73 (p. 50).

<sup>42</sup> ‘Von der gebrechlichen Einrichtung der Welt. Rede zur Verleihung des Kleist-Preises 1994’, in *Hunger und Seide*, pp. 7–15 (p. 7).

Silence is used as a source domain for life experiences. At the same time, it is conceived of as a physical object that can be possessed by the human subject. On the one hand, silence stands for life. On the other, the source domain of physical objects is used to construe silence. Overall, the author employs a complex multisensory metaphor to explain her vision of writing and its potential to represent life. She effectively uses figurative language to associate silence and writing with life and to highlight the tentative nature of this association.

### ***Mental States***

In *Atemschaukel*, the narrator-protagonist reflects on the nature of homesickness and presents it metaphorically through various source domains: ‘Manche sagen und singen und schweigen und gehen und sitzen und schlafen ihr Heimweh, so lang und so umsonst.’<sup>43</sup> Homesickness is imagined as something that can be sung, spoken, danced, or kept silent about; silence becomes an aspect of the complex multisensory phenomenon of homesickness. Notably, both metaphor and metonymy are crucial for understanding the passage. It is reasonable to interpret the quoted sentence as stating that some people can choose to keep silent about their homesickness. In this interpretation, silence metonymically refers to the feeling of homesickness. Silence is just one of the bodily experiences associated with homesickness and contributes to the original figurative conceptualisation of this complex mental state.

Müller uses silence to personify psychological states. They acquire the ability to keep silent and thus can be imagined as human beings. In her essay ‘Gelber Mais und keine Zeit’, she discusses her mother’s silence about the suffering in the Soviet labour

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<sup>43</sup> Müller, *Atemschaukel*, p. 233.

camp and construes psychological trauma as a human being: ‘Ich glaubte immer, Beschädigung ist stumm: sie begleitet alles und verbietet jedem den Mund.’<sup>44</sup> Trauma is imagined as a human subject able to keep silent but capable of such speech acts as prohibition. At the same time, ‘Beschädigung’ can metonymically refer to the person suffering from it. Here again, metaphor and metonymy participate in the construction of the meaning of the sentence. The author presents the victim of trauma as the object of manipulation, whereas trauma acts as the subject of action who influences the person. The metaphorical conceptualisation of psychological trauma allows the author to create a vivid image that conveys its effects on the victim. While silence becomes a metaphorical source domain when readers imagine trauma as a human being, trauma can also relate to the literal experience of keeping silent. Consequently, both the literal and figurative meanings of silence are essential for understanding the sentence. The literal meaning is integral to the text as silence is one of the effects of trauma, whereas its figurative use suggests that the victim does not freely choose to keep silent but is forced to do so by trauma. The personification highlights the victim’s suffering and alienation. The metaphor enables Müller to communicate effectively the reasons why her mother kept silent about her experience in the Soviet labour camp.

Throughout her oeuvre, Müller personifies relatively abstract concepts by attributing to them the ability to keep silent. Such personification commonly occurs along with the use of these concepts as metonymic vehicles for the people keeping silent.

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<sup>44</sup> *Immer derselbe Schnee*, pp. 125–45 (p. 129).

## Conclusion

In Herta Müller's fiction and non-fiction, silence is not only a central theme, but also a key means to illuminate other vital ideas. She relies on linguistic and conceptual conventions that make her vision of silence clear and engaging; at the same time, she defamiliarises those conventions, and foregrounds the figurative associations between silence and other concepts.<sup>45</sup> This agrees well with Viktor Shklovsky's view in his seminal essay 'Art, as Device' (1919) that writers estrange everyday language and thought to disrupt the automaticity of life and let their readers see the ordinary in a new light.<sup>46</sup> For Müller, the quotidian is infiltrated by the violence and destabilisation that characterise the experience of totalitarianism.<sup>47</sup> She is fully aware of figurative language and reveals this sensitivity to her readers. She creatively engages readers' imaginations to make accessible her representation of different phenomena through silence. When Müller uses silence as a trope to personify inanimate entities and to associate them with speech, she is realising the communicative potential of the environment. Language and meaning become inherent in the nature of things. She humanises the world when she imagines that its inanimate entities can keep silent. Furthermore, she invokes figurative associations to relate silence to writing. Writing helps her confront the many silences in her life. Silence, art, life, and language are intimately related, and metaphors help accentuate the intimacy of this relationship. Figurative language likewise enables

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<sup>45</sup> See in this context Marven, *Body and Narrative*, p. 102: 'Müller's narratives challenge textual conventions, [...] presenting the text as a physical artefact.'

<sup>46</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art, as Device', *Poetics Today*, 36.3 (2015), 151–74 (pp. 158, 162).

<sup>47</sup> Herta Müller, 'Der Fremde Blick oder Das Leben ist ein Furz in der Laterne', in *Der König verneigt sich*, pp. 130–50 (p. 136). See also Marven, *Body and Narrative*, p. 244: 'Müller's distinctive poetic vision and narrative voice – "der Fremde Blick" – are in part the product of the repressive conditions in Romania.'

Müller to establish a causal link between silence and the mental state of the person keeping silent: silence becomes a symptom of trauma and metonymically refers to the psychological suffering of the individual. Metaphor and metonymy can interact, and contribute to the understanding of silence. She can thus associate silence with feelings of guilt, powerlessness, submissiveness, and vulnerability, establishing a close connection between silence and fear. Her characters can keep silent because they are afraid of punishment for speaking out against the totalitarian regime or for voicing their ideas, which are irreconcilable with the oppressive social norms. Metaphorical language and thought relate silence to loss of identity, agency, and humanity. Silent characters can become lifeless and vulnerable to the dehumanising power of social oppression. Müller also relies on metaphors to elucidate the significance of silence in resisting social oppression and to explain its role in social power relations. Silence can be a sign of both suffering and resistance, and can symbolise either a strength or a weakness. Finally, the trope of silence refers to the absence and failure of (but also implies the potential for) language and communication; and its use brings to the fore the search for meaning, expression, and social interaction.