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"The piano that no longer plays"—The impact of intersecting traumas on narrative identity in Herta Müller's novel *Atemschaukel*

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Abstract

In this article, I analyze the intersecting traumas that appear in Herta Müller's novel *Atemschaukel* (2008), and their effect on the main character's narrative identity, through the perspective of feminist trauma studies and narrative hermeneutics. I argue that *Atemschaukel* describes three intersecting traumas: hunger in the Gulag, extreme minority stress, and lifelong homesickness. Those traumas have several effects on the narrative identity of the main character: isolation from the world, lack of belief in a better future, and inability to see possibilities for change. The combination of feminist trauma studies and narrative hermeneutics will generate new understanding of the effects of intersecting traumas and the ethical potential of traumatic narratives.

KEYWORDS
gulag, Herta Müller, narrative hermeneutics, narrative identity, trauma

1 | INTRODUCTION

Romanian-born, German-speaking author Herta Müller won the 2009 Nobel Prize in Literature for her depictions of "the landscape of the dispossessed" through "the concentration of poetry and the frankness of prose" (*NobelPrize. Org. Nobel Prize Outreach AB.*, 2022). One of those landscapes is depicted in her 2008 novel *Atemschaukel* (*The*

Hunger Angel, transl. Philip Boehm) which tells the story of Leo Auberg, a German-speaking Romanian sent to a Soviet prison camp as a 17-year-old gay man in the aftermath of the Second World War. Most of Romania's German-speaking population, including the author's mother, suffered the same fate (Marven & Haines, 2013, p. 3). The novel embodies both the concentration and the frankness present in Müller's works. It consists mostly of short chapters, overlapping time domains, metaphors, and neologisms. The dialogue is limited and everything is seen through the memories of the protagonist, one of the deeply dispossessed people Müller often writes about.

In this article I aim to explore this already quite widely studied novel from the perspective of intersectional trauma studies and narrative hermeneutics, the combination of which will generate new and more conclusive ways to understand the story of the novel's narrator Leo Auberg. Previously, most research on *Atemschaukel* has focused on the trauma Leo experiences in the prison camp and the special language the narrator uses to describe the all-encompassing trauma of hunger. Leo's homosexuality is often only briefly mentioned, which excludes the effect his severe minority stress and anticipatory trauma of being caught has on him throughout his life. Similarly, the 60 post-camp years Leo lives through at the end of the novel have rarely been focused on. My main argument related to the interpretation of the novel is that it describes not one trauma—the one stemming from hunger at the prison camp—but three intersecting ones: hunger, extreme minority stress related to Leo's homosexuality, and lifelong experience of not belonging. Further, I argue that the theory of narrative identity can be extremely valuable when analyzing the effects traumas might have on an individual, and that narrative identity itself should be understood as an active process that has certain requirements for its functioning.

The main character's suffering is quite different from that which a privileged reader in the 21st century is expected to have experienced. From a hermeneutic perspective, however, the difference can be the reason a work of fiction can awaken deep empathy in the reader (see Ritivoi, 2016). Therein lies the ethical potential of reading traumatic narratives far from our own experiences. While we read the story of Leo Auberg and see how his *sense of the possible* (see Meretoja, 2018) is diminished due to the trauma he has suffered, our understanding of possible realities, ethical issues, and cultural narratives can grow; literature may help us ethically understand and empathize with not only fictional characters but also other people in our world (ibid. 90). In this article, I combine the fields of literary trauma studies and narrative hermeneutics. I reflect on this theoretical combination in the following section. In Section 3, I demonstrate how the three traumas I find most evident in Leo's life are present in the text and how they influence and intersect with each other. Based on the findings in Section 3, in Section 4 I analyze the effect those traumas have on Leo's narrative identity and his sense of the possible. To conclude, I will discuss the role trauma fiction and studies on narrative identity can play in helping deepen the understanding of trauma and traumatic memory.

2 | HERMENEUTICS, TRAUMA, AND NARRATIVE IDENTITY

Literary trauma studies and narrative hermeneutics are both by themselves multidisciplinary and widely used theoretical frameworks. In this article, I seek to combine them in the analysis of *Atemschaukel*. In the field of trauma studies, I focus on feminist studies, and in addition to literary scholarship, I use the work of scholars from the fields of psychology and gender studies. My understanding of narrative identity is based on the hermeneutic tradition from the 20th century to the present and on Hannah Arendt's definitions of labor, work, and action given in *The Human Condition* (1958). Hanna Meretoja's concept of the sense of the possible—our understanding of what is possible to ourselves and the world around us—is used in this article to link together the study of trauma and the concept of narrative identity. Thus, I argue that the effects of trauma in a literary character are most visible in relation to their sense of the possible understood as a part of narrative identity.

My understanding of trauma as a concept in literary studies is based in part on Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma as a "wound of the mind" that unlike physical wounds does not heal slowly by itself but is stuck in the subconscious from which it belatedly haunts the conscious mind through flashbacks and nightmares (Caruth, 2016, p.

3). In addition, it is partly based on feminist trauma studies during the last few decades that have brought into discussion trauma as an everyday, long-lasting and slowly acquired phenomenon (see Brown, 1991; Cvetkovich, 2003). Traumatic experiences are generally seen as something that defies understanding and verbalization; therefore, literature that concerns trauma is a sort of a paradox (Whitehead, 2004, p. 3). Since its publication, *Atemschaukel* has been read and studied as trauma fiction with a focus on its poetic description of both suffering and the traumatic memories it creates (see e.g., Bannasch, 2011; Haines, 2013; Hakkarainen, 2013). While the 5 years during which the main character is imprisoned in the Gulag is the most widely studied part of the novel, studies have also paid attention to the topics of experienced homelessness (*Heimatlosigkeit*), exile, and a critique of totalitarianism (see Bologa, 2010; Acosta Gómez, 2011; Courtman, 2021, respectively).

As stated above, issues related to trauma in *Atemschaukel* have been quite widely studied. I use intersectional reading[1] to add to the previous analyses: I analyze how multiple traumas affect each other and overlap, and how they together affect the narrator in a way that differs from analyzing the traumas separately. By reading the novel intersectionally, it is possible to reach a more thorough understanding of the effect the overlapping traumas have on the main character's narrative identity: isolation from the world and other human beings, lack of belief in a better future for himself, and the inability to see a possibility for change in the world. Further, I add to the analysis by including narrative hermeneutics and especially Paul Ricœur's theory of narrative identity. When defining narrative identity, I rely on a hermeneutical understanding of the *narrative* itself: that narratives are something we use to make sense of and create meaning in our interpretations of the world, and are therefore always "ethically charged" (Meretoja, 2018, p. 3). Narrative identity occurs in the narratives we live among and tell ourselves and others. As Meretoja (ibid., p. 63) states, it is different from a simple life story, as each life "provide[s] material for a countless number of narratives." My grasp of the concept has also been strongly affected by Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*. While it refers to an unchanging identity and a single life story, and therefore somewhat contradicts a contemporary understanding of narrative identity, I believe her views, especially regarding the role other people play in forming and changing our identities, are still valid.

My definition of narrative identity can be encapsulated in three characteristics: the *temporal*, the *processual*, and the *dialogical*. Temporality refers to the fact that narrative identity includes the past, the present, and the future—stories we tell ourselves and interpret in the world around us about what might still happen. The processual nature of narrative identity means that it is constantly changing and evolving as we and the stories around us change. Lastly, narrative identity cannot be built alone and without contact with other human beings and narratives; it requires interpretation, reflection, and discussion. This tripartite definition builds on the work of several scholars. Paul Ricœur (1984), who first theorized the concept of narrative identity, has written especially about the temporality of narratives and the "(as yet) untold stories" (ibid., 74) that help processing our past and discovering what we dream and think of our future. Processualism is also present in Ricoeur's writing. However, he often talks about "a life story" as singular; Hanna Meretoja develops the idea of processing our life stories further and argues that "this process is endless and open-ended" and "can consist of contradictory narrative fragments, and it can involve radical ruptures and disconnectedness" (Meretoja, 2018, p. 64). Both agree that identity is constituted in a "temporal process of refiguration" (ibid.) in which identifications-with are an important building matter; that is, identity is built through connections with people and stories around us. According to Hannah Arendt, people only "reveal their unique personal identities" (Arendt, 1958, p. 179) in acting and speaking with one another. This builds a "'web' of human relationships" (ibid., p. 183), a space in which identities are revealed. Hermeneutical scholars have further discussed the idea of a web of interlocution, one that is built not only on exchanges between human beings but also in the effects cultural narratives and systems of meaning have on us (Meretoja, 2018, p. 75). Narrative identity as what has happened, is happening, and might happen to us is processed in and through that web, and therefore requires interhuman connections and reflection.

Explicitly combining narrative hermeneutics and trauma studies is quite a recent exploration in literary studies. In his 2016 article, Colin Davis proposes the idea of *traumatic hermeneutics*, pointing out that all definitions of trauma starting from Freud have relied heavily on interpretation, which is at the heart of hermeneutics

(Davis, 2016, p. 34). Hanna Meretoja (2018, 2020) has further developed this connection between trauma studies and narrative hermeneutics, building a *hermeneutic philosophy of trauma* (Meretoja, 2020) which focuses on the ethical potential of a non-subsumptive understanding that traumatic narratives may create. I add to this combination an explicitly intersectional perspective, which can create new understanding of the overlapping of several traumas and bring to light traumas related to circumstances that have previously been understudied.

3 | INTERSECTING TRAUMAS

I argue that in the narrative of *Atemschaukel*, three separate yet intersecting traumas stand out: minority stress (from living in a highly homophobic society), hunger, and homesickness. These have all been mentioned in previous studies on the novel, but treating them all as equally traumatic and focusing on their intersections provides new perspectives. In this section, I will introduce these traumas and then analyze how they intersect with each other. I will also briefly touch on the effects these traumas have on the narrator, although that is more broadly in focus in Section 4. The main effects I explore in this section are the dissociation of body and mind and the displacement between qualities usually connected to objects and to human beings.

The hunger that every prisoner experiences in the camp is the most explicit and widely explored trauma in the novel. It is also central in understanding how the three traumas I analyze intersect with each other, as its physical nature and corporality yet simultaneous metaphorical aspect ties it to both sexuality and homesickness. The hunger in the camp is far beyond what hunger means in everyday language. To express this, the narrator uses the metaphors of "The Hunger Angel" and "The White Hare," making hunger seem almost like a personal evil that torments the prisoners. Hunger is so deep and all consuming that it becomes everything there is: "How can you face the world if all you can say about yourself is that you're hungry." (HA, 17–18.)[2] While everyone struggles with hunger, it is still impossible to share: "There's no thought for the hunger of others, you can't hunger together." (HA, 149.)[3] Hunger is both physical and mental, and therefore affects both the body and the mind, creating a dissociation between the two: "Bent, mangy figures, in our nakedness we looked like worn-out draft animals. But no one was ashamed. What is there to be ashamed for when you no longer have a body." (HA, 224.)[4] Hunger creates contradictions: it makes one painfully aware of one's body yet makes it feel like the body is no more; it cannot be described with regular words. However, it takes over Leo's narration when he tries to write about his camp memories: "I went on for pages triumphantly describing my saved bread and cheek-bread.—When I got to the Hunger Angel I went into raptures" (HA, 271.)[5] Pavlo Shopin (2014, p. 204) has argued that this kind of a new, metaphorical language is what makes reading *Atemschaukel* as fiction possible and therefore allows the discrepancy of breaking the silence of the unspeakably horrific experience the novel deals with. This metaphorical language permeates the whole narration: while the factual starvation ends with the liberation of the camp, Leo is certain that the Hunger Angel comes back home with him, and therefore, the mental effects of hunger stay with him for the remainder of his life.

Although the structure of *Atemschaukel* is more elliptical and the matical than chronological, it is apparent that before the camp, Leo has already had traumatic experiences, mostly related to having to hide his sexuality in the homophobic milieu of 1940's Romania. Leo is painfully aware that "getting caught in the act" would result in imprisonment or worse (HA, 3). He describes his sexuality in contradictory terms: it is "strange, filthy, shameless, and beautiful" (HA, 2).[6] Before, throughout and after the camp, the fear that homophobia creates is constant in Leo's life, which is visible in for example how he reacts to some everyday words his parents or later on his wife use, thinking they might suggest he has been caught (see A, p. 10; 289). The continuity of this sort of trauma makes it an exception to the classical definition, in which trauma "is born" through a singular event that happens in the public sphere, and the traumatic memory is what continues to haunt the victim. Feminist scholars have criticized this definition, as it leaves out the constant private traumas that are often a part of everyday life for women and minorities (see Brown, 1991). For Leo, sexuality is both private and public. This is often the case for sexual minorities, as Ann Cvetkovich (2003, pp. 31–33) states. All his sexual experiments happen in public, in parks and spas, yet everyone uses nicknames—"THE

SWALLOW," "THE EAR," "THE PEARL" (HA, 2)[7]—to protect their identity and to keep their privacy. During the camp years, private and public blend as men and women have sex behind thin curtains, yet for Leo, memories and thoughts of sex stay extremely private. He remembers "roving desire and gasping delight in the Alder Park and Neptune baths" (HA, 86)[8] and watches Russian workers shower, yet so discretely that "I forget why I'm looking. They would kill me if I remembered" (HA, 107.)[9] Leo's memories include joy and happiness, yet he is sure he would be killed if anyone were to find out about his thought. This makes it clear that what creates the trauma is not Leo's sexuality itself but what might happen to him because of it; the trauma has an anticipatory nature.

According to my interpretation, homesickness can be classified as one of the traumas Leo continues to suffer from throughout his life. It presents itself as a trauma symptom that forces the one experiencing it to live in the past: "we wanted to go home, but we contended ourselves with looking back, and didn't dare to yearn ahead." (HA, 248)[10] Peter Blickle has called homesickness "a forced process of individualization" which can make one dependent on the concept of home (Blickle, 2002, pp. 69; 71). In *Atemschaukel*, Leo thinks that he might have grown up during the night the train carrying prisoners crosses the border from Romania into Russian territory, that is, when he leaves his homeland for what could be for good. At the camp, Leo starts idealizing his former home as a sort of a perfect German *Heimat* (see Merivuori, 2021), and obsessively thinks about his parents and the familiar mountainous landscape—completely contradicting his former willingness, almost relief, to leave it behind. The longing he experiences is familiar and therefore evokes the feeling of being home; however, it also intensifies the feeling of homelessness, as it is experienced at the camp, which can never be a homelike *Heimat* (Bannasch, 2013, p. 354). Nevertheless, the familiar feelings lead to a point where the camp does become a sort of a home: "No one could have guessed—that only three years later I would be alone in the night, a man made of potatoes, and that what I would call my way home was a road back to a camp" (HA, 188.)[11] While at the camp, Leo receives word that his parents have had another son. To Leo this means that he has been replaced: in the space below the lines, he imagines a heartless message: "As far as I'm concerned you can die where you are, we'll have more room at home" (HA, 202).[12] He no longer has a place to go back to, so "home" as a concrete place is no more; homesickness, however, only grows. "Some say that homesickness loses its specific content, that it starts to smolder and only then becomes all-consuming, because it's no longer focused on a concrete home. I am one of the people who say that" (HA, 222).[13] When liberation finally comes, to Leo it is "hard to accept" (HA, 251)[14]—almost another forced exile. His "ownerless homesickness" (HA, 260)[15] follows him home, and stops him from building any connections to people or places he once knew.

Homesickness and hunger are deeply connected throughout the camp years and beyond. While at the camp, Leo thought home was just a place "where I once was full" (HA, 181),[16] but even that turns out not to be true, because together with homesickness, The Hunger Angel follows him home. "Even sixty years after the camp, eating still excited me greatly.—I've been taught by hunger and am unreachable out of humility, not pride" (HA, 233).[17] Eating is never again simple sustenance, as it sends Leo's mind back to camp every time and imprisons his body in the traumatic memory of starving. This emphasizes the corporal nature of trauma: it is not only a painful memory but also a bodily response. Nicholas Courtman (2021, p. 147) has emphasized the physical damage the prison camp has on Leo's body: instead of becoming the hardened and effective "new socialist man" that the Gulag system officially pursues to create, he becomes deformed, taking a form similar to the tools he works with. During the forced labor in the camp Leo has learned that "1 shovel load = 1 gram bread."[18] Shoveling is presented as a way to control hunger but I Leo's mind the shovel controls him: "the shovel is the master, and I am the tool. I submit to its rule." (HA, 76)[19] This change can be read as one of reasons Leo continues to feel homesick after getting back home; he has transformed into something that belongs to the camp. Labor and hunger keep being deeply connected in Leo's mind, and he continues to follow "Russian working norms" after the camp: when he finds work in a crate factory, the rule he followed at the camp morphs into "1 nail head = 1 gram bread" (HA, 272).[20] Ironically, his community sees this trauma-induced workaholism as something positive—while the reader can interpret Leo's "work ethic" as a trauma response, the other characters seem to view it as a sign suggesting that he is reintegrating into the society.

Hunger creates both mental and physical changes in Leo: bodily disidentification leads to a loss of selfhood and agency (Meretoja 2025, 84). Besides his "work ethic," hunger also distances him from other people, as he feels

unable to talk about it to those who have not shared his experiences. Similar issues surround Leo's memories of his sexuality and having to hide it: "I won't say any more, because when I speak, I only pack myself in silence a little differently, in the secrets of all the parks" (HA, 278).[21] The physical effects hunger has had on his body too connect Leo to memories of sex: "I was never ashamed in front of the others, only in front of my earlier self, remembering my days in the Neptune baths, when my skin was smooth and I was giddy from the lavender steam and the gasping delight" (HA, 224).[22] After getting home from the camp, Leo escapes his childhood home, its eyes and silences, into a marriage with a local woman called Emma. Their marriage lasts for 11 years, during which Leo frequently visits the park and the spa to meet men, hiding behind nicknames as he did before the camp. He has started to use the nickname "THE PLAYER," but after Emma uses it in a sentence, he changes into "THE PIANO"—from a subject into an object, as if continuing the change hunger started during the camp years. Later in life, Leo reflects on his past, and his need yet simultaneous inability to find companionship are intertwined with hunger: "I need much closeness, but I don't give up control.—Since the hunger angel, I don't allow anyone to possess me" (HA, 283).[23]

While Leo and Emma share a sort of understanding, fear catches on. After some of the men Leo has met are imprisoned, he emigrates to Vienna, Austria. "Dear Emma, / Fear is merciless. / I'm not coming back" (HA, 278),[24] he writes in his final note to his wife. The wording of the message emphasizes Leo's inability to verbalize his feelings, as both lines are borrowed from other people: "Fear is merciless" is something Emma herself once said, and "I'm not coming back" a negative version of Leo's grandmother's words—"I KNOW YOU'LL COME BACK"—before the camp. In Müller's writing, homesickness and involuntary exile are typical themes. However, in her writing, the feeling of otherness relates more often to the "original home": otherness in the new, strange culture is expected and therefore not as painful (Bannasch, 2013, p. 339). This seems to be true for Leo: there is less focus on homesickness once he leaves home. Loneliness, however, stays and intensifies once Leo deems himself too old for anonymous sex. He confines himself in solitude, with only objects as his partners, and seems to remain unaware of any positive changes relating to the rights of sexual minorities occurring throughout the time he lives in Vienna. This lack of a safe, equal romantic relationship(s) in Leo's life has sometimes been read as conveying homophobic undertones (see Schwarz, 2018, pp. 282–283); however, I disagree with this reading. I interpret Leo's chosen solitude as a trauma response, one stemming from the intersection of his lifelong fear of revealing who he is, and of his constant but never realized yearning for a home. Leo's isolation is not presented as a norm or as an example that sexual minorities should follow; it is an understandable depiction of what having to be afraid and dispossessed might do to an individual.

The sentence "I'm not coming back" appears to me as an intersection between all of Leo's traumas. Firstly, the reason he is leaving for good is that many of the men he knows from the meeting places of closeted gay people have recently been arrested, and Leo wants to avoid the same fate. Secondly, by reversing his grandmother's words that in the camp functioned as a connection between home and himself, he is renouncing the existence of home and in a way choosing a life where homesickness is forever present. Thirdly, the sentence reflects Leo's inability to ever truly come back from the camp—he carries the trauma of hunger and forced labor wherever he goes. At the end of the novel, Leo lists his "treasures"—objects he owns and simultaneously his traits, all of which cruelly say "THERE I'M STUCK" (282).[25]

4 | TRAUMA AND NARRATIVE IDENTITY

In Section 2, I introduced three conditions of a properly working narrative identity: *temporality*, *processuality*, and *dialogue with people and existing narratives*. I see narrative identity as a feature of all humans, although our awareness of it may fluctuate. When I refer to a "working" narrative identity, I mean that it includes all three attributes and that they are roughly in balance with each other; someone with a working narrative identity is able to reflect on their past and future, be in a dialogue with their surroundings, and change in relation to their circumstances and reflections. In this section, I analyze how the traumas Leo suffers from affect the three aspects of his narrative identity and therefore his sense of the possible. I argue that traumatic experiences that are never properly faced or treated lead to a situation where one's narrative identity stops working, rendering the person unable to move on from, change their perspective

of, or share their past. In Leo's case, this results in him living alone in a self-built museum of his traumatic past, with no windows to the evolving world and people around him. As stated in Section 2, I use Hannah Arendt's definition of the human condition as a combination of labor,[26] work, and action to clarify my understanding of the effects trauma might have on narrative identity.

In Arendt's (1958) definition, labor refers to repetitive tasks and fulfilment of physical needs; work to creation of objects and art; and action to human connections. The division between labor and work is, according to Arendt, "unusual" but "striking" (Arendt, 1958, p. 79). Labor is never-ending, needed to sustain life, yet a person being forced to only labor meant to be transformed into a "tame animal" and was "a faith worse than death" (Arendt, 1958, p. 84). In *Atemschaukel*, we see a transformation enforced by labor: "I am the tool" (HA, 76).[27] Nicolas Courtman points out that this transformation into an object-like being happens not only to Leo in his mind, but physically to other people as well: after working, the other inmates' "eyes and lips were as stiff and square as the blocks" (HA, 145)[28] and "lips tear like the cement-sack paper" (HA, 30)[29] (quoted in Courtman, 2021, p. 148). For Leo, the transformation happens both physically and metaphorically—as Marja-Leena Hakkarainen (2010, p. 429) points out, his identity is largely built on objects. When working with cement, he is "made of cement, too, and there is less and less of me" (HA, 33)[30]; when collecting potatoes, he turns into a "man made of potatoes" (HA, 188).[31] Leo and other people take their shape from objects around them and are therefore reduced to objects, completely under the authority of the camp leadership. As objects, the prisoners lose their ability to reflect on their lives and make changes in not only their conditions but also their self-perception—being forced to labor while starving and being therefore transformed into an object stops the processualism required of a properly working narrative identity.

For Arendt, one of the clearest distinctions between labor and work is the result—or the lack of a permanent one. Therefore, for example, producing food counts as labor as the need for food is endless, but art is work, since the completion of a work of art ends the need for work. While some of the projects the inmates in the Gulag work with have a physical result—a completed building or a railway track—for the inmates themselves it is unending labor, since they are moved on to the next project immediately. However, for Leo, labor is also art. "But when it comes to coal, the tool you use—the heart-shovel—turns logistics into artistry" (HA, 73),[32] he thinks, and later on claims that "every shift is a work of art" (HA, 160).[33] According to Hannah Vinter (2020, p. 134), this thought of labor as art can be seen as "an imaginative space that pushes back against the Gulag hierarchy." Both Vinter (ibid.) and Courtman (2021, p. 146) see the description of Leo and Albert Gion's shared work shift emulating the formatting of a play and therefore bringing a sense of artistic performance into the repetitive tasks they are required to do. However, in the kind of forced labor Leo and the other inmates perform, there is no room for development—the cycle of work repeats itself always in the same fashion without leaving room for learning, change, or new experiences. While seeing every shift as a work of art might help bear the repetitiveness, labor lacks the uniqueness of art—the same steps are performed, there are no acquired skills that might improve the quality or speed of work, and the result is no true result, as everything needs to be done again in the exact same way. Therefore, being stuck in labor lacks the temporality necessary for narrative identity to work. The labor tasks have no past, present or future, since they lack distinction from each other.

Leo poetically explains the effects of forced labor through his "treasures":

> The most burdensome of my treasures is my compulsion to work. It is the reverse of forced labor, an emergency exchange. In me sits a merciful compeller, a relative of the hunger angel.—He climbs into my brain, pushing me into the enchantment of compulsion, because I am afraid of being free.
>
> (HA, 283)[34]

Forced labor does not end because it enforces itself on Leo as a compulsion to work and forces him to stay who and what he was in the camp even years after liberation. The fact that Leo lists even some characteristics and memories of his as "treasures," a word which usually represents physical objects of value, highlights his dependence on objects. There seems to be no room for people nor abstractions since the camp; there, even "Hunger is an object" (HA, 134).[35] While people turn into objects, objects turn into people: when Leo receives a handkerchief from an old Russian

woman, he is certain that the words of his grandmother, "I KNOW YOU'LL COME BACK," have taken physical form in the handkerchief. "I'm not ashamed to say that the handkerchief was the only person who looked after me in the camp" (HA, 70).[36] As regularly happens in Müller's work, non-human things are humanized, yet people in their silence are dehumanized (see Shopin, 2018). Leo takes part in this: he avoids people who share his experiences from the camp and would rather talk to animals or objects. Immediately after liberation from the camp, he buys a notebook, in which he writes: "Will you understand me, question mark. By you I meant the notebook" (HA, 269).[37] Later, from his apartment in Vienna he sees a man walking a dog and thinks to himself: "The truth is I'd like to have a word with the dog. It would be good if the dog went on a walk by himself for once, or just with the vanilla bean and without the man" (HA, 284).[38] As happened in the camp, Leo continues seeing himself as an object, when, as I mentioned in Section 3, out of fear of being found out he changes his nickname from "the player" to "the piano" and later on thinks he has become "The piano that no longer plays" (HA, 280)[39]—an object that in its silence is practically useless.

Leo's willingness to see labor as art is echoed in his willingness to share his story, yet he ends up failing in both as the compulsion to work takes over and he keeps on carrying his "silent baggage." Leo's apartment in Vienna seems to have turned into a museum of his life—the exhibits of which, his "treasures," cannot be seen or touched per se, but that hold him imprisoned under their control. As "the piano that no longer plays" he is simply another broken object among the exhibition: unable to make music—or, to speak. There is solace to us readers in the fact that the novel we are reading acts as both—a work of art and a communication of traumatic memories. However, for Leo both remain unachievable. According to Hannah Vinter (2020, p. 122), the first sentences of the novel already imply Leo's difficulties in verbalizing his experiences, as they are rephrased multiple times and contradict each other: "All that I have I carry on me. / Or: All that is mine I carry with me. / I carried all I had, but it wasn't mine" (HA, 1).[40] This struggle to find words is present throughout the novel, but its emphasis during the first few chapters highlights the elliptical structure: Leo narrates the beginning of his own story from its end. "I carry silent baggage. I have packed myself into silence so deeply and for so long that I can never unpack myself using words. When I speak, I only pack myself a little differently." (HA, 3).[41] There is a strong sense of discouragement in the narrator, as he seems to have accepted the fact that words have failed. Curiously, the wording seems to imply that there is a possibility for "unpacking oneself into words"—but not for Leo.

Leo's unwillingness and inability to speak to people in his life both keep him locked in silence. In his old age, he lives in chosen solitude in an apartment in Vienna. This lack of connections to people and to the outside world as a whole lead to the complete loss of action, in Arendt's terms, and therefore to the loss of humanity. "A life without speech and without action — has ceased to be human life because it is no longer lived among men" (Arendt, 1958, p. 176). The lack of action is synonymous with the lack of dialogue, as it also leads to the absence of reflection—both self-reflection and reflection between self and cultural narratives. As narrative identity is built primarily through these reflections (Meretoja, 2018, p. 74), Leo's isolation becomes another obstacle between him and the possibility of healing by building a narrative identity that would include something else than traumatic memories. He does crave contact but stops himself from searching for it out of fear of being turned into property again: "I need much closeness, but I don't give up control. I'm a master of the silken smile even as I shrink back. Since the hunger angel, I don't allow anyone to possess me." (HA, 283)[42] All the trauma Leo has suffered has left him stuck in the past, alone and with no tools to change. As he states, "I was now free, but it was an immense personal disaster that I was irrevocably alone and a false witness against myself" (HA, 271).[43]

I argue that one of the main impacts trauma has on narrative identity through the loss of all three of its aspects is the diminishing of one's sense of the possible. In Leo's case, this is very clear, as can be seen through his "treasures" that he "cannot bear but also can't let go of" (HA, 282).[44] Those treasures symbolize the marks his past has left on him and keep him locked in that past with no way to escape. Leo's notion that "I can't protect myself by keeping silent and I can't protect myself by talking" (HA, 282)[45] bluntly describes the complete lack of possibilities in his life. While the reader is most likely aware that, for example, the treatment of sexual minorities has greatly changed from the 1940's to the early 2000's; that there are new ways to diagnose and treat post-traumatic stress, and that the novel's existence in itself shows that it is possible to write about traumatic experiences, Leo remains unaware of all this. While a properly crafted and growing narrative identity consists of many narratively mediated experiences that might even collide

in some ways (Meretoja, 2018, p. 63), in Leo's case the camp has taken over all possible space: "The camp stretches on and on, bigger and bigger, from my left temple to my right. So when I talk about what's inside my skull I have to talk about the entire camp." (HA, 282).[46] Traumatic memories of the camp have, in Leo's experience, physically taken over his brain and left no space for the present or future.

5 | CONCLUSION

According to my interpretation, *Atemschaukel* unfolds as a story of an individual left alone at the mercy of traumatic memories, which almost completely disable his narrative identity. It is a narration that according to its narrator should not exist, as he seems to abandon all hope of "unpacking his silent baggage." The whole novel carries a sense of hopelessness, "a distance deep within" (HA, 285); however, to the reader, there is an inkling of hope. While the narrator's sense of the possible is diminished, reading his story may increase the number of possibilities its reader sees. Herta Müller's work has often been studied in relation to how it describes authoritarian regimes and ordinary lives under them, experiences of exile, and relationships haunted by silence. *Atemschaukel* explores them all and adds to this the experience of someone belonging to a sexual minority.

Writing fiction about and therefore verbalizing issues common in our own world also carries ethical potential that academic studies can highlight. I have done this by focusing not only on individual traumas but their intersections, and showing how those overlapping traumas affect narrative identity, as understood through the lens of Hannah Arendt's philosophy. I have shown that narrative identity can be seen as an active feature of humans, one we can positively influence but also one that can be influenced from outside in a way that affects us negatively. I argue that a properly functioning narrative identity is a dialogically formed temporal process; that is, it requires the three attributes I presented in Section 2 of this article. In my analysis of *Atemschaukel*, I have shown that traumatic experiences and anticipatory traumas may negatively affect all three aspects of narrative identity and therefore result in diminishing one's sense of the possible.

My combination of feminist trauma studies, intersectional reading, and narrative hermeneutics opens up more thorough interpretations of narratives affected by intersecting issues. Thus, I have argued that while the core of Leo's traumatic memories lies within the labor camp, his traumas neither start nor stop there. He already suffered from homophobia before being imprisoned and continues to do so afterward; he experiences deep and disabling homesickness both in the camp and after liberation. These traumas intersect with each other, as to Leo, his sexuality is one of the reasons he feels different from others and can never truly belong. In the camp and from then on, everything falls under the shadow of the hunger angel—deep, all-consuming starvation, which alters Leo physically and leaves him yearning for food, love, and home. Analyzing the traumas together instead of focusing on one of them allows for a broader picture of their effects throughout the narrator's life.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Intersectionality the theory stems from the work of black female scholars and activists and is used to explain the complexity of different power relations related to social injustices, and how those influence societies and individuals (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020, pp. 2; 73). This history naturally affects my thinking; however, in this article, intersectionality is less related to power injustices and is rather used to describe how I read the overlapping and intersecting effects of different traumas often connected to social injustices.

[2] "Wie läuft man auf der Welt herum, wenn man nichts mehr über sich zu sagen weiß, als dass man Hunger hat." (A, 24–25.) The original German describes not simply facing the world, but more broadly acting in the world; it carries the sense that existing itself becomes difficult (or impossible).

[3] "Die Anteilnahme am Hunger der anderen ist null, mithungern kann man nicht." (A, 158).

[4] "Verbogene räudige Gestalten, nackt sahen wir aus wie ausgemustertes Arbeitsvieh. Geschämt hat sich keiner. Wovor soll mann sich schämen, wenn man keinen Körper mehr hat." (A, 235).

[5] "ich [habe] seitenlang, wie ein Triumph, das Eigenbrot und das Wangenbrot beschrieben. – – Beim Hungerengel kam ich ins Schwärmen" (A, 283).

[6] "absonderlich, dreckig, schamlos und schön" (A, 8).

[7] "DIE SCHWALBE," "DAS OHR," "DIE PERLE" (A, 8).

[8] "die streunende Lust und [das] schnappende[s] Glück im Erlenpark und im Neptunbad" (A, 96).

[9] "ich selbst nicht mehr weiß, warum. Die würden mich tötschlagen, wenn ich wüsste." (A, 117).

[10] "Man wollte zwar nach Hause, beließ es aber bei der Erinnerung nach hinten, man traute sich nicht in die Sehnsuch nach vorn." (A, 260.) The original German uses a passive structure, which makes the statement seem more like a general fact, not a shared experience.

[11] "Das hat sich die Mutter nicht vorstellen können — dass ich nur drei Jahre später allein in der Nacht ein Kartoffelmensch bin und meinen Rückweg in ein Lager Heimweg nenne." (A, 198).

[12] "Meinetwegen kannst du sterben, wo du bist, zu Hause würde es Platz sparen." (A, 213).

[13] "Manche sagen, das Heimweh verliert mit der Zeit seinen Inhalt, wird schwelend und erst recht verzehrend, weil es mit dem konkreten Zuhause nichts mehr zu tun hat. Ich gehöre zu denen, die das sagen." (A, 233).

[14] "unzumutbar" (A, 263).

[15] "herrenloses Heimweh" (A, 272).

[16] "wo ich früher einmal satt war" (A, 191).

[17] "Für mich ist das Essen auch 60 Jahre nach dem Lager eine groβe Erregung. — Ich bin vom Hunger belehrt und aus Demut unerreichbar, nicht aus Stolz." (A, 248).

[18] "1 Schaufelhub = 1 Gramm Brot." Repeated on multiple pages.

[19] "[Die Herzschaufel] ist mein Herr. Das Werkzeug bin ich. Sie herrscht, und ich unterwerfe mich." (A, 86).

[20] "1 Nagelkopf = 1 Gramm Brot" (A, 284).

[21] "Mehr sage ich nicht, weil ich mich, wenn ich rede, nur anders einpacke ins Schweigen, in die Geheimnisse aller Parks" (A, 290).

[22] "Vor der anderen schämte ich mich nie, nur vor mir, weil ich mich früher kannte mit glatter Haut im Neptun-bad, wo der Lavendeldampf und das schnappende Glück mich verwirrten." (A, 235).

[23] "Ich brauche viel Nähe, aber ich gebe mich nicht aus der Hand. – – Seit dem Hungerengel erlaube ich niemandem, mich zu besitzen." (A, 292).

[24] "Liebe Emma, / Angst kennt kein Pardon. / Ich komme nicht wieder." (A, 291).

[25] "DA KOMM ICH NICHT WEG" (A, 294).

[26] For the sake of continuity in style I use the UK spelling; Arendt, however, uses the US spelling "labor."

[27] "Das Werkzeug bin ich" (A, 86).

[28] "Augen und Lippen [waren] vom Starrhalten viereckig wie die Steine" (A, 154).

[29] "Lippen [zerreißen] wie Zementsackpapier" (A, 38).

[30] "doch aus Zement und werde auch immer weniger" (A, 41).

[31] "Kartoffelmensch" (A, 198), literally "potatohuman".

[32] "[B]eim Kohleabladen macht das Werkzeug, die Herzschaufel, die Logistik zur Artistik" (A, 82).

[33] "jede Schicht ist ein Kunstwerk" 28 (A, 168).

[34] "Der schwerste meiner Schätze ist mein Arbeitszwang. Er ist die Umkehr der Zwangsarbeit und ein Rettungstausch. In mir sitz der Gnadenzwinger, ein Verwandter des Hungerengels. – – Er steigt mir ins Hirn, schiebt mich in die Verzauberung des Zwangs, weil ich mich fürchte, frei zu sein." (A, 295).

[35] "Der Hunger ist ein Gegenstand" (A, 144).

[36] "Ich schäme mich nicht, wenn ich sage, das Taschentuch war der einzige Mensch, der sich im Lager um mich kümmerte." (A, 80).

[37] "Wirst du mich verstehen, Fragezeichen. Mit dem Du meine ich das Heft." (A, 281).

[38] "Im Grunde möchte ich einmal mit dem Hund reden. Es wäre gut, wenn der Hund einmal allein oder mit der Vanillestange unterwegs wäre, ohne den Mann." (A, 296).

[39] "Das Klavier, das nicht mehr spielt" (A, 292).

[40] "Alles, was ich habe, trage ich bei mir. / Oder: Alles Meinige trage ich mit mir. / Getragen habe ich alles, was ich hatte. Das Meinige war es nicht." 34 (A, 7).

[41] "Ich trage stilles Gepäck. Ich habe mich so tief und so lang ins Schweigen gepackt, ich kann mich in Worten nie auspacken. Ich packe mich nur anders ein, wenn ich rede." 35 (A, 9).

[42] "Mein gründliches Imstichlassen. Ich brauche viele Nähe, aber ich gebe mich nicht aus der Hand. Ich beherrsche das seidene Lächeln im Zurückweichen. Seit dem Hungerengel erlaube ich niemandem, mich zu besitzen." (A, 295).

[43] "Es war das große innere Fiasko, dass ich jetzt auf freiem Fuß unabänderlich allein und für mich selbst ein falscher Zeuge bin." (A, 283.) The different word order in the original German suggests that being free is also a part of the "immense personal disaster."

[44] "weder ausstehen noch loslassen kann" (A, 294–295).

[45] "Man kann sich nicht schützen, weder durchs Schweigen noch durchs Erzählen" (A, 294) The original German uses a passive structure, which makes the statement seem more like a general fact, not just a personal experience.

[46] "Immer mehr streckt sich das Lager vom Schläfenareal links zum Schläfenareal rechts. So muss ich von meinem ganzen Schädel wie von einem Gelände sprechen, von einem Lagergelände." (A, 294).

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