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## **DOCTORAL THESIS**

### **HISTORICAL IMAGISM AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE GERMAN LITERATURE PRODUCED IN ROMANIA: HERTA MÜLLER AND JOACHIM WITTSTOCK, A CASE STUDY**

**- SUMMING-UP -**

Scientific research in the field of German literature produced in Romania is a central preoccupation for many present-day philologists. Theoreticians active in this particular field often choose an interdisciplinary approach, considering that the new scientific paradigm often crosses the boundaries of the simple interpretative method. The present paper aims at being a contribution to the research of German literature produced in Romania from the perspective of cultural studies. The analytical process undertaken is meant as a contribution to the research of German literature in our country from the vantage point of literary sociology.

The self-declared aim of the present thesis is to establish the social significance of the aforementioned type of literature, as well as to highlight the aspects connected to the way history is narrated in works of fiction. Moreover, we have tried to identify in how far the literature produced by the German minority in Romania contributed to the continuity of this ethnic group's identity structures by means of authentic representations of identity within this mode of cultural expression.

Without being an exhaustive study of the subject matter at hand, our scientific research has focused primarily on the literary works of two writers whom we consider highly representative for German literature produced in Romania after 1945: Herta Müller and Joachim Wittstock.

Consequently, the literary works we have singled out for discussion and analysis should rather be assessed as case studies, because the theoretical framework applied to the present thesis can be adapted to various other contexts. Going beyond a limited analysis of the thematic contents, we have attempted to highlight certain aspects related to the creation and reception of the selected works.

The historical context, the autobiographical dimension and the thematic references of the works analyzed are but a few of the relevant aspects which characterize our scientific undertaking.

The motivation that underlies the research process is the candidate's own didactical curiosity. Having taught the history and cultural heritage of the German minority in Romania to secondary school students we have repeatedly noticed the lack of scientific studies which highlight the importance of literary productions in defining the cultural heritage of Germans in Romania, most studies focusing on traditions, customs, feasts and musical productions and scarcely on the literary dimension of this ethnic group. Being ourselves active in the field of historical research we aimed to determine in how far these literary works can be regarded as historical sources, the present research project being the result of this interrogation.

The thesis is made up of two distinct sections. The first one is dedicated to the theoretical framework, which has been selected and adapted to the needs of the analysis at hand, with the aim of reaching complex conclusions to our scientific undertaking. Thus, various instances of cultural theory have been analyzed, the focal point of our endeavor being to establish the place of German literature produced in Romania within the context of Romanian societal culture.

The first chapter defines the domain of scientific research as well as the key terms of analysis and the theoretical framework in view of highlighting relevant aspects of our undertaking, that is of the representation of history and of identity structures in works of fiction. Due to the complexity of the research field under scrutiny certain limitations had to be taken into account, and consequently only a part of the aforementioned authors' works was selected.

After a thorough assessment of the theoretical frameworks relevant to our concerns, we have decided upon the theory of actions materialized in the American sociologist Talcott Parsons's AGIL scheme. This scheme consists in the categorial delimitation of the actions of social subjects thereby enabling us to also assess the function of various aspects present in the literary works under analyzed.

In this sense mention has to be made of the fact that the theoretical framework that underlies the analysis of the two authors' works can easily be transferred to the literary output of other German writers in Romania who dwell upon historical and identity-related issues.

Ways of narrating history in works of fiction and the limitations thereof constitute the concerns of the second chapter. The ideological confrontation between historians and writers is ongoing and it is only in a few isolated cases that one can speak about a consensus regarding the legitimacy of the two parts in recreating the past through writing.

The two principal means of mirroring history through artistic creation are either the taking over of information from documentary sources, or by the inclusion of autobiographical elements in the literary work. But even in the case of a literary construction of history one has to consider certain limitations brought about by the very peculiarities of fiction-writing. The risk of presenting a past event through a limited perspective is even greater when one considers that oral or written accounts of individuals who have witnessed the horrors of war first-hand are often inevitably characterized by subjectivity.

In spite of this, a close look at the way historical data is translated into fiction can certainly prove an efficient method of perceiving individual history, as this literary genre focuses on isolated destinies and not history on a macrodimensional level.

The second chapter ends with a series of methodical considerations related to the analysis of historical themes in the German literature produced in Romania and with the highlighting of this literature's peculiarities.

The following chapter focuses on a further object of analysis: identity construction as mirrored by German fiction produced in Romania. In the beginning of the chapter we briefly offer an account of the complex relationship between writing and identity along history and the way in which literature has helped to consolidate identity structures within the collective consciousness. Furthermore, our endeavor also focuses on the importance of identity construction in fiction in view of building up identity structures truthful to everyday realities.

The second part of Chapter Three contains a series of aspects related to the past of the German minority in Romania. A historical mapping-out of the central events leading to the identity construction of Germans in Romania from the beginnings through WW II and the Communist era and concluding with the 1990s and beyond (a period that coincides with the exodus of this population) offers a broader understanding of the details related to the evolution of identity structures within this ethnic minority. The way in which German literature contributed to the continuity of these structures makes up the concluding part of this section.

The first three chapters form the theoretical part of the thesis which will be applied to practical findings in the second section of the paper.

Chapters four to seven represent the analysis proper within our scientific undertaking and highlight the practical findings we have reached by applying the theoretical framework and methodology to the selected literary works. Although the analysis is focused on the thematic dimension of the works, we have chosen a chronological approach, in view of a more accurate perspective on the subject matter discussed.

Chapter Four sets off with an analysis of WW II realities as mirrored in Joachim Wittstock' novel *Ascheregen* (En. *Ashen Rain*). Here we have chosen to focus not only on historical aspects but also on the work's multicultural dimension. The analysis of this novel thus reveals two important aspects: the historical realities of the war years, materialized first and foremost in the

generation gap between old and young Romanian Saxons, and the intercultural relations typical of the Transylvanian area.

We have also attempted to offer a double perspective, a parallel view related to the deportation of Romanian Germans to the Soviet Union at the end of WW II, in January 1945. Herta Müller describes the fate of young Leopold Auberg, deported to the Soviet Union at the age of seventeen and the devastating effects of this traumatic experience in her novel *Atemschaukel* (En. *The breath-cradle*). Joachim Wittstock, on the other hand, focuses in his novel *Bestätigt und besiegelt* (En. *Confirmed and sealed*) on the fate of those who escaped these terrors, but for whom the temporary or permanent loss of loved ones as a result of deportation represents a painful cesura in their daily lives. Both writers offer images of the despair and lack of orientation that individuals experience in the new context.

The ones forcefully sent to Soviet work camps fight for survival, gradually renouncing all manifestations of human individuality and thus of their own identity, an attitude brought about by the harsh living conditions they need to adapt to. Herta Müller makes excellent use of writer Oskar Pastior's first-hand accounts in the novel *Atemschaukel*, which is based on the latter's experiences.

In the meantime, the ones left behind helplessly witness the gradual dissolution of the German community, as perceived by the notary of the town of Cîsnădie, Thomas Böhm. Novelist Joachim Wittstock makes again use of documentary sources for inspiration, but at the same time also for illustrating in a realistic manner the tragedy of the German minority brought about by the instauration of the Communist regime in Romania. The novel *Bestätigt und besiegelt* is in this sense a historical view of the past but also an authentic description of the identity and alterity dissolution process undergone by Transylvanian Saxons in the aftermath of 1945.

The next two chapters focus on the two writers' novels dealing with the Communist period from its onset in the 1950s up to its collapse in 1989. Chapter Five focuses on Wittstock's fictionalized experiences as a university student in Cluj Napoca during the time span 1965-1961. The novelist offers a bird's eye

view of his years of study, characterized by the ongoing oppressions of a regime that controls all societal and existential levels and of the way in which those active in academic circles, be they educators or students, try to cope with the new realities. The novel *Die uns angebotene Welt* has thereby not only literary, but also profound historical value, being modeled on an individual account of historical events re-lived after a long period of time.

In the case of Herta Müller the means of illustrating everyday life in the Communist era has completely different connotations considering that the writer produces her novels shortly after her emigration from Romania. Her perceptions are not distorted by temporal distance and the traumatic experiences are still vivid in the consciousness of the Nobel prize laureate. These aspects have undoubtedly influenced the sharp tone of Müller's writings that illustrate the Communist regime.

The novel *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger* (En. *Back then the fox was already the hunter*) narrates the experiences of an individual terrorized by the Securitate in different ways prior to 1989 in order to transform her into an obedient member of society. Harrassment, cross-interrogation, threat and treason are the leitmotifs within this thematic frame taken up by Herta Müller in her three novels produced in the 1990s. We cannot however speak about thematic recurrence or monotonousness here, as the writer exposes the horrors of totalitarianism on various levels of perception. In the case of the aforementioned novel the protagonist experiences the traumas of dictatorship caused by the abuses of the oppressive apparatus to both the protagonist's consciousness and to secondary characters in the novel.

Chapter Six deals only with Müller's novels *Herztier* (En. *Sentimental Animal*) and *Heute wäre ich mir lieber nicht begegnet* (En. *I wish I wouldn't have met myself today*) both of which are modeled on the conceptual pair individual-community. If in *Herztier* the thematic concern is centered on the conflict between the oppressive forces and a group of friends, in the second novel we witness an account of psychic terror brought about by the intense cross-interrogation of a protagonist apparently dangerous to the regime, but who in fact

cannot threaten the existing order because she is reduced to an all-encompassing state of fear.

The reader may expect a different destiny in the case of the first novel where group cohesion hints at a social structure much fitter to fight political injustice than isolated individuals. Efficient methods of hiding hostility towards the system are counterbalanced by even more efficiency on part of the Securitate officers, the main supporters of the regime.

The last chapter of our analytical endeavour is centered on the theme of emigration and on the effects of such a decision on the individual. In this sense we have analyzed two collections of short stories by Herta Müller, one of these being *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt* (En. *Man is a big joke in the world*) having been written shortly before the author's departure from Romania, whereas *Reisende auf einem Bein* (En. *One-legged travelers*) is the only work produced in Federal Germany where the narration takes place in the host country and where the author illustrates the protagonist's incapacity of adaptation to the new social context.

In the first of the aforementioned novels we come across descriptions of a typical village of the Banat Swabians, dominated by the abusive manifestations of the local authorities who take advantage of the desperate desire of many Germans to leave the country subjected to Communist rule. Bribe and sexual blackmail are detailed at a grotesque level, while the individuals subjected to such inhumane treatments gradually disintegrate on the level of personal identity due to resignation and lack of vision in a desolating community.

The last literary work discussed in this context is *Reisende auf einem Bein*. Here the author creates a picture of desolation caused by the protagonist Irene's failure to adapt to a new social context. The trauma totalitarian Romania has made her suffer renders her unable to see past the material and spiritual limitations of totalitarian oppression. Consequently, not even in midst of an apparently open-minded society is the protagonist able to leave the burden of the past behind and to embrace a new beginning.

Chapter Eight sums up the concluding remarks of this thesis related to our findings regarding German literature produced in Romania. We once more dwell upon the theoretical framework and the research methodology and their efficiency both within the present scientific undertaking and in view of their possible application to future research projects.

The scientific preoccupations in this research area have naturally led to an interdisciplinary approach of the literature produced by Romanian Germans. From this perspective the conclusion naturally arises that any study which aims at capturing the multifaceted nature of this mode of cultura expression can only be of a multi- and interdisciplinary character.

The present doctoral thesis represents an element of novelty in the field of studies of German literature produced in Romania, primarily due to its application and adaptation of the theoretical framework employed. We hope that by our scientific endeavour we have contributed to an increased visibility of German literature produced in Romania among exegetes and researchers alike. Simultaneously we wish our undertaking to be the pathway towards a more profound analysis of the subject matter from an interdisciplinary perspective, not only in view of offering a picture of Romania as a multicultural society, but also for the overall enrichment of German literature world-wide.

### **Keywords:**

German literature produced in Romania, Herta Müller, Joachim Wittstock, history, identity, fiction, social history, cultural studies, intercultural approach, AGIL scheme, World War II, post-war epoch, deportation, communism, emigration

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