



Gabriel Liiceanu, Herta Müller

When personal integrity is not enough

Herta Müller and Gabriel Liiceanu discuss language and dissidence

Herta Müller has publicly criticized Romanian intellectuals for their passivity during the Ceausescu regime. Talking to the publisher and philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu in Bucharest in October 2010, the novelist and Nobel laureate defended her often unpopular view that the preservation of personal intellectual integrity alone was inadequate as a form of political resistance.



Gabriel Liiceanu: Can I suggest we start with the text you have read, *Atemschaukel*?¹ You say at one point: "but hunger stayed like a dog in front of a bowl and gorged itself". Being a writer means seeing a relationship between things that nobody else does, capturing a nuance in things that nobody else does, establishing a relationship between them and words in a way nobody else does. To my mind, a writer is a privileged being who manages to name relationships between

things in a way nobody else has done before. This is why I am tempted to say that a writer opens up a relationship with the world that did not exist before. He or she is a *Vorläufer*, a trailblazer. And yet, I get the impression that, on more than one occasion, you have refused to concede that a writer has this exceptional role to play.

Herta Müller: I believe that every person is a unique individual in the world and has a unique relationship with that world. Each and every person. And everything each one of us does we do differently, because we have no other option. You can test that with writers because their job is to write things down — and this is something you can see for yourself and discuss. In the case of other people, things and ideas do not get expressed on the outside so we can't see them. That's the difference. I have met so many sensitive people in all walks of life, doing all sorts of jobs, and I have never thought that I am capable of seeing something which these people who do not write cannot. Language, if it is capable of expressing life, is the language of those who do not write, and I have to use their language. If I write their language in a certain way, then I produce what we call literature, poetry, poetic atmosphere.

GL: This means that some of us — those who, for example, have seen in your novel *Atemschaukel* a new way of joining words, a shock that language provokes in the reader for the first time — we have been mistaken. Let us talk about something else. Let us talk about "serious stuff".

Would you accept that some of the things which have concerned you, and from which your obsessions have been born, have also concerned others, some of us? Early on in your collection of essays entitled *Der König verneigt sich und tötet*,² you quote Jorge Semprun: "Homeland is not the language you speak but what you say". And this is your comment: "Jorge Semprun knows that, in order to belong to a community, you need to have a minimum of inner consensus about what is communicated through speech". Neither you, nor I, nor many, many other Romanians of our generation, have achieved this inner consensus during our lives. If we have never identified with what has been said publicly, with the official discourse, then what has been our homeland? Have we had a homeland? Aren't we — all those from whom what is said through language has been stolen, those who have found themselves within a public discourse they have never identified with — without a homeland?

HM: I would make a distinction here. "Homeland" is a word that has been overused for ideological purposes. Whether in German history, National Socialism, the Stalinism of East Germany, or in the other socialist countries, this word has been used very often. "Home" means a lot less but also a lot more: if you feel at home I think that is enough. I cited Semprun because I have often met German writers at lectures or symposia who thought it was interesting to say that language was their homeland. And I got angry. I asked myself: "Who the hell questions this homeland?" Never in their lives have they had any kind of problem with their homeland. Those born in the West in the 1950s were not asked if they loved their homeland or not, they could leave the country and return. This phrase "homeland is language" was created by immigrants during National Socialism, by those who fled Hitler's dictatorship. With Semprun, I realised he knew what this meant — because he too had been in exile during Franco's regime, then he fought against the Nazis in France, and then he went incognito to Spain several times using false names. So he knows what this is about. The common language belongs to me as well — through my life, through birth. But if this language is inimical to my life, what use is it to me? It shows me even more how much I am not at home in it.

This notion of "being at home" has its opposite too. The German word for homeland, *Heimat*, signifies something you cannot stand but cannot leave. You can leave with your feet but you carry everything in your head — because a lot of things have happened and all the difficult moments you have been through are too great to ignore. Whether you like it or not, that stupid homeland will accompany you and torture you, even where you've gone to save your life. Often, when I'm abroad, homeland as "home" comes to mind. I was once in Barcelona when some public festival happened to be taking place. I didn't know what festival it was, I asked a few people but they didn't know either. People of all generations were dancing in a square. They had put their bags and shoes in a pile in the middle and had put on their dancing shoes. They were dancing to folk music, but it was very nice music. At moments like these I burst into tears because I realize that there are many people in this world who have never had to leave their country, who have been able to keep something they can take for granted, something that they do not have to question. Because if you have to question your homeland when you want to have a discussion, then something is not right.



GL: What I asked you was whether those of us who stayed home without having a home of our own represent a new mode of being, at least in the twentieth century? What happens to a whole

generation who have never felt at home precisely because they did not identify with the language that was supposed to give them public expression? They did not go anywhere, did not taste the joy of putting on dancing shoes and dancing to music in the public square. Are they traumatised?

HM: The fact that you stayed here is a completely different matter: you are in Romania, you were born here and you have stayed here, with all the things that came with it. I lived through almost all of those things until 1987 and then that was it, they threw me out. I could not return now, it would be an illusion. The history of exile has always been like this: you do not return the way you left. Not because you don't want to, but because you've had to change in the place you went in order to sort out your life, to know what you are doing with yourself. You return, but things have been cut short, the thread doesn't exist anymore, you cannot continue. Maybe it's an illusion, maybe envy too. This is not about me, exile is an enormous loss for any country. And it's usually those with integrity, those who cannot take it any longer, those who are sensitive, who are the first ones to try and leave.

GL: Sometimes even some of the sensitive ones stay...

HM: Romanians stayed in their country because there were too many of them for the context in which they lived to be unravelled. Most of the Germans of Romania, on the other hand, have left. The German culture of Romania belongs to the past, it is history. There are just a few old lonely people left in villages. Care homes are the future of the German minority in this country. If I wanted to come and continue something here, I would have nothing and nobody to do it with. It would be impossible. All the Germans who once lived in this place are now in some other part of the world. This sometimes pains me, but at other times I tell myself that I was lucky. No doubt I was lucky to have left Romania. I don't know what I would have continued to do in Romania, I don't know if I would be here today having written a few books. And yet, it annoys me that my luck has been a reversal of misfortune. It could have been otherwise. I know a lot of people who left and who have not made it in life; they have remained stuck and weren't able to find a place for themselves. There have been tragedies too. I have also been very lucky because of this profession of mine: I write. Others have been left forever wandering.

GL: This "banal" profession...

HM: Yes. This profession in which I only have myself to deal with. Others who have normal professions are tied to circumstances. They have to have a diploma, to be qualified, to find a job. This is what happens with most professions that don't belong to the so-called arts, or at least those arts that you

can practise alone.

GL: By asking you that question I was trying to get inside your condition as member of an ethnic minority, and to suggest that many of us felt as though we were also part of a minority. It would be good if you accepted us, but if you won't, we will find another way.

HM: When I was in trouble and quarrelled with the dictatorship, I would have liked to see that there were many of us... But the majority kept quiet, did not protest, so there was no minority to be seen. And that bothered me.

GL: I won't reply because we will get stuck on this point and there are also other things on my mind. In the same collection of essays — *Der König verneigt sich und tötet* — there is one entitled "In our country, Germany" in which you say: "As I write I have to keep myself in the place where I was hurt the most." But what if that hurt of yours no longer interests anyone? I ask you this because I too have felt the exasperation of those around me when I used to speak about what I went through before 1990. "Why are you so dour?" is the question I have heard hundreds of times since then. All your books are about the terrible things you experienced in Romania during the 1980s: interrogations, homes violated, friends tortured, others assassinated.

You say somewhere: "My friend, the civil engineer, who in 4–5 years' time — he was 28 — would be hanged and who today comes up as a suicide in the official records". What do we do if people don't want to take the horrible things that have happened to others as their points of reference in life? Have you accepted that, in your literature, you may pass through a territory that others do not or no longer want to visit?

HM: If I write about these problems, I do it first of all for myself. Because I have no other choice. I have to put my past life into order so as to be able to live the one I have now. I neither want to nor am able to force anyone to take part in this. A book cannot force anyone to read it. If somebody picks it up and sees that it is no good to them, he or she can throw it away. When it comes to a book, every person is free and can behave as he or she sees fit. But I don't know that those who want to confront this problem are so few in number. I think there are quite a lot of them. Once the dictatorship was gone, and this could have been anywhere (look at Germany after the Nazi period), there were many who still supported the regime. But still, they were a minority. And why shouldn't it be so? If 99.9 per cent of the population, any population, had not taken part in the dictatorship (either by doing what they had to do, or by shutting up, or by keeping themselves to themselves), that dictatorship could not have existed. And we know that many people enjoyed advantages, held positions, led a good life in a way that depended on the dictatorship. It does not surprise me that these people today don't want to say that the dictatorship was a historical crime. Because they would then have to question their own past. From an individual point of view, nobody can force you to do that. But I think that, for society as a whole, it is important. If these problems are not discussed in a way that heals society, they will not disappear, they will remain below everything else and erupt or surface when you least expect it.

I have no choice but to write. If one doesn't have to write, why should one? There are so many books in this world, nobody can read them all. Nobody is waiting for another book. If I didn't have to do all this for myself, in order to keep myself together, I wouldn't do it. I don't want to be a writer, this isn't the reason I write. I just have no choice, or rather, it wasn't I who chose. I didn't

choose the life I had in Romania, nor did I wish for it. Every second I tell myself I would rather have never written a word. I would have liked to have a different profession, to do something else in life and not have all those things happen to me. This is it. And if one day I no longer need to get myself together, then I won't write anymore. I hope that moment will come. Writing is not a pleasure for me, I do not enjoy writing. I only write reluctantly and after much hesitation, because I know how it constrains me, and I always know that I have to face it. And sometimes I don't feel like facing it, staring at the blank page and looking for words. It consumes me and it would be good if I didn't need it anymore.

GL: Lets move to the West. There is a gulf which separates eastern from western intellectuals, who have not experienced repression. As you explicitly put it: "Their heads are full of books not one of which has helped them grasp even fractionally what the lack of freedom means." Are we condemned to this gulf, to this eternal misunderstanding? How do you deal with your western colleagues, whose heads are full of books but who know nothing about the lack of freedom? How do you entertain a dialogue with them? How have you entertained a dialogue with them over the past 20 years?

HM: I do not entertain a dialogue with everyone. If opinions are so different that we can't meet anywhere, there is no point. In the West, in general, there is this belief that you have to talk to everyone about everything and that if you have talked long and profoundly enough then you can clarify everything and find harmony. This isn't true. I often quite simply say "there is no point in my talking with X or Y". But it doesn't all depend on whether somebody has known dictatorship or not in his or her own lifetime. There are people who have not experienced dictatorship but are interested in this problem and understand it. Equally, there are people who have lived through dictatorship and don't understand a thing.

GL: If you had been born in Germany, and had not had the experience you have had here, would you have understood less? Would you have felt less about life and death? Has it been worth paying the price of suffering for a superior understanding of the world?

HM: I have said this before: I do not possess a superior understanding of the world. In fact, I do not possess any understanding of this world, let alone a superior one. I do not understand the world. I do not understand. That is why I write, because I do not understand. As for the price, it was not worth anything. A person's suffering, life itself, is the most precious thing there is. Nothing justifies the degradation of another, nothing justifies someone wanting to look at a zoo, to stand in front of a cage and think "I am more sensitive and have an extraordinary mind and I watch the common people to see how they behave." I haven't a clue. I belong among those in the cage, I am not standing outside the bars watching. I don't even understand what I have done. When I was in Romania, if I started every night to think about what had happened during the day, I couldn't get my head round it. I couldn't even afford to think within a wider time span. The exact, tiny things which kept accumulating were enough for me. I couldn't think, I had to cope, and this absorbed everything I could come up with in my head. I think literature too is a way of searching. What is this existence of ours? We are all a mystery, even in our own body: we do not know how long we will live, which body organs will fail us, when our mind will go. So this is enough. That is why it was so tragic, because alongside all these existential problems, which automatically concern us all, the dictatorship introduced the political surveillance that you had to fight against. I didn't

understand a thing. That's why I keep trying to ask myself: what happened back then? All I have understood is that freedom is important.

GL: When you say about western intellectuals that "their heads are full of books and they haven't grasped at all what lack of freedom means", you automatically distinguish between those whom the world has placed in extreme situations and those who have lived on the surface of life, who have had an easy, pleasant existence. And nobody reproaches them for that, it was their historical luck. In fact, what I wanted to ask you was whether people who have lived through a harsh history have understood more about life than those who have had the luck to live through a clement history.

HM: I think we can only talk at an individual level. If we think about the nostalgia for communism, which exists in all eastern European countries, how do we explain it? Why this nostalgia, if people are supposed to have learned something from living under a dictatorship? Some have not learned anything because they were part of that system, and don't like to say that they were a part of it. And there are others who *have* learned something. It depends on the individual person, on his or her moral values, what he or she is told and what he or she is willing to accept.

GL: Your literature is paradoxically born out of your belief that there is a disconnect between thoughts and words. You said at one point: "Thought speaks to itself in a completely different way than words". Words say precise things, while thoughts are a "silent, muddled race inside one's head. Besides, words cannot express essential or convoluted things." This means that you start writing precisely at the moment when you believe that words have lost their power. You engage in a fight that seems lost from the outset. How do you manage to write?

HM: I force words to help me say what I think I want to say. It is only when I start a sentence that I find out what it has to say. I realise as I go along. So I have to somehow make words help me and I have to keep searching until I think I have found something acceptable. Writing has its own logic and it imposes the logic of language on you. There is no more "day" and "night", "outside" and "inside". There is subject, verb, metaphor, a certain way of constructing a phrase so as to give it rhythm — these are the laws that are imposed on you. On the one hand, language is something which tortures me, doesn't give me peace, forces me to rack my brains until I can't do it any longer; and on the other hand, when I do this, it actually helps me. It is an inexplicable vicious circle. Right now, sitting here, I'm not a writer. I'm a writer only when I'm alone with myself. What we are doing here is a different profession: it's a circus!

GL: Can I suggest we end this circus with a difficult problem? You have frequently spoken about the apolitical stance taken by Romanian writers during communism and you have pointed at this as being dishonourable. I would like to ask you what you understand by political commitment in a totalitarian society, where being politically committed meant one thing: becoming a party activist or mimicking phrases from the official language. Some of us were naïve enough to think that, by failing to behave and talk as we were supposed to and thus flouting the basic rule of a repressive society, we were politically committed. Now you come and tell us that this refusal to prostitute our language was not enough. That this way of writing differently from the way we were supposed to write, of speaking differently from the way we were supposed to speak, of never using words against our own conscience, didn't

constitute political commitment. Indeed, judging by some of the things you have said, I even start to think that this was a culpable failure.

HM: It's not me who has to see that it wasn't enough. You have to see it too.

GL: I asked you what political commitment other than dissidence looks like in a repressive regime.

HM: If we compare Romania to other eastern European countries which had the same political regime (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, even East Germany), we see that in most countries those who dared to say something were in greater numbers. As far as Romania is concerned, there was no organized dissidence to speak of. There were just a few individual cases: Radu Filipescu, the priest Calciu-Dumitreasa, Paul Goma when his turn came. They were left to their own devices. Who supported them? In other countries there were dissident movements and samizdat literature. There was nothing in Romania. Those who dared raise their heads were left to their own devices. When I was in Timisoara, an Orthodox priest came to collect money. He rang all the door bells. He had come to ask for the church tax. I told him: "Come to me only when you want to collect money for the [dissident] priest Calciu." He ran away! He didn't even wait for the lift. He ran scared down the stairs, all the way from the fifth floor, as though he had seen an apparition. We now also know about the things the Church did during the communist regime. Compare it with Poland or East Germany, where there were movements within the Church and the Church sought to maintain its integrity.

GL: Did you think of yourself as a dissident whilst in Romania?

HM: No. The label "dissident" is applied to you externally. I wanted to have a normal life, not to do things for which I cannot be responsible. I was disgusted with all the apparatchiks, all the nonentities I came across in the factory, at meetings... Even when you went to the shops or to the post office or to pay the electricity bill, they treated people as though they were, you'll forgive me, pieces of shit. That is what hurt me.

GL: It hurt many of us and many of us were disgusted.

HM: This is the reason why I could not do otherwise. I didn't *do* anything, I just could not take it any longer, and I told them: "Gentlemen, you disgust me". What else could I have done? I couldn't have served a society which disgusted me. I felt sorry for people. I even worked in a factory, I was lucky — or unlucky — enough to end up in a place where most intellectuals did not. Because they kept firing me everywhere I worked, I ended up in places where I was able to learn about the things that concern normal people. I almost lost my head when I saw the conditions they lived and worked in. The factory room had no window panes, it was cold, they worked on the assembly line. They had to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning to get to work because they lived in the countryside. They had to have a drink in the morning so they could make it through the day and so their hands wouldn't freeze. There were power cuts and they would spend all day there "to fulfil the plan". But was it "the plan" that mattered when the regime was humiliating people? When I saw all this, of course I started quarrelling: with the director, the janitor (who was arrogant), I quarrelled with everyone and everywhere where I thought things were wrong.

GL: But this has happened to many of us.

HM: You should have got angry! Why did you not get angry? I got angry every day and that was all. And the Securitate did not like it.

GL: You know, I too was angry and sad. What I want to say is that when you question the lack of political commitment in a totalitarian society, then you have to imagine that each of us has lived his or her own adventure, and that many have been able to cross over to the other side without sullyng ourselves. If every one of us told his or her own story (and some of us already have), then things would turn out to be less simple than they sometimes seem. Are those who respected their relationship with language, who did not let themselves enter the equation which destroyed language, who never borrowed the official language, are they the "hangers on" you refer to? Don't you think that every book — a clean, good, wonderful book — born during those times was a way of saying "no" to the world in which we lived?

HM: No, it was a way of evading it. I don't accuse anybody apart from those who produced literature "made to order", but what you are asking me to praise seems to me too little.

GL: I did not ask you to praise it, I just asked you not to accuse it.

HM: It was a way of staying true to oneself but it was too little, it did not oppose the dictatorship. The fact that those people did not sully themselves was a personal matter. But it was not something that was going to bother Ceausescu and the *Securitate*, which was everywhere. I don't think the dictatorship would have been able to become as sinister as it did had many opposed it. After all, nowhere else in eastern Europe did people have to take their typewriter to the police, every year, and request a permit to use it.

GL: Did you go?

HM: Of course I went.

GL: I didn't.

HM: You were a dissident!

GL: So I discover. Why did you go?

HM: So I could use the typewriter. So they wouldn't tell me the next day that they were going to arrest me because I had used it.

GL: You should have been a dissident, taken the risk, and not suffer the humiliation.

HM: Maybe I wasn't even a dissident. Maybe the others were, those who wrote books using a pure language. I didn't even want to be a dissident. I tried to live in such a way so as not to have to be responsible for what I didn't do, and not do what disgusted me in others. That was enough.

At one point I worked in a nursery. The children had to sing the national anthem, which was getting longer and longer. The worse the country got, the more stanzas they would add to the national anthem. I arrived there after a period of unemployment and was out of touch. I thought that things would be better in a nursery, that because the children were younger you would be able to do certain things there, that the authorities would leave you alone. But it

turned out to be just as bad. They sang the anthem in the morning and the director said: "First we sing the anthem, comrade". On the first day I taught the children a little song, *Schneeflöckchen, Weissröckchen*. It's a winter song, and all day long we sang *Schneeflöckchen* and *Weissröckchen*, and again, *Schneeflöckchen* and *Weissröckchen*. The children weren't used to this, I had to explain to them why snowflakes wear snow dresses. They had never heard anything like it. For years they had only been taught ideological drivel, poems about their mother where the name "Elena" would pop up in the third stanza, you didn't expect it to appear after the first few stanzas but it always did eventually. And I did not want to sing the anthem the next day. I asked them: "Can you still remember the *Schneeflöckchen* and *Weissröckchen* song?" But a child told me: "First we have to sing the anthem, comrade." So I said "Sing it then". And they gathered in a semicircle, stretched their arms along their bodies like soldiers, and started shouting the anthem. I felt like crying. They were so young and already so well drilled. After two stanzas I said "very well, that's enough." But another child said: "Comrade, we have to sing the anthem till the end." So I said "Sing it then." After they were finished, they asked me: "Our other comrade teacher used to sing along with us. Why didn't you?" I said: "I am tone-deaf, I can't sing, and I kept quiet so I can hear you better." But for me it was devastating to see that, at that age, those children were already being manipulated in a way I could not have imagined.

GL: Those children are 25 years old now.

HM: Yes. They might not have recovered from that manipulation. They might never do so. It depends on what they are being told now by their parents, grandparents and by all those who lived through those times.

GL: So this circus tonight has a point after all. It may tell them something.

HM: I don't know, maybe.

Bucharest, October 2010

¹ Herta Müller, *Atemschaukel*, Hanser Verlag 2009. Unpublished English title, "Everything I Possess I Carry with Me".

² Herta Müller, *Der König verneigt sich und tötet*, Hanser Verlag 2003. Unpublished English title, "The King Bows Down and Kills".

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