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Transfer-images in the literature of migration:

Herta Müller and Cătălin Dorian Florescu

Summary

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Summary:

The proposed research, entitled *Transfer-images in the Literature of Migration: Herta Müller and Cătălin Dorian Florescu*, sets out to investigate the imaginary of writers who transit spaces by identifying narrative structures and ideas that constitute, on the one hand the malignity of the communist landscape, depicted in the works of Herta Müller, on the other hand the way in which characters reorder their identities through mental and physical dislocation, visible in the works of Cătălin Dorian Florescu. Using the fictional worlds constructed by the two authors, this study aims to introduce, define and apply the concept of transfer-images and thus to point out a different theoretical approach to such works. Furthermore, the attempt to explore simultaneously the two authors of Romanian origin, through the display of a complex socio-political and hermeneutical background, will showcase differences and similarities in their writings, suggesting the emergence of a literature charged and framed by communism and migration.

The first chapter offers a short introduction on the appearance and development of what researchers call literature of migration in the German speaking world, using Germany and Switzerland as study cases. This part of the paper explores European population movements starting in the 50ies, tracing a political and historical framework that has influenced the perception and interpretation of migration, exposing sociological categories and typologies that operate in this context. Therefore, this chapter exhibits what I call discourse and politics of migration. This approach to the phenomena of migration is realized through its components and through the ability of the imaginary to convert any type of physical and mental relocation.

The second chapter describes not only the chronology and the main themes encountered in the literature of migration, but also follows some of the prevalent methods and difficulties researchers, critics and readers have while trying to assess, interpret and understand the works in question. Moreover, while trying to integrate the two authors into the discourse of migration, this chapter proposes a theoretical framework necessary for defining the concept of transfer-images. In short, transfer-images are narrative vehicles that contain and retain, metaphorically, the

characters' mental and physical relocation. Transfer-images transport the traumatic dimension of such an experience, by configuring the latter spatially and temporally. Transfer-images can signalize, on a textual level, other traumas as they are mechanisms that coagulate and display traumatic experiences.

The last chapter takes upon the task to describe characteristics and functions of transfer-images in five novels (*The Hunger Angel*, *The Appointment* and *The Land of the Green Plums* by Herta Müller; and *Zaira* and *Jacob decides to love*, by Cătălin Dorian Florescu). In *The Appointment* the transfer-images incorporate a traumatized Self, as they generate a fragmented language and reveal a physiognomy of fear. Transfer-images in *The Hunger Angel* recreate a nude, blank and incapacitated language (through the lack of references to reality). Hence, all unmediated perceptions and all what cannot be told will be revealed by deploying a proper and highly metaphorical language. On the narrative level, the effort to remember and understand the imprisonment in a concentration camp takes on the veil of trauma, as the character regains solely symptoms and fragments of his experiences. *The Land of the Green Plums* evolves around the transfer-image of the animal heart, a metaphor that recreates a negative, deathly and pulverized universe, engulfed by the ever-watching eye of power and haunted by inner pictures of a traumatic childhood. The last two novels, *Zaira* and *Jacob decides to love*, follow the line of physical and mental displacement. In these novels there is no journey towards the inner world, a refuge from all forms of violence. Instead, the novels depict border crossings and characters that are in a permanent status of transit. Florescu's characters attempt to rebuild familiar universes that have disappeared or have never existed. *Zaira* retraces migration components and how they envelop the traumatic experience that goes along with the protagonists' relocation. In the novel *Jacob decides to love*, transfer-images allow characters to invent their origin and identity, allowing them to endlessly rebuild and reframe destinies dominated by refuge.

All novels were read in German to allow access to linguistic and stylistic subtleties, aspects that revealed the recurrence and function of transfer-images. The bibliography selected for this research was acquired during the two research stages at the Konstanz University, in Germany and University of California, at Berkeley. Hence, the main purpose of this study is to open a discussion on the morphology of a traumatic universe in the literature of migration. Herta Müller and Cătălin Dorian Florescu are relevant and emblematic for this type of literature, as the imaginary constructed can be investigated through narratological and psycho-critical methods.

Such an attempt can help researchers, critics and readers discover an alternative way of understanding and interpreting the literature of migration, as a whole.

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Migratory movements of the 20th century display an economic and forced character. After the 2nd World War, Europe reemerges as a broken continent, divided socially and ideologically. Totalitarian states in Eastern Europe were under the Soviet red flag and promoted nationalism and communism for „the new man”. When it comes to the debate on the existence of a common *European memory*, the violence, brutality and criminality of these regimes enter new terms and territories.

Society undergoes changes due to migratory movements and the different historical, social and political stages show how migration operates with socio-political elements and cultural phenomena. This reciprocal relation shows how a movement from a point A to a point B opens up the possibility for returning to point B.

All modern forms of migration are being state controlled through politics of migration. These kinds of movements enter interdisciplinary fields that can shed light upon how (new) societies appear. Literature uses its own means to find proper instruments and show how migration has turned into a fundamental condition of mankind.

Migration presupposes the movement from a point A to a point B. Moreover, this movement implies two poles, even two systems (in Michel Foucault’s definition). Motives that drive the population movements need no hierarchies, as individuals are actually being drawn in a process of *transformation* and *justification*. In this case, transformation implies a statutory, fundamental and essential change, at an individual level, while in a justification process migrants assume a new and different social, political and judicial status. This status is controlled and awarded by the host society. The source society will process an individual, in high mobility, differently. Hence, these three factors (migrants, host and source societies) cannot be looked upon separately, in a migratory context, but as part of an area that consists of what I call components of migration. Any type of movement can exhibit these elements and patterns as they are individual, quantifiable and observable stages. They are signs of a personal, social and psychological transformation process.

The components of migration are constant elements in the mentioned processes of transformation and justification; they touch upon how the individual adapts to conditions of high mobility; they appear on an individual level, in different intensity degrees and in any type of movements (not necessarily across borders). The components are the decision to relocate, the cultural shock, adaptation, assimilation and integration through political participation. The usage of these terms helps to describe phenomena that can be identified on an individual, social and cultural level. Each of these concepts are orientative and open the discussion visible in the next chapters of this study. The components of migration will help the reader understand migratory movements as part of a discourse that is based on issues of identity and alterity.

Daily reports on migration tend to describe rather historically and convulsive aspects regarding border crossings. Hence, understanding the works of writers with a migrant background becomes a question of one's position towards socio-political and external factors. If migration is a fundamental condition of mankind, then a plea for the establishment of an international literature will help integrate and explain how some authors of different origins than assigned by the language of creation are successful across borders, nations and countries. A part of the German speaking world has faced dilemmas of integration and descent. Germany and Switzerland implement different politics of integration and control of migration, while Romania has (partially) failed to change its status from source country for migrants to target society. Motives that ground the decision to relocate are multiple, from economical reasons to forced exile. Despite all of these complex issues, source and target societies showcase spectacular changes. The necessary framework for understanding and interpreting literature produced in conditions of high mobility in the German speaking world becomes volatile as methods seem stuck in an **alterist** discourse. The shelves for such writings still bear the name „foreign literature“. There are different criteria used to investigate the literature of migration. Firstly, authors use their mother language and the acquired one in the creative process. Secondly, aspects related to what researchers call *jus sanguinis* designate the authors' origin as necessary criteria for interpreting their writing. One third perspective comes close to the aesthetic function of literature: transit as a literary theme with its cathartic function. Such efforts are a sign of how Europe has become a cradle for (new) societies and cultures and how complex such phenomena turn out to be.

In the literature of migration, there are two authors that are linked to what we call a Romanian imaginary, Herta Müller and Cătălin Dorian Florescu. How and to what extent do these two authors have access to such an imaginary? Migration offers meaning and delivers an imaginary content for the writings of authors that transit spaces. Furthermore, through examining the socio-political dimension, the hermeneutical analysis of the chosen novels will be guided by what I call transfer-images. How can such a coined term help us understand the imaginary and the entire discourse of migration?

Transfer-images are, initially, metaphors of memory (King, 2000). Remembering, through the act of narration, brings the present and the past together, but not by placing them in a causal relationship. These images have analeptical and proleptical features and fulfill „a ritualic and repetitive function” (Rapaport, 2011), as they are not being coherently processed but take up the forms of internal and incremental archetype. In the prose of Herta Müller the „text feeds linguistically from itself” (Symons, 2005) through these archetype and follow a poetic principle linked to a traumatic context. The designated language is inexistent due to the fact that there are no references to a familiar universe. We witness the birth of a metaphorical, hermetic and singular language that has the capacity to describe traumatic bits and pieces. The context, together with the transfer-image (a figment of a past), contain all that cannot be told (Dawidovski, 1997), hence escaping a lucid articulation. Due to the physical and mental relocation, the act of narration turns into an attempt to recover and return to conflicting accounts of the Self” (Flurderink, 2007). The revisiting of the traumatic context sheds light on the deepest resorts of trauma, setting off an „impossible scenario” (Rapaport, 2011). Through the emergence of transfer-images, the narrator is faced with his or her own absence, due to the fact that the entire experience becomes inaccessible (Tidd, 2008). Such a practice brings into question a new meaning of what we call mimesis (van Bohmeen-Saaf, 1999). The victim of a deep psychological shock fails to reflect the events through the act of narration. Instead, the traumatized relives and revisits endlessly moments and events that escape articulation through images (transfer-images). Furthermore, such glimpses and pictures develop a complex, immaterial and self-generative structure, as there is no reference to reality. Transfer-images turn into archives situated on the touching horizon between sight and thought, provoking the total dispersion of the Self (Mitchell and Khalip, 2011).

Obsessive metaphors become noticeable in the writings of any author and the appearance of obsessive images, that are being constantly recontextualized, offer coherence and cohesion to the entire work of art (Mauron, 1962), especially through their capacity to become nodal points of the imaginary. Transfer-images, in contrast with obsessive ones, are an intrinsic metaphor of the text, as they signalize the writer's relocation and transitory state. On the one hand, transfer-images are vehicles that contain trauma, offering a narrative wrap and the conditions for proper reformations of traumatic events. On the other hand, transfer-images carry obsessive images and metaphors. Moreover, writers such as Herta Müller and Cătălin Dorian Florescu have undergone mental and physical relocation and transfer-images become the expression of this double trait. Such images become fully fledged textual marks through a constant return to the space of trauma and the entire process of remembrance. If the trauma contains its own transfer-image, then the transfer-image will also display traumatic forms or mediate and facilitate other traumas through the act of narration, by casting them on a textual level. Hence, transfer-images develop antithetical features: they either will exorcize the trauma, or will open a path towards heightening such experiences.

Transfer-images are narrative vehicles that contain and retain, metaphorically, the characters' mental and physical relocation. Transfer-images transport the traumatic dimension of such an experience, by configuring the latter spatially and temporally. Transfer-images can signalize, on a textual level, other traumas as they are mechanisms that coagulate and display traumatic experiences. The way in which they are constructed depends on the nature and the structure of the prose at hand, but also on the imaginary that can dynamize and energize them. In Herta Müller's poetic prose these images are subtle and complex, due to the implosion of language, caused by a narrative voice that dismantles and reframes traumatic experiences. Such attempts are symptoms of a split universe. In a prose linked to realism by containing coherent epic strains and a clear structure, as it is the case in the novels by Cătălin Dorian Florescu, transfer-images cease to be figments of a scattered inner Self, favouring large-scale pictures that develop all transitory states (mental and physical displacement) of the characters and their lives on a constant edge. Hence, my analysis will focus on these two types of prose, one poetic and the other close to realism. While the German author writes a literature scarred by totalitarianism, Cătălin Dorian Florescu turns his prose into symbolic journeys that become signs of his mental and physical relocation to Switzerland.

In *The Hunger Angel*, hidden in a hermetic language, we find an omnipotent time and space of the concentration camp. Revealed through transfer-images, we are faced with a photographic negative that multiplies the imprisonment and the deepest secret of the protagonist, his homosexuality. Transfer-images carry marks of a personal realism, as the character tries to remember and put into words his horrific past. Moreover, such an effort reveals not only a metaphorically charged and proteic language, but also offers a way to translate and reconcile personal and collective memory. But, trauma pulverizes language as there is no access to similar experiences. Transfer-images concentrate, sometimes in just one word, meanings through metaphors and poetic metonymies that correspond solely to a singular and particular universe. Hence, transfer-images and their recurrence in the text will produce other traumas. Not only the repetition of these elements causes other traumatic forms of living, but also the way in which language is being stripped and rebuilt in an attempt to express all that cannot be told. While obsessive metaphors support narrative structures and configure the personal myth of an author, transfer-images will pulverize and implode the narration in order to create a nude, blank and non-communicative (with no reference to reality) language. But, if this type of language seems incapacitated and muted, through the act of narration we witness the appearance and deployment of initial, pure and unmediated images.

Transfer-images turn out to be articulations of the dispossessed and their symptomatic universe, as we do not assist and encounter the „post hoc ergo propter hoc” principle. The protagonist in the novel *The Appointment* relives images that show „an internal reflection of guilt” (Symons, 2005). The mechanics of this symptomatic universe is being retraced through transfer-images, as language comes closer to what is called sign-language. Such techniques were invented in the visual arts, like it is the case with the collage (Moyrer, 2010). Language can showcase its own mimics and gestures, perceptions and reality succumb under the pressure of being split and fragmented. Transfer-images will unify memory, language and trauma, while they cross the entire narration. An autobiographical investigation, in Herta Müller’s case, can offer access to just one dimension of what I have called transfer-images, as they refine and rarefy internal structures and traumatic experiences. Hence, transfer-images support multiple realization forms, from becoming pathways for the entire effort of remembrance, to bearing signs of a ruptured and muted language. Such images can be identified in Müller’s prose as well as in her

essays, because transfer-images sustain and fuel the entire violent and traumatic imaginary in her writings.

While such images can turn into nodal points in the narration, they announce multiple traits of the latter: reality as sign of alterity, remembrance, expulsion of the Self and abjection. They charge and recharge the entire imaginary, through reframing and inventing a proper language that can express such singular universes. Charging transfer-images implies narrative tensions that favour symbolic actions, and not actual ones. Recharging will provoke splitting, ruptures in language and recurrence.

The inner world of the protagonist in *The Appointment* is being materialized through an unveiling of what I call the physiognomy of fear. This inner world is captive and violent, the characters take no shape and the protagonist seems to be (de)formed without identity. For the narrative voice there is no escape and no refuge from this brutality. Hence, the main character will only find possible embodiments to elude but at the same time express trauma. These embodiments turn out to be transfer-images that show contradictions of a pulverized Self, self-imposed norms and how the Self, through the usage of a symbolic language, is willing to transfer marks of identity on all the objects constructed in the narrative world. Ralph Köhnen shows how Müller's essays treat one dimension of reality, while her other writings try desperately to hide it. In her prose we have access to fragments, linguistic and imagistic lenses (Köhnen, 1997), due to the way in which one can perceive and try out closed and distinct parts of a world, protected from any sort of intrusion and control.

In *The Land of the Green Plums* transfer-images construct a topos of trauma, a symbolic *locus coeruleus*: communist Romania, an inapt childhood and the universe of the dispossessed, stripped even of the right to choose how one dies. Similar to the images encountered in the novel *The Hunger Angel*, there is a condensed and claustrophobic space. Transfer-images, through their recurrence, retrace and return, recreate solely instants of death. The linguistic material, as it is the case in most of Müller's novels, is under an immense pressure due to the violent nature of the imaginary. Transfer-images like „animal heart”, or „the Hunger Angel”, illustrate an oxymoronic texture, being a *coincidentia oppositorum*. The „animal heart” is a form of the naked life (Agamben), containing everything hidden, secret, abject but alive. It is exactly what escapes the surveillance and control of the malefic eye of power. Hence, all that what cannot be told is actually the gesture of communicating the truth, a concomitance between image, thought and

words. The *animal heart* is the image of a primeval form of violence, a metaphorical original sin, something that can only be grasped and embodied through its parts: flesh, kidneys etc. Moreover, we are dealing with a new *anima corpus*, a sort of amiotical sack for death. In *The Land of the Green Plums* transfer-images fragment and cause the implosion of the real, through spontaneous analogies and reframing primary senses of words. They show violent structures that enable the expression of unmediated perceptions. While they leave reality, these images build deathly hollows and a negative cosmos made out of symbolic instruments needed for human sacrifice: blood, severed limbs, cadavers, disease, insanity and the slaughter house.

In the prose of Cătălin Dorian Florescu, transfer-images recompose the imagined space of origin, associated with childhood memories, but also reclaim and contain signs of mental and physical relocation. Florescu's characters are thrown into unknown, into the ambiguities of existence and birthplace, and can only be free if they escape all what once was proof of the familiar. *Zaira* is a novel built symbolically on what refuge is and why characters feel the urge to constantly escape faith. As readers we are being immersed in a story with historical references and from where visions of the impossible emerge.

Transfer-images multiply a mental space, supported by manifestations of traumatic events. Florescu's characters find forms of expressing all what cannot be told through going back and revisiting lost worlds, people, spaces and all that has become inaccessible to the traumatized. *Zaira* does not pay history the ultimate price of extracting the truth, but favours a form of narrating a personal history, that can show the collective tragedy of communism in Romania, or the American dream and the Revolution in Prague. Florescu practices a literature ready to forgive and reveals, through transfer-images, an untranslatable topos he left behind thirty years ago. What remains are figments of imagination, faces and tragedies of such spaces and Florescu offers them, through his writings, a new existence.

Jacob decides to love is a saga of exile and a story of those sentenced to survival. The novel configures a historical background animated by a personal one. In the case of Florescu's prose, transfer-images develop a pathway through which the narration can take place. While in Müller's prose we face a hermetical, polymorphous and symbolic texture of the transfer-images, in Florescu's works these images construct mirror-characters that make visible mental processes, without needing the mediation of other textual structures.

The chronology of narration is interrupted and imploded by mirroring the four individual destinies of the Obertins. The eradication of provenance, forced exile, murder, abandoned identities and survival set the stage for the narrative voice to decompose a brutal family history. Because these images set the background for the story, they will also reshape the narrative voice by exposing and overlapping traumatic events. Hence, transfer-images become narrative circles that retrace the characters' physical and mental relocation. Furthermore, the employment of transfer-images, in this case, recreates a map of mental processes during all the violent displacements.

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Transfer-images in the literature of migration become narrative vehicles that build the imaginary universe of the dispossessed, through enabling a suture between spaces and negative forces, but also allowing characters in high mobility conditions to renegotiate and signify their identity and place.

The literature of migration is not barely a symptom and by-product of migration. Any type of relocation calls upon components of migration and the trauma that arises in such conditions. If such aspects are refined artistically and take on a cathartic shape, negative consequences tend to vanish. The movement from a familiar space to the unknown is a source of emotional tension and the imaginary will reveal this. The act of narration linked to the process of displacement reactivates trauma by issuing images of a comeback, but not necessarily to familiar spaces, but to contexts/objects/people filled with contradictions. The literature of migration and the two authors chosen for this study fabricate lost and inexistent worlds in the language of creation. Herta Müller's prose depicts a tense and claustrophobic universe, her characters constantly return to their violent childhood or to a perverted family life due to the communist oppression. Cătălin Dorian Florescu, instead, places his characters in the midst of a life script, where journeys back(wards) are possible only when any type of origin disappears and the universes of the past stop irradiating forms of linkage to a present.

All these features identified in the prose of the two authors were revealed by the analysis and usage of the concept transfer-images. Hence, there are five possible categories of transfer-

images, that can be symptomatic for the literature of migration. Firstly, we are dealing with images that mark forms of a naked and incapacitated language, due to a natural scepticism towards any form of linguistic mediation. Hence, we face a reduction to zero of language and the inauguration of a primeval one, necessary and useful in reconstructing traumatic events. Such images are metaphors and comparisons like the „BreathingSwing”, „animal heart” or „heart shovel”. Secondly, there are transfer-images that reclaim and denote the deathly universe of the concentration camps, dystopias of the modern world. In Müller’s prose such images depict contradictions of the Self and show self-imposed norms, typical patterns visible in any oppressive context. Her characters are captive and wonder in a labyrinth of utter silence – as it is the case in the novel *The Hunger Angel* – where there are no possible ways of communicating authentically and the protagonist can only hermetically releases himself from the past. In this case, the imaginary crashes under the weight of psychological shock and can only build figments that are closer to death than to life. These become the only bits and pieces that can be recuperated and expressed. Thirdly, in the literature of migration we encounter transfer-images that can suture memory, ruptures in language and trauma together, due to their circularity and repetitiveness (*The Appointment* and *The Land of the Green Plums*). In this case such images construct and register microscopically the physiognomy of fear towards death. Another type of transfer-images, the fourth possible category, would signal the dissolution of provenance and identity, through the emergence of mirror-characters condemned to relocate in order to invent exactly what was erased through a forced displacement, the origin and sense of Self (in *Jacob decides to love*, these are Caspar, Frédérick, Jakob the Father și Jakob the Son). One last possible type of transfer-images comes close to a sort of archive for memory, from where recorded figments and pictures from the process of relocation can be inserted, afterwards, in the narrative structure (journeys in the novels *Zaira* and *Jacob decides to love*, Zaira’s puppets, and symbols of death in Müller’s novels).

The proposed classification serves only as an orientation point, as any analysis will show how some transfer-images can be absent, while others can be discovered. But, the generating mechanism remains the same, as long as we are dealing with a physical relocation or a metaphorical inner journey of writers who transit spaces. This study aims at opening a broader discussion and investigation on the literature of migration, operating with methods that reveal the imaginary, with narratological instruments and also psychocritical concepts. This project is only

at the beginning and will continue with a closer look at the literature written by Kurdish and Turkish authors in the German speaking world.