

The Parallels of Self-Reflective Writing: A Comparative Analysis of Herta Müller's Novel *The Land of Green Plums* and Essay *How Perception Invents Itself*

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Abstract

Following her emigration to Germany in the late 1980s, Herta Müller's essays began to focus on the writing process and the interplay between memory, creative thought, and the written text. This thematic concern also appeared in her early fictional works. Self-reflective approaches to writing first surfaced in her essay collection *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel. Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet* (1991) and continued in later collections such as *Der König verneigt sich und tötet* and *Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel* (2011). This article aims to examine how Müller stages the act of writing in a self-reflexive manner in her 1990s essays, and how this is mirrored in her fictional works. The article addresses this question in detail.

Keywords: Herta Müller, identity, reality, imaginary, writing process, perception

1. Introduction

This article focuses on the parallels of self-reflective writing in two distinct works: Herta Müller's novel *The Land of Green Plums* (*Herztier*, 1994) and Müller's essay *How Perception Invents Itself* (*Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet*, 1991). By examining these texts, I explore how self-reflective writing serves as a means to investigate personal identity, memory, trauma, and the literary representations of self-analysis and the observation of reality. Through these texts, Herta Müller engages in a profound investigation of identity, memory, trauma, and the blurred boundaries between the real and the imagined, employing self-reflexive narrative techniques to reveal how personal experience shapes both the author's and the characters' understanding of reality. This analysis seeks to uncover how Müller's works navigate the intersections of lived experience and literary creation, using self-reflective writing as a tool for examining the complex process of identity formation under oppressive political regimes and in the context of exile.

A central theme in this article is the search for identity, which lies at the heart of both texts. *The Land of Green Plums* (*Herztier*, 1994) the protagonist Lola's experiences are marked by a constant struggle to assert her individuality in a totalitarian society, where official versions of reality clash with personal perception. Herta Müller's portrayal of Lola's inner world, articulated through both her own voice and the voice of the narrator, mirrors the author's own reflections in *How Perception Invents Itself* (*Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet*, 1991). In the essay, Herta Müller examines how her identity as a writer is shaped by her dual cultural and linguistic heritage, grappling with the alienation that stems from her Romanian-German background. This duality allows her to confront the personal and cultural fragmentation that informs her perception of the world, highlighting the ways in which personal and collective memory intersect to shape one's sense of self.

A key technique employed in both works is the use of double voices, where the boundary between narrator and author is deliberately blurred. In the novel, the voices of Lola and the first-person narrator exist in a dialogic relationship, complementing and deepening each other's perspectives. This creates a layered narrative in which Lola's lived experiences and the narrator's observations merge, offering readers a multifaceted view of the oppressive environment that shapes their identities. Similarly, in *How Perception Invents Itself* (*Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet*, 1991), Müller's authorial voice reflects on her own creative process, allowing her to engage in a self-reflective dialogue about the role of perception in writing. This interplay between the voices of narrator and author not only challenges traditional distinctions between fiction and essay but also highlights the complexities of self-representation in literature.

Additionally, this article addresses the dichotomy of real and imaginary perception that runs through both texts. In *The Land of Green Plums* (Herztiel, 1994), Müller contrasts the official version of reality imposed by the regime with the subjective perceptions of her characters, particularly Lola, whose understanding of the world is shaped by her inner experiences and memories. Through her self-reflective writing, Lola resists the imposed narrative of the regime, creating an imagined reality that offers a form of internal resistance. In *How Perception Invents Itself* (*Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet*, 1991), Müller similarly explores how perception is not fixed but constantly shaped and reshaped by personal experiences, memory, and cultural context.

2. The Search for Identity

Both *The Land of Green Plums* (Herztiel, 1994) and *How Perception Invents Itself* (*Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet*, 1991) explore the theme of personal identity in the face of political oppression and cultural displacement, though they do so in distinct yet complementary ways.

In the novel *The Land of Green Plums* (Herztiel, 1994) Herta Müller tells the story of four young friends living under the brutal dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romania. The protagonist, Lola, a young woman, reflects on the personal and psychological toll of living under constant surveillance, repression, and the threat of violence. Müller's intense, introspective writing style brings readers into close contact with Lola's internal struggles as she attempts to maintain her sense of self amid the stifling constraints of a totalitarian regime. (cf. Eke, 2017, p.41) Her reflections on friendship, betrayal, and the struggle for autonomy illustrate the pervasive effects of state control on the individual psyche. The novel delves into themes of fear, resistance, and the enduring search for identity in a society that seeks to erase personal expression. Through her portrayal of Lola and her companions, Herta Müller highlights the tension between individual survival and the collective trauma inflicted by political oppression. In the novel's second opening passage, the voices of the narrator and Lola begin to merge, creating a powerful connection between their identities. Lola's life and her thoughts, as recorded in her diary, become intertwined with the narrator's own reflections. This blending of voices is vividly captured in a passage where the narrator describes Lola's origins:

“Lola came from the south of the country, and she reeked of poor province. I don't know where it showed the most, maybe in her cheekbones, or around her mouth, or smack in the middle of her eyes. It's hard to say that sort of thing about a province or a face. There was poverty in every province in the country, and in every face. But Lola's province, whether you saw it in her cheekbones or around her mouth or smack in the middle of her eyes, was perhaps poorer still. More land than landscape.

The drought devours everything, Lola writes, except sheep, melons, and mulberry trees.

But it wasn't the dry province that drove Lola to the city. The drought couldn't care less about what I'm learning, Lola writes in her notebook. The drought doesn't realize how much I know. Only what I am, or really who. To become somebody in the city, writes Lola, and then, four years later, to go back to the village. Not on the dusty path down below, but higher up, through the branches of the mulberry trees.” (Müller, 2009, p.3).

This passage vividly illustrates the blending of perspectives between Lola and the narrator. The description of Lola's physical appearance becomes an exploration of her background, her aspirations, and her attempts to escape the poverty of her rural upbringing. Through Lola's words, the narrator gains insight into her desire to transcend her environment, to redefine herself, and to find her identity beyond the limitations of her origins. Lola's hope of returning to her village as someone transformed, not bound to the dust of the earth but floating above it through the branches, symbolizes her yearning for freedom and self-determination. Herta Müller's careful juxtaposition of the narrator's reflections and Lola's diary creates a deep emotional and psychological resonance. The diary entries allow for a fluid merging of voices, where the boundaries between narrator and subject blur. This narrative technique not only highlights the intimate connection between the two characters but also reflects the broader themes of identity, memory, and the struggle for personal autonomy within a repressive political context.

How Perception Invents Itself (*Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet*, 1991) presents a more direct exploration of the author's own search for identity as a writer. The essay provides a deeply self-reflective analysis of how language, memory, and personal experience intersect to form one's identity, particularly in the context of exile and displacement. (cf. Dimian-Herghelegiu, 2022, p.436) Müller delves into the complexities of writing in a language that is both her native tongue and one associated with cultural estrangement, exploring how perception is shaped by these factors. The essay not only offers an intimate look at Müller's identity as a writer but also engages with broader questions of how identity is constructed through narrative, memory, and cultural context. She discusses the fragmentation of identity that arises from being caught between different languages and cultural influences,

reflecting on how this fragmentation informs her writing. The essay serves as a meditation on the creative process, demonstrating how language can both reveal and obscure truth, and how perception is an invention shaped by memory, trauma, and cultural displacement. Müller's self-reflexive analysis offers readers insight into the challenges of navigating cultural and linguistic boundaries, while also delving into broader philosophical questions about the relationship between language, self, and reality. The tension between these elements informs her writing, shaping both her narrative style and the themes she explores. This fragmentation, she suggests, is central to her experience as a writer:

“Das Schreiben ist jedesmal das Letzte, das, was ich (immer noch) tun kann, ja muss, wenn ich nichts mehr Anderes tun kann. Es ist immer, wenn ich schreibe, der Punkt erreicht, wo ich mit mir selber (und das heißt auch mit dem, was mich umgibt) nicht mehr umgehen kann. Ich ertrage meine Sinne nicht mehr. Ich ertrage mein Nachdenken nicht mehr. Es ist alles so verstrickt geworden, dass ich nicht mehr weiß, wo die äußeren Dinge anfangen und aufhören. Ob sie in mir sind oder ich in ihnen. Es brechen Stücke Welt heraus, als hätte ich alles geschluckt, was ich nicht tragen kann.“ (Müller, 1991, p.33). (Note 1)

This passage encapsulates Herta Müller's struggle with writing as an act of survival and necessity. She portrays writing as the last resort when she can no longer cope with her internal and external worlds, revealing the intense emotional and psychological toll of navigating her surroundings. The boundary between inner and outer experience becomes blurred, as she reflects on the overwhelming complexity of perception. Her writing emerges as a means of processing these fragmented experiences, where pieces of the world seem to break away, as if she has internalized more than she can bear. This disorientation reflects the way in which trauma, memory, and cultural displacement complicate the sense of reality. (Bründl, 1998, p.29-45) She highlights the paradox of language as both a tool for expressing truth and a barrier that can obscure it, particularly when grappling with the weight of personal and collective histories. Müller's reflections offer readers an intimate glimpse into the creative process, showing how writing becomes an act of invention, where perception is shaped by memory, trauma, and the complexities of cultural displacement.

3. Double Voices and the Dichotomy of Narrator and Author

In both *The Land of Green Plums* (Herzti, 1994) and *How Perception Invents Itself* (*Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet*, 1991) Herta Müller employs the literary technique of double voice, where the narrator's voice and the author's voice coexist within the same text. This technique adds depth and complexity to the self-reflective nature of the text. In *The Land of Green Plums* (Herzti, 1994), the narrative is primarily conveyed through the voice of the protagonist, Lola. However, Müller's presence as the author is subtly woven into the text, blurring the boundary between the narrator's voice and the author's voice. This blending of voices allows Müller to comment on Lola's experiences and offer a broader context and perspective on themes such as oppression, identity, and memory. It also invites readers to consider the role of the author in shaping the narrative and how personal experiences can be transformed into fiction. Similarly, in *How Perception Invents Itself* (*Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet*, 1991) Müller's authorial voice is central as she reflects on her own experiences and writing process. Here, the double voice technique enables Müller to seamlessly transition between introspective self-reflection and the analytical exploration of broader themes. By intertwining the voices of the narrator and the author, Müller creates a multilayered narrative that blurs the boundaries between autobiography and essayistic reflection.

In *The Land of Green Plums* (Herzti, 1994), the narrative unfolds primarily through the voice of the protagonist, Lola. However, as the story progresses, the narrator's voice merges with Lola's, forming a relationship of complementarity between the two voices. This fusion is especially evident when the narrator begins reading Lola's diary. Through this act, the narrator gains access to Lola's inner world, her experiences, emotions, and reflections on life. The narrator not only observes Lola's memories but also enters into them, blending their perspectives to the point where the distinction between narrator and character begins to dissolve.

In the essay *Wie das Erfundene sich im Rückblick wahrnimmt* (1991) Herta Müller reflects on how writing blurs the boundaries between inner and outer worlds, between reality and perception. She writes:

“Im Zustand des Schreibens ist die Person, weil sie schreibt, eine für sich selbst nicht erreichbare Person. Man könnte sagen: Die Person, die schreibt, ist eine erfundene Person. Auch für sich selbst.” (Müller, 1991, p. 44). (Note 2)

Here, Herta Müller highlights the inherent distance between the self who writes and the self who exists outside of writing. The act of writing, according to Müller, creates an “invented” version of the self, one that is not fully accessible to even the writer herself. This idea is deeply embedded in the narrative structure of *The Land of Green*

Plums (Herztier, 1994), where the narrator's voice becomes intertwined with Lola's voice, creating an invented self that is both part of the narrative and separate from it. This interweaving of voices reflects how personal identity can be constructed and deconstructed through the act of narration, with the boundaries between author, narrator, and character constantly shifting.

Similarly, in *How Perception Invents Itself* (*Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet*, 1991) Müller's voice as the author is central as she reflects on her own experiences of exile and cultural displacement. In this essay, the double voice allows Müller to transition seamlessly between personal introspection and an analytical exploration of broader themes such as memory, trauma, and the role of language in shaping perception. By intertwining the voice of the narrator (her introspective self) with that of the author (her analytical self), Müller creates a text that is both deeply personal and intellectually expansive. The essay does not merely recount her personal experiences; it also offers a philosophical meditation on how memory and perception are constructed, particularly in the context of exile. Müller reflects on the fragmentation of identity that comes from being caught between languages and cultures, exploring how this fragmentation influences her writing:

“Es ist alles so verstrickt geworden, dass ich nicht mehr weiß, wo die äußeren Dinge anfangen und aufhören. Ob sie in mir sind oder ich in ihnen.” (Müller, 1991, p. 33) (Note 3)

This reflection illustrates the disorienting effects of displacement, where the self becomes entangled with its surroundings to the point where it is no longer clear where internal and external realities begin and end. Müller's self-reflexive analysis reveals how the experience of exile disrupts not only one's sense of place but also one's sense of self. Her writing becomes a tool for navigating this dislocation, allowing her to reconstruct a sense of identity in the face of fragmentation. This blending of voices not only enhances the self-reflective nature of Müller's work but also positions it within a broader literary and philosophical discourse on identity, memory, and narrative. Drawing on Michael Schaffel's concept, narrative self-reflection, understood as a process of self-mirroring or self-observation, is not inherently tied to the fictionality of a narrative. (Scheffel, 1997, p.46-90) This blending of voices across Müller's works enriches the texts with layers of meaning, offering readers not just a story but an exploration of the mechanisms through which narrative, perception, and identity are constantly negotiated and redefined. The dichotomy of narrator and author in these works challenges traditional notions of voice and perspective, allowing for a deeper, more nuanced engagement with themes of oppression, exile, and selfhood. Through her use of double voice, Müller transcends the boundaries of fiction and essay, transforming her writing into a multifaceted meditation on the nature of identity itself.

4. Discussion Imaginary and Real Perception

Both *The Land of Green Plums* (Herztier, 1994) and *How Perception Invents Itself* (*Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet*, 1991) explore the interplay between imagined and real perception. These texts examine the ways in which subjective interpretation and personal experience challenge official or imposed versions of reality.

In the novel, the protagonist Lola's reflective writing functions as a tool for resisting the totalitarian regime's manipulation of perception mirroring Müller's recurring testimony to the oppressive realities of Ceausescu's dictatorship across her body of work. (cf. Brandt & Glajar, 2013, p.65) Her journal offers readers insight into the dissonance between the regime's official narrative and her own subjective experiences of reality. Through her self-observations, Lola grapples with the contradictions inherent in her daily life, where she is expected to accept the state's version of events, but her lived experience reveals a much darker and more complex truth. Lola's awareness of the divide between the regime's expectations and her own experiences allows her to carve out a space of autonomy, where she can reflect critically on her environment. Her imagined perception, seen through her dreams and aspirations, provides an alternative to the oppressive world she inhabits. For instance, in her diary, she writes about leaving the dusty village of her childhood to return one day with a sense of personal achievement and dignity. This idealized future, though imagined, stands in contrast to the grim reality of her current situation under the regime. Thus, Müller uses the contrast between Lola's imagined and real perceptions to highlight the power of individual consciousness to question and resist oppressive realities.

“You could say Lola's sentences in your mouth. But they didn't let themselves be written down. Not by me. They were like dreams, suited for speech but not for paper. When I wrote them down, Lola's sentences dissolved in my hand.” (Müller, 2009, p.37).

The distinction between speech and writing is central to this passage. Müller's narrator acknowledges that Lola's sentences, which represent her lived experiences and internal world, are more easily expressed verbally than in written form. The idea that the sentences are “suited for speech but not for paper” suggests that spoken language is

more fluid and immediate, capable of capturing the raw, unfiltered emotions that writing struggles to convey. Speech, in this context, is linked to personal experience, memory, and identity, making it more natural and authentic in expressing Lola's reality. The narrator's failure to write down Lola's words speaks to the difficulty of translating the visceral, lived experiences of trauma and oppression into a fixed, written narrative. The metaphor of the sentences "dissolving" in the narrator's hand emphasizes the elusive nature of capturing reality in writing. Written language, in contrast to speech, implies permanence, structure, and order, qualities that seem incompatible with the fluid, dreamlike quality of Lola's thoughts. By comparing Lola's sentences to dreams, Müller suggests that certain experiences, particularly those shaped by trauma, defy coherent expression. Just as dreams are fragmented, fleeting, and difficult to grasp, so too are the thoughts and memories that the narrator seeks to capture. Writing, which imposes structure and coherence, cannot fully contain or express the fragmented, often chaotic nature of Lola's experiences. The dissolution of Lola's sentences also reflects the limitations of language in the face of trauma. Müller's works frequently grapple with the difficulty of representing trauma through language, as traumatic experiences often resist straightforward narration. In this case, the narrator's inability to preserve Lola's sentences in written form can be seen as a reflection of the ineffability of pain and suffering. Trauma distorts memory and perception, making it difficult to articulate or even fully understand one's own experiences. The fact that the sentences "dissolve" in the narrator's hand suggests that language itself is inadequate to fully capture or convey the depth of Lola's inner world and the trauma she has endured. This passage also ties into broader themes in Müller's work, particularly those of identity and memory. Lola's sentences, which are "suited for speech but not for paper," can be seen as symbolic of the tension between individual identity and collective memory. In totalitarian regimes, where Müller's novel is set, personal narratives and subjective experiences are often suppressed or erased in favor of official, state-imposed versions of reality. Lola's inability to have her sentences written down mirrors the broader erasure of individual identity under oppressive regimes, where personal memories are denied, and personal narratives are rewritten or silenced. The fragility of memory itself is also suggested by the fragmentation of the sentences. Just as Lola's words dissolve when the narrator attempts to write them down, memories, particularly traumatic ones are often elusive and fragmented. Müller often explores how memory is shaped by trauma and how individuals struggle to make sense of their past in the face of political and personal repression. The narrator's inability to write down Lola's words reflects the challenge of preserving and transmitting memory in a way that remains true to the subjective experience of the individual.

Müller's reflections in the essay *How Perception Invents Itself* (*Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet*, 1991) resonate with her exploration of Lola's perception in the novel. In both works, perception is portrayed as fluid, shaped by memory, trauma, and external conditions. However, Müller emphasizes that perception is not merely a passive response to the world; it is an active, creative process. In a striking passage from the essay, she writes:

"Perception, when it invents itself, does not stand still. It crosses its boundaries, even where it tries to hold on. It is unintentional, it means nothing definite. It is rocked by chance. Yet, its unpredictability strikes the only possible selection when it chooses itself. The pointing finger in the head constantly breaks in." (Müller, 1991:19)

This passage underscores the idea that perception is not a stable or reliable guide to reality. Instead, it is constantly in flux, shaped by the unpredictable interplay between external stimuli and internal interpretation. Müller's self-reflexive exploration of her own perceptual process illustrates how language and memory intervene in shaping how individuals construct their understanding of the world. Just as Lola negotiates the space between official and personal realities, Müller in her essay reflects on how her writing navigates the space between real and imagined perceptions.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Herta Müller's oeuvre represents a significant exploration of self-reflective writing, demonstrating a broad spectrum of narrative techniques and storytelling strategies. Central to her literary approach is the use of metafiction, where she employs forms of literary self-observation and meta-narration to reflect on the act of writing itself. Through these methods, Herta Müller explores the complex intersections between individual experiences and larger political, historical, and social contexts, illustrating how personal narratives are inevitably shaped by broader realities. Müller's ability to intertwine personal memory with collective trauma is a defining feature of her work. Her narratives frequently engage with themes of identity, belonging, and survival, particularly within the repressive environments she portrays. By focusing on the individual's struggle for self-assertion in the face of totalitarian regimes, Herta Müller highlights the ways in which personal identity is constructed and negotiated in oppressive circumstances. This merging of the personal with the political not only deepens the thematic complexity of her

writing but also positions her work as a critical reflection on the nature of subjectivity within sociopolitical frameworks. Ultimately, Müller's contributions extend beyond the aesthetic domain, as her work critically engages with the role of language in shaping perception, memory, and identity. Her writings invite readers to reflect on the intricate relationship between personal experience and wider historical and cultural forces. By doing so, Herta Müller's literature provides a profound and multifaceted reflection on the human condition, encouraging deeper contemplation of how individual narratives are influenced by and contribute to the construction of collective history and sociopolitical understanding.

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Notes

- Note 1. personal English translation: "Writing is always the last thing I can (still) do, indeed must do, when I can no longer do anything else. Whenever I write, I reach the point where I can no longer deal with myself (and that also means with what surrounds me). I can no longer bear my senses. I can no longer bear to think. Everything has become so entangled that I no longer know where external things begin and end. Whether they are inside me or I am inside them. Pieces of the world burst out as if I had swallowed everything I couldn't carry."
- Note 2. personal English translation: "In the process of writing, the person writing is a person who is unreachable for themselves. It could be said that the person who writes is an invented person. Even for themselves."
- Note 3. personal English translation: "Everything has become so tangled up that I no longer know where the external things begin and end. Whether they are inside me or I am inside them."