

SWINGING OF THE BREATH
 UNDECIDABILITY AND ZONES OF INDISTINCTION IN HERTA MÜLLER'S
ATEMSCHAUKELE
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ABSTRACT

In the essay I use Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'zones of indistinction' in an investigation of how undecidability functions in the generation of meaning in Herta Müller's *Atemschaukel*. I argue that, by evoking a number of oppositional pairs, *Atemschaukel* demarcates an area as a zone of indistinction. Within this zone the thinking and experience of the first-person narrator, and, by extension, of the reader, oscillate between different modes, and tension is produced and sustained. Through this zone some of the most significant meanings of the narrative regarding the nature of representation, historic truth, and the truth of a specific witness are conveyed.

While undecidability on the level of genre and the representation of reality is arguably the most obvious form in *Atemschaukel*, it is not the main focus of my analysis. Rather, my purpose is to shed light on the interrelation of oppositional pairs and their effect of meaning-production without subsuming the various forms of undecidability under the obvious one of genre, as a categorisation of the work as 'autofiction' likely would do. Thus I challenge the generic categorisation of complex works of undecidability such as *Atemschaukel* and argue that in order to recognise certain meanings of the work, the reader must accept the unresolvedness of its undecidabilities.

In dem Aufsatz verwende ich Giorgio Agambens Begriff von den ‘Zonen der Ununterscheidbarkeit’ um zu überprüfen wie Unentscheidbarkeit in der Erzeugung von Bedeutung in Herta Müllers Buch *Atemschaukel* funktioniert. Ich argumentiere, dass *Atemschaukel*, indem es eine Reihe von oppositionellen Paaren hervorruft, ein Gebiet als eine Zone der Ununterscheidbarkeit abgrenzt. Innerhalb dieser Zone oszillieren das Denken und die Erfahrung des Ich-Erzählers, sowie die des Lesers, zwischen verschiedenen Modi, und Spannungen werden dadurch erzeugt und aufrechterhalten. Durch diese Zone werden einige der Schlüsselbedeutungen der Erzählung bezüglich der Art der Darstellung, der historischen Wahrheit und der Wahrheit eines bestimmten Zeugen vermittelt.

Während die Unentscheidbarkeit auf der Ebene von Genre und Repräsentation der Realität wohl die offensichtlichste Form in *Atemschaukel* ist, ist sie nicht der Hauptfokus meiner Analyse. Vielmehr möchte ich die Beziehung der oppositionellen Paare und ihre Wirkung der Bedeutungserzeugung beleuchten, ohne die verschiedenen Formen der Unentscheidbarkeit unter die offensichtliche Unentscheidbarkeit des Genres zu subsumieren, wie es eine Klassifizierung des Werkes als ‘Autofiktion’ wahrscheinlich tun würde. Daher stelle ich die generische Klassifizierung komplexer Werke der Unentscheidbarkeit wie *Atemschaukel* in Frage und argumentiere, daß der Leser die Ungeklärtheit der Unentscheidbarkeit des Werkes akzeptieren müsse, um bestimmte Bedeutungen zu erkennen.

In Herta Müller's *Atemschaukel* (2009) undecidability functions as a structuring principle and primary conveyor of meaning. The reader is confronted with undecidability on the level of genre already in the paratext of the work which places the narrative undecidably between life-writing and fiction, referentiality and construct. While this tension-producing undecidability on the level of genre and representation of reality might be the most obvious form of undecidability in *Atemschaukel*, it is by no means the only one at play. It is related to a number of additional forms of undecidability on different levels.

In this essay I draw a notion of undecidability from a politico-philosophical context in order to investigate how undecidability functions in the generation of meaning in Müller's *Atemschaukel*. More specifically, I use Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'zones of indistinction'¹ and his particular perspectives on oppositional tension to shed light on the meaning that is conveyed through the use of oppositional pairs in *Atemschaukel*. Agamben's concept of zones of indistinction is of obvious relevance to *Atemschaukel*. The concrete space of the Soviet work camp in which most of the events in *Atemschaukel* take place evidently corresponds closely to one of Agamben's primary examples of a zone of indistinction, namely the concentration camp. Likewise, the figure of Leo Auberg, the young man who as part of the German-speaking minority in Romania is deported to the work camp by the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War, corresponds to Agamben's conceptualisation of a threshold being, namely the 'homo sacer'.

I argue that by evoking a number of oppositional pairs and dualist categories, Müller's work demarcates an area which is a zone of indistinction. Within this

demarcated zone the perception, thinking, and experience of the first-person narrator and protagonist – and by extension of the reader – oscillate between different modes and poles, and tension is produced and sustained. In tune with Agamben's theory, the oppositions in *Atemschaukel* appear not as dichotomies, but rather as 'di-polarities' in the sense that the opposites appear co-implicated and rooted in a fundamental zone of indistinction. Through this zone of indistinction some of the most significant meanings of the narrative regarding the nature of representation, historic truth, and the truth of a specific witness are conveyed.

The main focus of my analysis is thus not the immediate, noticeable generic undecidability of the work. Rather, the purpose of this essay is to shed light on the interrelation of oppositional pairs and their effect of meaning-production in the work without subsuming the various forms of undecidability under the obvious one of genre.

The production of tension between extremes or oppositions in *Atemschaukel* has already been noted by several Müller scholars. Pavlo Shopin uses the notion of a tensional field analysing *Atemschaukel* in terms of the tension between the fictional and the real.² In her contribution to this special issue Hannah Vinter too observes a kind of tensional field, pointing to the tension and contradiction produced by the work's paratactical structures, arguing that these cause a destabilisation in the narrative, as 'notions of fixed identity and ownership crumble'. Vinter resists a reading of *Atemschaukel* as a single, coherent narrative and stresses the unresolvedness of the contradictory meanings and conceptions presented by the work, as she contends that Müller 'creates a dynamic assemblage with Pastior, capable of holding different historical elements in parallel without forcing them into a contrived whole.'

Michel Mallet shows how the opposition between Heimat and Lager is one of the primary structuring oppositions in *Atemschaukel*.³ He convincingly presents Leo's relationship to his home in terms of two extreme, contradictory feelings, namely that of a longing for the Heimat and that of oversaturation or disgust for the Heimat. Mallet's analysis evokes a tensional field of indistinction with a clear affinity to the one I am outlining in the present essay. He describes Leo as being in a state of 'simultaneous feelings of being at once heimatlos and heimatsatt'⁴ and he points out how in *Atemschaukel* the conventional hierarchically structured opposition of Heimat and Lager is disturbed. However, Mallet argues that a reversal takes place in the work in which the value of 'truth' and 'construction' are simply swapped between the Heimat and the Lager. Thereby he ascribes to the narrative a negative conception of the Heimat as the place for repressive normativity and socially constructed and thus 'false' values and a positive conception of the Lager as a place of 'true companionship and solidarity.'⁵ My analysis thus differs from Mallet's in this respect as I read the work as a form of deconstruction, the outcome of which is undecidable. Thus I would argue that the work disrupts and complicates the conventional conceptions of Heimat and Lager, but without arranging them hierarchically anew and without ascribing them unambiguous opposing values.

My analysis, then, recognises the tensional field established between oppositions in *Atemschaukel* as one that is sustained. Accordingly, my reading aims at sustaining the tension and undecidability produced in the narrative. I identify four forms of undecidability as particularly significant in the production of meaning and undecidability in the work: first, an epistemological undecidability which emerges between the

protagonist's lyrical interpretation and objective description of the camp, and, thus, what I designate as the 'internal camp-logic' and the 'external camp-logic'; second, a narrative undecidability that emerges between the two forms of I that narrate the story, that is, the older, reflecting I and the younger, experiencing I; third, temporal undecidability between present and past, in line with the temporal suspension that is characteristic of witness literature; and finally an existential undecidability between the position of the elderly I outside the camp and the position of the young I inside the camp.

In the following I firstly discuss a few of the problematic aspects of approaching a work like *Atemschaukel* from a genre theoretical point of departure and argue for the relevance and advantages of adopting genre-disinterested theory from the field of critical theory and philosophy in the investigation of the uncertainty of meaning in a literary work. Then follows an introduction to Agamben's concepts of zones of indistinction and 'the relation of exception' as these are represented in relation to Agamben's theory on the sovereign state and bio-power in *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). These concepts are then implemented in an analysis of undecidability in *Atemschaukel*. I point to four forms of undecidability which demarcate a tensional zone of indistinction in which the experience of the protagonist, the meaning of the work, and the interpretation of the reader oscillate. And I argue that this zone of indistinction conveys some of the main meanings in the narrative about the experience of the protagonist, Leo Auberg, as well as the real person in the external reality, Oskar Pastior, about a specific historical reality, and about the representation of truth and reality in general. Lastly, I point to the affinity between the title of Müller's work and the structuring principle of undecidability in the work.

GENERIC UNDECIDABILITY

As mentioned above, the most obvious undecidability in *Atemschaukel* is generic. The work presents a specific historic reality, the deportation of German minorities to Soviet work camps at the end of the Second World War, and is based in part directly on the personal experiences and account of a work camp deportee, namely those of the poet Oskar Pastior, Müller's close friend, as well as to some extent the experiences of Müller's mother as it can be learned from the work's epitext.⁶ The narrative is, however, not told in a conventional biographical mode. It is rendered in the first person, and along with the considerable amount of reconstruction of real events, it clearly also consists in a good deal of construction. This is emphasised by the work itself, indicated several times in the paratext of the book and signalled through the use of a highly lyricized and idiosyncratic language and the use of a first-person narrator. *Atemschaukel* thereby clearly places itself in a zone of indistinction between objective truth and personal truth, between referentiality and construct.

Various generic designations for the fusion of fiction and nonfiction in literature inevitably spring to mind in the reading and critical investigation of *Atemschaukel*. And Müller's work is obviously connected to a certain current in contemporary literature. The blending of the conventionally separated domains of fiction and nonfiction has asserted itself as a strong trend in Western literature in recent years, in particular in works with an autobiographical dimension. Accordingly there has been a keen effort in literary criticism and scholarship to generically determine the trend. The most successful term for the blending of autobiography/biography and the novel in contemporary literature has

arguably been that of ‘autofiction.’ Autofiction was originally launched by critical theorist and writer Serge Doubrovsky in 1977⁷ and has since spread and become prevalent in literary studies, adopted by both Philippe Lejeune and Gérard Genette who redefined the concept for their own purposes. Today it appears as the most widely accepted term for blending of fiction and fact in the field of life-writing though there is no consensus on an exact definition. Various other attempts have been made to adequately designate the trend of blending. In a Scandinavian context, where the trend has arguably been particularly strong and which has produced the perhaps most prominent example of contemporary life-writing which challenges the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, namely Karl Ove Knausgård’s *My Struggle*, a number of other designations have been launched and eagerly debated alongside that of autofiction, such as ‘performative biographism’,⁸ ‘double contract’,⁹ and ‘fictionfree fiction’.¹⁰

It would be easy to designate *Atemschaukel* as an example of autofiction. Still I hesitate to inscribe Müller’s work unequivocally into the genre of autofiction – or any other genre. Although the scholarly work on autofiction and related concepts has uncovered many interesting traits of the recent rise in literary works of blending, they inevitably neglect certain aspects of the literature they investigate. By replacing conventional and established genre designations with another version of a fixated relationship between the fictional and the factual they often generically fixate the literary works they include anew.

Furthermore, the foregrounding and prioritising of generic undecidability establishes an arbitrary hierarchy between levels of meaning and thus of forms of undecidability in a literary work. Many of the works that are considered part of the

contemporary trend of blending of fiction and nonfiction do not exhibit undecidability on a generic level exclusively. In many cases the generic undecidability takes part in an intricate interweaving of undecidability of meaning on several levels and is thus symptomatic of a general condition of undecidability. An investigation of a literary work with a strong degree of undecidability that is based on a genre focused approach is at risk of overlooking the complex structure and interplay of various forms of undecidability and thus of trivialising and reducing the meaning of literature.

More adequate for a description of *Atemschaukel* than the term of autofiction, then, seems that of witness literature. Less a genre than a designation of a particular dimension of a work, the concept is obviously relevant in an investigation of a work that is in part the testimony of Soviet work camp survivor Oskar Pastior. In theory on witness literature undecidability appears as a defining and constitutive element. The literary testimony places itself between fiction and nonfiction, referentiality and construct, and personal truth and historical truth as it is crucially embedded in historic reality and at the same time uses distinctive artistic methods, usually associated with fiction, in the rendering of both historical and personal truth. Furthermore, as historian and member of the Swedish Academy Horace Engdahl has pointed out, the literary testimony relies on a temporal undecidability which distinguishes it from conventional nonfiction like historiography. Thus the artistic method of the literary testimony entails a temporal fixation of the depicted event: 'Historical research describes concluded events. For the witnesses and their interpreters, the event never stops happening. Solzhenitsyn's prose annihilates the time between the perpetration of a crime and our reading of its account.'¹¹ Such generic and temporal undecidabilities are, as we shall see, highly characteristic of

Atemschaukel, in which they interweave with a number of other forms of oppositional undecidability.

I argue, then, that *Atemschaukel* places itself undecidably between literary testimony, biography, and fiction and that this generic undecidability is most productive when left unresolved by the reader and critic. While recognising the undecidability on the level of genre as highly significant in *Atemschaukel* my main interest, then, is the effects and functions of undecidability in the generation of meaning in the narrative. With the purpose of developing an adequate theoretical and methodological approach to Müller's work – as well as to tentatively outline a general analytical approach to contemporary works of undecidability – I take as the point of departure for my investigation concepts established outside narrative and genre studies in the field of political theory and philosophy. Such an approach, I argue, has several advantages; it sheds light on a central aspect of Müller's work which has already been noted in Müller scholarship, but not thoroughly developed; it allows for a complementing of the existing theory on the blending of fiction and nonfiction in contemporary literature; and it gives an indication of the potential of applying the concept of undecidability as an analytical tool in the study of literature.

AGAMBEN'S ZONES OF INDISTINCTION

In his theory on the modern state and sovereignty, most famously presented in *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben presents a view of oppositions that seems of clear relevance to the reading of *Atemschaukel*. In narratology the convention has been to reject the possibility of generic and ontological undecidability in literary

narrative. Drawing on central figures like Käte Hamburger and Philippe Lejeune, narrative theorist Dorrit Cohn has been hugely influential in establishing within narrative studies a conception of fiction and nonfiction as clearly demarcated and separated narrative domains, arguing that a narrative will necessarily be read as *either* fiction *or* nonfiction¹². Though there have been several attempts in recent years to challenge or reject the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, the separatist approach¹³ continues to structure many theories on the blending of genre in contemporary literature.¹⁴ In contrast, Agamben argues for the inherent interrelation of all oppositions and describes a number of conceptual phenomena that are necessarily characterised by precisely undecidability. The context in *Homo Sacer* is political-analytical, but the argument itself is of general conceptual theoretical relevance. Agamben's theory thus allows for an approach to literary works that presumes that generic and other forms of undecidability are not only possible in literature, but indeed already realised and manifest.

As part of his argument for the modern state as a state of exception, Agamben introduces the oppositional relation of inclusion by exclusion which he names 'the relation of exception'. The relation of exception points to the connection between two oppositional entities: the point of conveyance that marks a zone of indistinction between the two. As a structural principle the relation of exception applies to all the oppositions with which Agamben works – natural life vs. political existence, rule vs. exception, law vs. lawlessness – as the constitution of any one opposite happens via an exclusion, as explained in the following with the specific example of the rule and the exception:

The exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule [...] We shall give the name *relation of exception* to the extreme form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion. The situation created in the exception has the peculiar characteristic that it cannot be defined either as a situation of fact or as a situation of right, but instead institutes a paradoxical threshold of indistinction between the two.¹⁵

The relation of exception thus indicates that neither part in an oppositional pair can be viewed as a distinct and pure unit, since each is by definition always connected to its opposite through a principle of co-implication through co-exclusion. The relation of exception, then, not only structures and governs the specific relation between natural life and political life and in their intermediate zone of indistinction create the sovereign figure and the figure of the homo sacer; by logical extension it structures all pairs of oppositions. Thus Agamben generalises the concept, extending it to apply to the coincidence of any two seemingly opposed terms – here in an interview on the relation of the later work *The State of Exception* to his homo sacer project in general:

When you take a classical distinction of the political-philosophical tradition such as public / private, then I find it much less interesting to insist on the distinction and to bemoan the diminution of one of the terms, than to question the *interweaving*. I want to understand how the system operates. And the system is

always double; it works always by means of opposition. Not only as private / public, but also the house and the city, the exception and the rule, to reign and to govern, etc. But in order to understand what is really at stake here, we must learn to see these oppositions not as ‘di-chotomies’ but as ‘di-polarities,’ not substantial, but tensional. I mean that we need a logic of the field, as in physics, where it is impossible to draw a line clearly and separate two different substances. The polarity is present and acts at each point of the field. Then you may suddenly have zones of undecidability or indifference. The state of exception is one of those zones.¹⁶

According to Agamben the two opposites in an opposition do not represent pure, rigid entities, demarcated and disconnected from each other, but are instead interconnected and co-implicated. In Agamben’s view, the centre between the two poles – that is, the middle zone of coincidence and indistinction – is in fact the fundamental point of determination of each pole, as the ‘polarity is present and acts at each point of the field’. REFERENCE NEEDED

This perspective on oppositions as di-polarities rather than dichotomies is evidently applicable in fields other than the political-theoretical, and it is, I argue, of great relevance for the specific reading of Müller’s *Atemschaukel*. It renders possible a view of the fundamental problem of the opposition between fiction and nonfiction in literature – as well as in other arts – as in fact a fundamental tension, which is inherent and inevitable in all narratives. It recognises the interconnection of oppositions and the zones of undecidability that occur between oppositions and thereby challenges the separatist

approach in narrative studies and theory of fiction. As such it enables an approach to narrative analysis that not only recognises the possible activation of undecidability in literature – generically between fiction and nonfiction as well as on other levels – but even encourages an explicit focus on the uses, modes, functions, and effects of undecidability and the interweaving of these in the literary work.

I propose that such an approach to literature which recognises not only the possibility, but the inevitability of undecidability between oppositions and which entails a view of oppositional tension as potentially highly productive of meaning holds a considerable and under-explored potential. It brings to light the inevitability of undecidability and oppositional tension in all narrative¹⁷ which authors and readers might conventionally have sought to reduce and conceal, but which are in many modern works deliberately activated and emphasized by the author in order to produce specific meanings. One has just to look to literary modernism to find a multitude of examples of works in which undecidability is foregrounded and used as a primary conveyor of meaning.¹⁸

FORMS OF UNDECIDABILITY IN *ATEMSCHAUKE*

The fundamental mechanics of the narration in *Atemschaukel* can be described as the seemingly spontaneous appearance of highly idiosyncratic lyrical descriptions and abstractions from the protagonist's physical sensing of the concrete conditions and objects in the work camp. The narrative depicts how the impressions of these concrete surroundings activate the protagonist's distinctive associational functions.

Throughout most of the narrative, the immersion of the protagonist in sense-metaphorical abstractions and associations is clearly rooted in the physical sensing of the concrete work camp, and the relation between the concrete and the abstract is relatively close and apparent:

Anfang November ruft Tur Prikulitsch mich in sein Dienststube. Ich habe Post von zu Hause. Vor Freude tickt mein Gaumen, ich krieg den Mund nicht zu. Tur sucht im halboffenen Schrank in einer Schachtel. An der geschlossene Schrankhälfte klebt ein Bild von Stalin; hohe graue Backenknochen; wie zwei Ab-raumhalden; die Nase imposant wie eine Eisenbrücke; sein Schnauzbart wie eine Schwalbe. Neben dem Tisch dubbert der Kohleofen, darauf summt einer offener Blechtopf mit Schwarztee. Neben dem Ofen steht der Eimer mit Anthrazitkohle. Tur sagt: Leg mal bischen Kohle nach, bis ich deine Post gefunden habe. Ich suche im Eimer drei passende Brocken; die Flamme springt wie ein weißer Hase durch einen gelben Hasen. Dann springt der gelbe durch den weiße; die Hasen zerreichen einander und pfeifen zweistimmig Hasoweh. Das Feuer bläst mir Hitze ins Gesicht und das Warten Angst. Ich schließe das Ofentürchen und Tur schließt den Schrank. Er überreicht mir eine Rot-Kreutz-Postkarte.¹⁹ COMMENT NEEDED ON QUOTE?

In other passages the relation between the concrete and the abstract is more extreme. The lyrical abstractions become further detached from their concrete basis, almost bursting into a form of self-oscillation, as the narrator seems to reach a state of curious delirium:

Und der Hungerengel hängt sich ganz in meinen Mund hinein, an mein Gaumensegel. Es ist seine Waage. Er setzt meine Augen auf, und die Herzschaufel wird schwindlig, die Kohle schwimmt. Der Hungerengel stellt meine Wangen auf sein Kinn. Er lässt meinen Atem schaukeln. Die Atemschaukel ist ein Delirium und was für eins. Ich hebe den Blick, da oben stille Sommerwatte, die Stickerei der Wolken. [...] Der Hungerengel schaut auf seine Waage und sagt: Du bist mir noch immer nicht leicht genug, wieso lässt du nicht locker. Ich sage: Du betrügst mich mit meinem Fleisch. Es ist dir verfallen. Aber ich bin nicht mein Fleisch. Ich bin etwas anderes und lasse nicht locker.

(*Atemschaukel*, p. 87)

This associational mechanism and movement of oscillation in the narration in *Atemschaukel* clearly and effectively convey a mind strongly influenced and pressured by the extreme conditions of the work camp, which appears as a zone of indistinction in the Agambian sense: isolated from the outside world in a state of exception, excluded from the sphere of law and determined and defined by this exclusion. Reduced to bare life, and under severe physical and mental pressure, the mind of the protagonist produces a distinct consciousness, which oscillates between chaotic and often beautiful delirium with an escapist, euphemistic note to it and a strict and meticulous description of the surroundings and happenings in the camp. Thus, the work alternates between, on the one hand, thorough, sober, and meticulous descriptions of the physically concrete, externally determined and independently existing structures and systems at work in the camp –

including everything from the amount of bread systematically measured out and distributed according to the workload of each worker, to the continually rising number of casualties, to different kinds of relevant temporal specifications – and, on the other hand, abstract lyrical depictions of the seemingly corresponding systems and structures in the interpreting mind of the protagonist.

The two modes of representation of the camp thus represent two forms of reactions to the same extreme situation, and, perhaps, two narrative strategies of survival: an impersonal, rational assessment of the perceived concrete surroundings, which constitutes the external logic of the camp, and a lyrical interpretation and idiosyncratic organising of the same surroundings, which constitutes the internal camp logic.

The oscillation between these forms of logic and modes of narration is mirrored by the alternation between the two modes of the I in the narrative: the older narrating, remembering I and the younger narrated, experiencing I. Thus, a distinction can be made between, on the one hand, the objective, authoritative narrating I, which is the older Leo Auberg, narrating and assessing his life from the position and with the perspective of an elderly man, and thus, telling the story of his younger self, much like an omniscient narrator narrates a character in a third-person fictional story, and, on the other hand, the experiencing I, which is the younger Leo Auberg, living inside the work camp, whose perspective on and insight into the diegesis is limited in comparison to the older, narrating I, and who as such appears much like a character narrated in a third-person fictional narrative.

Though identical in formal grammatical mode, the two I-instances alternately dominate on the level of narrative voice in the sense that the perspective and voice of the

young experiencing I is prevalent in the lyrical, associational passages on the internal camp logic, which is indicated by the use of idiomatical and deictic formulations, while the voice and perspective of the older narrating I dominates the passages on the external camp logic, indicated by a more objective, sober, and less idiomatic language use. The two I-instances thus enter into a narrative relation much like that between a narrator and his character in conventional third-person fiction – but, interestingly, here this relation is transposed to a first-person, partly referential narrative.²⁰

This separateness of the I-instances is, however, not upheld throughout the narrative, but is at certain points dissolved. Thus, the distinction of the older narrating Leo's perspective and voice from that of the younger, experiencing Leo is at times blurred, as the two Is coincide and become indistinguishable in a zone of indistinction. This zone of indistinction between the two Is is established through temporal shifts in the narration, from the past to the present tense.

The temporal shifts to present tense establish a sense of immediacy and nearness in the representation of both Is, that is, for the experiencing I: 'Ich komme aus dem Keller in den Morgenschnee, erblandet' (*Atemschaukel*, p. 219) as well as a for the narrating I: 'Ich hasse die Durchfall Schlacke heute noch' (*Atemschaukel*, p. 171). These two quotations offer sufficient contextual information for the reader to distinguish whose perspective is being presented – that of the younger Leo inside the camp in the first and that of the older Leo in the latter. But in a number of passages it is not possible to distinguish between the two I-instances, for instance: 'Ich rede mir ja immer ein, dass ich wenig Gefühle habe. Wenn ich mir etwas zur Herzen nehme, ergreift es mich nur mäßig. Ich weine fast nie' (*Atemschaukel*, p. 190). Here the distinction between the

older narrating Leo and the younger experiencing Leo collapses, as the two coincide in the zone of indistinction that is constituted by the present tense, thereby manifesting the point of conveyance between the two polarities.

The two I-instances and the two forms of camp logic are parallel in the sense that the alternations between them appear synchronously. As such the experiencing I is linked first and foremost to the passages on the internal camp logic, while the narrating I is primarily linked to the external camp logic. The relation of the two forms of tempus to the two forms of I-instances and camp-logics, is, however, as illustrated with the quotes above, diachronic, as the shifts to the present tense occur in passages on *both* the internal camp logic dominated by the voice of the experiencing I *and* in passages on the external camp logic dominated by the voice of the narrating I. This diachronic shift of tempus in the work adds a dynamic dimension to the two parallel polarities – the I-instances and the camp-logics – and produces one of the most significant meanings of the narrative.

The diachronic relation undermines the separateness of the polarities, connects them and let them coincide in a zone of indistinction. As a result a strong sense of continuity in the relation between the I and the camp and a sustained tension is established in the narrative, as the temporal and mental distance between the experiencing and the narrating I, and thus between the internal camp logic and the older narrating Leo is dissolved, as the I instances become included in the same zone of indistinction. The result is a strong sense of the protagonist's continual existence in the camp sixty years after he has left it, or the camp's continual presence in Leo Auberg. As put by the older, narrating Leo himself:

Ich weiß mittlerweile, dass auf meinen Schätzen DA BLEIB ICH steht. Dass mich das Lager nach Hause gelassen hat, um den Abstand herzustellen, den es braucht, um sich im Kopf zu vergrößern. Seit meiner Heimkehr steht auf meinen Schätzen nicht mehr DA BIN ICH, aber auch nicht DA WAR ICH. Auf meinen Schätzen steht: DA KOMM ICH NICHT WEG. Immer mehr streckt sich das Lager vom Schläfenareal links zum Schläfenareal rechts. So muss ich von meinem ganzen Schädel wie von einem Gelände sprechen, von einem Lagergelände. Man kann sich nicht schützen, weder durchs Schweigen noch durchs Erzählen. Man übertreibt im Einen wie im Anderen, aber DA WAR ICH gibt es in beidem nicht. Und es gibt auch kein richtiges Maß (*Atemschaukel*, p. 294).

Thus, *Atemschaukel* establishes a number of tensional fields of undecidability through which it produces and conveys its highly significant meanings. Though he has physically left the work camp, the protagonist can never escape its space; its physical conditions and structures have forever imprinted themselves on him and altered his psychological and emotional state. Leo Auberg, and by implication Oskar Pastior, remains on some level what he becomes in the camp: a man in a state of exception and a zone of indistinction, forever determined by the other pole of the opposition, undecidably positioned between past and present, between human being and *Muselman*, in an existential sense forever the homo sacer.

THE UNDECIDABILITY OF TRUTH

Atemschaukel, then, establishes a tensional field of meaning in the form of a zone of indistinction between several oppositional pairs. These oppositional pairs appear in the narrative not as dichotomies – with pure and distinct opposites – but rather, in tune with Agamben’s view on oppositions, as di-polarities. The oppositions of the external and internal camp-logic, the lyrical interpretation and the sober observation of the camp, the concrete and the abstract form of the camp, the experiencing I and the narrating I, the young and the old Leo, and the past and the present are not substantial, but tensional and interconnected so that ‘the polarity is present and acts at each point of the field’.

REFERENCE NEEDED Within this field, demarcated and delimited by the di-polarities, the perception, experience, and narration of the protagonist oscillate, and an effect of sustained and unresolved tension is produced.

The oscillation of the mode of experience and narration of the protagonist and narrator on the diegetic level of the narrative implicates an interpretational undecidability on the level of reading. *Atemschaukel* leads the reader into a tension-producing and thought-provoking interpretational space of undecidability, as it precludes an unambiguous decision on the genre and the truth of the work. With its temporal undecidability the narrative challenges our conventional way of conceiving and representing the past as closed and distinct from the present, the conception of a life-narrative as progressive and gradual as well as the conception of literary narrative as a closed, finished, and unambiguous system. With its blend of strong referentiality to a both biographically and historically external reality and techniques and elements usually associated with fiction, *Atemschaukel* challenges not only the conventional view of the literary testimony as necessarily told by the first-hand witness, but also the conventional

conception of nonfiction and fiction as two clearly demarcated and distinct domains which convey two essentially different forms of truth.

Through the establishment of a field of tension and undecidability on the level of genre, *Atemschaukel* conveys its underlying, unconventional concept of truth. The use of fictional techniques such as a highly lyricized language, first-person-narration, and temporal undecidability in the rendering of a particular historical event and of the biography of a specific person, indicates an underlying truth-conception which challenges the conventional conception of biographical and historical truth as exclusive to conventional nonfictional modes of narration. Through its blending of referentiality and construct as well as through its presentation of oppositional pairs as di-polarities, rather than dichotomies, *Atemschaukel* challenges the distinction between historical truth and fiction and recognizes the interconnectedness of the two poles of fiction and nonfiction. What *Atemschaukel* suggests then, is a concept of truth according to which referentiality and construct must both be included and activated in a zone of indistinction in order for a narrative to come as close as possible to a truthful and authentic presentation of reality. The generic undecidability indicates that *Atemschaukel* aims at neither a subjective nor an objective truth, but at something oscillating in between – thereby both connected to and different from both. The Danish translator of Müller’s work, Carsten Sand Iversen, also points to the combination of referentiality and construct as conveying the underlying concept of truth of Müller’s works in general, defining this as a ‘poetic truth’ in the following remarkable description of Müller’s general poetics:

The works of Herta Müller are closely related to her biography [...]. The novels [...] are based on verifiable events, but the truth they seek is poetic [...]. 'The invented sensation is not distinct from the sensation. It moves to a level beneath it. The invented sensation is the complete immersion in the sensation. A double, a triple, a multiple soundingboard emerges, which is not a board.' The sentence demands of truth, that it transcends the immediate and the remembered sensation. This is to say, that the verifiable event is illuminated by a mind, by images that add to the plain retelling a depth, a bottomlessness, and sparks off an 'astray-ness' in the reader.²¹

Interestingly, with the 'multiple soundingboard', the 'illumination' and the 'bottomlessness' Iversen seems to outline in the quotation something very similar to the tensional zones of indistinction in which meaning, experience, and thinking oscillates; likewise the 'astrayness' that this particular narrative strategy and its effect of bottomlessness causes in the reader resembles the stimulating interpretational undecidability on the level of reading which I have pointed to earlier in this article. Thus, through the combination of referentiality and construct, the narrative transcends the verifiable truth of the conventional nonfictional account and adds to this truth a poetic truth, but one which is, importantly, a truth of oscillation and of non-fixated modes and meanings.

THE BREATH SWING

Oscillation then becomes the primary movement in *Atemschaudel*, both on the level of the experience and thought of the protagonist, on the level of narration, and on the level of reading and interpretation. It is surely no coincidence, then, that the original title of the book as well as the main trope of the narrative, the ‘breath swing,’ encapsulates this movement – the swinging not only of the breath, but of perception and existence between polarities.

The breath swing contains a double and undecidable meaning: as a metaphor it seems to arise as part of the protagonist’s deliberate handling of his situation, that is from his lyrical survival strategy of metaphorical sublimation of the unbearable concreteness of the camp. At the same time the swinging of the breath appears to arise against the will and intent of the protagonist, as an unavoidable extreme physical effect of the violence to which his body and mind are subjected. It thus captures the sustained undecidability and the tension of this state of being or mode between control and delirium, which the protagonist is in throughout the narrative; and at the same time it refers to the fundamental movement of experience and narration in the narrative and the readerly effect it brings about. Thus the very title and primary trope of the narrative functions as a reference to and indicator of the undecidability and oscillation that function as a primary structuring principle in the narrative.

This insistence on undecidability, the sustained tension and unresolved situation, the suspension of time and dissolution of the distinction between past and present and between inside the camp and outside it, have an effect that reaches further than the specific narrative of *Atemschaudel* and beyond the personal reading experience. Through its strong referentiality to a specific historical situation of crisis, *Atemschaudel*

undeniably participates in the testimonial literature that grew out of the trauma of the Second World War. *Atemschaukel* not only insists, as most of Müller's works does, on the importance of shedding light on the margins of some of the most central political crises of modern Europe and on the realities of the people who inhabit these margins, thereby challenging the bigger, established historical narratives; through its demarcation of zone of temporal indistinction the work also makes the specific reality of the deported Rumanian minority present and contemporary. Thereby *Atemschaukel* highlights not only Pastior's particular experience of continued existence within the Soviet work camp, but activates and manifests the existence of the camp in the reader's mind and in our contemporaneity.

The use of undecidability and zones of indistinction in *Atemschaukel* makes the work a particularly clear demonstration of how Herta Müller contributes significantly to the development of the world's literature and the understanding of modern European history. *Atemschaukel* is a highly original and formally bold and at the same time immensely empathetic and ethically dedicated experiment with the literary testimony which undeniably influences the way both fiction and factual narrative are understood and written as well as the conception of history. The work stands as an essential contribution to both an expansion of historic truth and of literary tradition. To fully acknowledge the contributions and significance of the work, I argue, requires an acceptance of the possibility of undecidability in narrative as well as a recognition of the co-implication and interconnectedness of oppositions.

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, CA 1998.

² Pavlo Shopin, 'Unpacking the Suitcases: Autofiction and Metaphor in Herta Müller's *Atemschaukel*' in *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, 50, 2 (2014), 197-215.

³ Michel Mallet, *Heimat as Schein: Debunking the German Myth of Heimat in Herta Müller's Narratives*, Montreal 2014.

⁴ Mallet, *Heimat as Schein*, p. 111.

⁵ According to Mallet, Leo realises that 'the instances of true companionship and solidarity he witnessed in the Lager clearly outshine the constructed and normative virtues of Heimat.' Mallet, *Heimat as Schein*, p. 122.

⁶ See for instance Herta Müller, *Mein Vaterland war ein Apfelkern. Ein Gespräch mit Angelika Klammer*, Munich 2014. The connection to Pastior's experiences is however the only one made explicit in the peritext of the book. I use here Genette's well-known concept of the paratext which designates the 'threshold' material that surrounds and is related to the 'main' text of a published book as well as his distinction between the two forms of paratext: the peritext, which is the paratextual information that is included 'inside' the confines of the published, physical book (cover etc.), and the epitext, which is the potentially ever-expanding paratextual information appearing 'outside' of the published work, e.g. in interviews, diaries, correspondence, and notes. Gerard Genette, *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge, NewYork 1997.

⁷ Serge Doubrovsky presented his novel *Fils*, Paris, 1977, as an 'autofiction' on the back cover of the same book (at almost exactly the same time as Elie Wiesel presented the notion of what would become known as Witness Literature: 'If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony. We have all been witnesses and we feel we have to bear

testimony for the future.' Elie Wiesel, 'The Holocaust as a Literary Inspiration' in *Dimensions of the Holocaust*, Evanston, IL 1977.) and has since described the genre as a '[a] fiction of strictly real events and facts', connecting the genre unambiguously to psychoanalytic content. Serge Doubrovsky, *Autobiographiques: De Corneille à Sartre*. Paris 1988, pp. 61-79.

⁸ Jon Helt Haarder, *Performativ biografisme. En hovedstrømning i det senmodernes skandinaviske litteratur*, Copenhagen 2014.

⁹ Poul Behrendt, *Dobbeltkontrakten—en æstetisk nydannelse*, Copenhagen 2006. ^[1]_{SEP}

¹⁰ Hans Hauge, *Fiktionsfri fiktion: om den nyvirkelige litteratur*, Copenhagen 2012.

¹¹ Horace Engdahl, 'Philomela's Tongue: Introductory Remarks on Witness Literature' in Horace Engdahl (ed), *Witness Literature: Proceedings of the Nobel Centennial Symposium*, 2002, pp. 1-14 (p. 5).

¹² '[W]e cannot conceive of any given text as more or less fictional, more or less factual, [...] we read it in one key or the other [...] fiction, in short, is not a matter of degree but of kind, in first- no less than in third-person form.' Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction*. Baltimore and London 1999, p. 35.

¹³ Narrative scholar Henrik Skov Nielsen introduces the designation separatist/exceptionalist for this approach to fiction and nonfiction in narrative in Henrik Skov Nielsen, 'Natural Authors, Unnatural Narration' in Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik (eds), *Postclassical Narratology. Approaches and Analyses*, Columbus OH 2010, pp. 275-301.

¹⁴ For instance Gasparini's notion of a 'simultaneous double-reading' in Philippe Gasparini, *Est-il Je?* Paris 2004, Arnaud Schmitt's concept of 'autonarration' in Arnaud Schmitt, 'Making the Case for Self-narration Against Autofiction' in *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 25, 1 (2010), pp. 122-37, and Poul Behrendt's development of Schmitt's concept of autonarration, in Poul Behrendt, 'Autonarration som skandinavisk novum. Karl Ove Knausgård, Anti-Proust og Nærværseffekten' in *Spring 31-32: Fiktionens forandringer*. Hellerup (2011), pp. 294-335, all

seem to be stuck in the very dichotomy they aim to do away with as they end up defining the works which they include in their proposed genres as essentially *either* fictional *or* nonfictional and confirming the distinction between the fictional and nonfictional domains.

¹⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 18.

¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, 'Interview with Giorgio Agamben – Life, A Work of Art Without an Author: The State of Exception, The Administration of Disorder and Private Life' by Ulrich Raulff in *German Law Journal*, 05 (2004), pp. 606-14 (p. 612).

¹⁷ This view corresponds to the conception advanced by Derrida, for instance in Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* Evanston, IL 1988, that undecidability is the basic structure and condition for language and as such precedes all production and determination of linguistic meaning.

¹⁸ Narrative, generic, and representational forms of undecidability along with more situational kinds abound in the works of e.g. Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Robert Musil, and Ford Madox Ford.

¹⁹ Herta Müller, *Atemschaudel*, Munich 2009, p. 211. Further references appear as *Atemschaudel*.

²⁰ I am here drawing on narrative scholar Poul Behrendt's analysis of Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle* in which he argues that the relation between the young narrated I and the older narrating I on the level of narrative voice resembles that between narrated character and omniscient narrator in a conventional fictional narrative; Behrendt points to this as the primary reason that critics and readers have tended to read the *My Struggle* as a fictional work despite the overwhelming referentiality of the first person narrative. Behrendt, 'Autonarration som skandinavisk novum'.

²¹ Karsen Sand Iversen, 'Herta Müllers arv. Erfaringen af diktatur' in *Bogens Verden*, 4 (2010), (3). My translation from Danish: 'Herta Müllers bøger er nært forbundne med

hendes biografi [...]. Romanerne [...] har verificerbare hændelser som grundlag, men den sandhed de søger er digterisk, ikke historisk, men sanset, subjektiv og kun æstetisk verificerbar: 'Den opdigtede sansning adskiller sig ikke fra sansningen. Den går et lag ned under den. Den opdigtede sansning er den fuldstændige nedsynkning i sansningen. Der opstår en dobbelt, tredobbelt, mangedobbelt lydbund som ikke er nogen bund.' Sætningens krav om sandhed transcenderer den umiddelbare og den erindrede sansning. Dermed er sagt at den dokumenterbare begivenhed oplyses af et sind, af billeder som giver den flade genfortælling dybde, bundløshed og udløser en 'vildfart' i læseren.'