

Guilt-tripping the ‘Implicated Subject’: Widening Rothberg’s Concept of Implication in Reading Herta Müller’s *The Hunger Angel*

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Implication, one might attempt to paraphrase Michael Rothberg’s concept, renders subjects guilty of wrongdoing of various kinds. Rothberg, however, avoids the charged terms guilt and morality in order to attain a fresh perspective onto why people of various historical and cultural contexts participate in wrongdoing, even in spite of knowing better. Such a fresh perspective is urgently needed in order to move beyond a mere naming, blaming, and singling out of culprits, towards any analysis of the complexity of involvements. My contribution seeks to outline that a more complex engagement with the conceptual history and systematic claims of canonical notions of ‘guilt’ and ‘morality’, nevertheless, makes implication a stronger concept for approaching both historical complicities and the contemporary crisis in democratic participation due to a seemingly ubiquitous implication in neoliberal structures. My response to Rothberg will proceed in three steps: The first section will outline Rothberg’s treatment of moral concepts and the systematic purpose of these terms in understanding wrongdoing; the second section will propose a broadening of Rothberg’s notion of implication and link it to my own work on the crisis in democratic participation; the third section will propose language as a model for comprehending implication in a pre-formed structure that, still, prompts and demands individual responsibility. Language as presented in literature emphasises this complex structure, as I will show with reference to Herta Müller’s novel *The Hunger Angel* (*Atemschaukel*). A reading of select passages from her text serves to outline the relevance of Rothberg’s concept of implication in the analysis of problematic participation in wrongdoing, and to demonstrate that an expanded notion of implication that comprises traditional moral terminology is even more productive than Rothberg’s narrower focus. My response starts with a key passage from Müller’s text that both evokes the issue of guilt and refutes the naming of culprits as inadequate, thus prompting the urgency of an alternative terminology to address problematic participation.

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Rothberg's Rejection of Moral Concepts

Herta Müller's 2009 novel *Atemschaukel* (translated into English by Philip Boehm as *The Hunger Angel*, 2012) is a work of documentary fiction, a fictitious portrayal of historical instances of implication which evade conventional historiographic means due to political and psychological resistance. Müller's text is based on the gulag experiences of the poet Oskar Pastior, Müller's mother, and others who were deported as part of the Soviet reparations program after the Second World War. The hard labour, and often death, in the gulags remained a taboo topic in eastern bloc societies – mentioning it was heavily legally sanctioned until the 1960s as a challenge to Soviet solidarity; and it remained unwelcome even after the end of Stalinism in most states, since it pointed to instances of prior collaboration and complicity with the Nazi rule, such as the Romanian Antonescu regime. My reading is based on the assumption that the interest of contemporary literature in testimonies of (European) totalitarianisms reaches beyond memory culture and related (transnational) identity discourses; these texts outline modes of partaking in institutional violence that draws on heritage, culture, gender, social, and other distinctions.¹ The modes of complicity and implication stand out more clearly – and are acknowledged more readily – in dictatorships of the past while they might seem more complicated, but are just as active, in the globalized world of the present.

In one passage, the narrator of Müller's novel states:

The naked truth is that Paul Gast the lawyer stole his wife's soup right out of her bowl until she could no longer get out of bed and died because she couldn't help it, just like he stole her soup because his hunger couldn't help it [...]

That was the way [things go]: because [everyone] couldn't help it, no one could.²

- 1 The participation of men and women in the perpetuation of violent social economies of sex and gender roles discussed by Freud features prominently in many of Müller's texts, too; see Karin Bauer, 'Gender and the Sexual Politics of Exchange in Herta Müller's Prose', in *Herta Müller*, ed. by Birgit Haines and Lyn Marven (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 153–172. Müller makes clear that it is political or economic wrongdoing which is more often than not exerted by way of sexualized violence and gender stereotyping.
- 2 Herta Müller, *Hunger Angel*, trans. by Philip Boehm (London: Portobello, 2009), p. 218; see *Atemschaukel* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2011), p. 230: 'Die nackte Wahrheit ist, dass der Advokat Paul Gast seiner Frau Heidrun Gast aus dem Essgeschirr die Suppe stahl, bis sie nicht mehr aufstand und starb, weil sie nicht anders konnte, so wie er ihr die Suppe stahl, weil sein Hunger nicht anders konnte, [...] / So war der Lauf der Dinge: Weil jeder nichts dafür konnte, konnte keiner was dafür.' My unidiomatic translation 'everyone couldn't captures the equally unidiomatic 'jeder nichts' better than Philip Boehm's 'each person' (ibid.).

What exactly is the 'naked truth' spelled out here? The narrator's gesture of brutal frankness identifies culprits just to insist that they could not help their wrongdoing, thus undermining the idea of culpability. The sense of guilt, Müller's text suggests, is unavoidably brought up by the death while, at the same time, the concept of guilt is inadequate to approach this kind of action and causality. The notion of implication is better suited to address them, especially an expanded notion of implication that comprises the ambivalent and highly charged terms of guilt and, by extension morality.

The theory of implication responds to what Rothberg is right to call an 'underdeveloped vocabulary' for thinking what it means to be a participant in social dynamics and historical structures of wrongdoing beyond the victim-perpetrator-divide.³ Rothberg sees this polarity not only as too simple to grasp complex realities but, moreover, as often used to denote human essences and identity.⁴ The 'figure' of the implicated subject, in contrast, is 'an analytical category'⁵ that seeks to emphasize actions and changing, multifold, or contradictory implications to grant insight into the varying roles individuals play in different contexts. This, Rothberg proposes, permits a better understanding of ambiguities such as 'the grey zone' described by Primo Levi, a result of the Nazi policy that 'camps were set up to make victims complicit in their own victimization', which 'troubles not only conventional morality but also legal judgment and historical understanding'.⁶ Rothberg's notion of implication seeks to 'twist the temporal axis'⁷ in order to translate the complication of a 'simplified, moralistic'⁸ victim-perpetrator-differentiation attained in Holocaust studies onto other issues of complex individual involvement and collective responsibility such as trauma in historical perspective⁹ and in the context of the Anthropocene.¹⁰ Far from evoking moral relativism or inappropriate comparison, Rothberg's project of carving out a term to describe problematic involvement in

3 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 1.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 39; Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. by Michael F. Moore, *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, ed. by Ann Goldstein, 3 vols (New York: Liveright, 2015), III, 2414-2415.

7 Rothberg, p. 41.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

various contexts hinges on the insight that involved-ness in pre-determined structures is pervasive and yet hard to grasp due to 'psychic and social denial'.¹¹

The translation of insights and structural challenges from Holocaust studies to other historical and contemporary forms of social complexity marks the relevance and appeal of Rothberg's theory. Understanding forms of involvement that reassure the subject while, at the same time, undermining individual action and personal responsibility is one of the key challenges to a historical understanding of the recent past, the twentieth century dominated by totalitarianisms. And it is also pivotal to manoeuvring the neoliberal present, as forms of involvement without explicit consent pose an eminent challenge to the democratic maxim of participation and the role of the individual as responsible actor in political, economic, and ethical communities. Involvement in complex structures has become a common feature in critical and public discourse, mostly in the claim that remaining inactive or continuing a certain habit renders the subject complicit in wrongdoings of humanitarian, political, ecological, moral, or other natures. And while it is indeed questionable what participation and individual responsibility mean in a world of globalized markets, conflicts, climate change, and electronic media, the criticism of this involvement raises the same question: Is there a point of view that is not involved in any social contexts? How would such a position communicate, given that languages rely on the participation in pre-determined structures of grammar, semantics, etc.? In how far is the assumption that the positions of analysis, critique, and opposition can be untouched of all wrongdoing itself an instance of complicity by ignoring the complexity of involvements? Rothberg is well-aware of the 'narcissism or solipsism that keeps the privileged subject at the center of analysis'¹² and that yet deems it to be removed from all problematic involvement. What seems puzzling, however, is Rothberg's recurrent dismissal of two canonical ethical terms: guilt, and morality. These are evoked as simplistic labels rather than actual concepts, to the effect that their refutation appears as a dismissal of a larger, structural problem within the theory of implication. The issue becomes apparent in Rothberg's discussion of complicity.

In the quest for a new terminology, Rothberg contrasts his notion of implication with the more conventional concept of complicity, which shares the same etymology of 'folded-togetherness' but 'operates in

¹¹ Rothberg, p. 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

proximity to notions of criminal guilt.¹³ The theory of implication, in contrast, seeks to operate beyond a legalistic and individualist scheme. This is a thoroughly convincing approach. Complicity – a legal term conventionally used to describe the way a crime is committed, namely by aiding or abetting wrongdoing – poses a challenge to legal research as it undermines the principles of individual accountability and autonomous action: Dependent on the actions of a principal wrongdoer, the accomplice is still autonomous insofar as aiding or tolerating the wrongdoing makes a difference.¹⁴ Accountability is based on individual intentionality, which gives rise to a particular difficulty in current corporate and international law, and consequently in political and social communities, whereby corporate and state complicity with human rights infringement and environmental damage often evades sanction because corporations and states are not understood to have intentions. This, paradoxically, renders them actors without intentions.¹⁵ In order to provide an alternative to such a conceptual aporia, Rothberg's notion of implication seeks to highlight 'the relational understanding of human action'.¹⁶ He outlines the particular way in which this is supposed to work:

it does two things simultaneously that stand in tension with each other: it both draws attention to responsibilities for violence and injustice greater than most of us want to embrace and shifts questions of accountability from a discourse of guilt to a less legally and emotionally charged terrain of historical and political responsibility. If the former action seems to increase the ethical burden, the latter loosens the terms of that burden and detaches from the ambiguous discourse of guilt, which often fosters denial and defensiveness in proximity to ongoing conflicts and the unearned benefits that accrue from injustice. By foregrounding the 'impurities' that characterize all identities, the framework of implication de-moralizes politics and encourages affinities between those who are positioned as victims and those who have inherited and benefited from privileged positions.¹⁷

¹³ Rothberg, p. 13.

¹⁴ Pierre-Marie Dupuy, 'Introduction', in Vladyslav Lanovoy, *Complicity and its Limits in the Law of International Responsibility* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. vii–ix (p. vii).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. viii; Michael J. Kelly, *Prosecuting Corporations for Genocide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 1; Gro Nystuen, Andreas Follesdal, and Ola Mestad, *Human Rights: Corporative Complicity and Disinvestment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Olivier Thimonier and Raphaël Doridant, *Survie: La complicité de la France dans le génocide des Tutsi au Rwanda* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009).

¹⁶ Rothberg, p. 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

In what David Wellbery calls ‘the pathos of the limit’¹⁸ constitutive of theory, Rothberg keeps invoking guilt as a traditional and competing concept that fails to address the issue at hand, and hence proves the necessity of the notion of implication. The same rhetoric evokes the concept of morality as too narrow.¹⁹ Yet it is Rothberg’s particular evocation of guilt and morality that renders them too narrow and hence unable to give any insight into problematic involvement and contribution. The concept of guilt comprises much more than criminal culpability. It is indeed ‘emotionally charged’, and even more ‘ambiguous’ than Rothberg will allow: The conceptual complex of guilt is based on the notion of an economy of exchange realized in legal culpability as much as in financial debt, in theological notions of an original indebtedness and the transgression implicit in particular actions (‘sin’), as well as the psychoanalytical concept of the super-ego, the psychic instance that produces bad conscience or guilt, and thus enables culture. The ‘metaphysical notion of guilt’,²⁰ however, features as problematic in Rothberg’s reading of Karl Jaspers’s distinction of different forms of guilt:

Instead of leading to punishment, reparation, or lustration, moral and metaphysical charges that come ‘from within’ demand penance and self-transformation [...] Jaspers was most interested in these latter, while my interest lies primarily with public and collective forms or responsibility, that is, with versions of ‘political guilt.’²¹

To be sure, this overly schematic distinction between internal and external guilt is taken from Jaspers,²² yet inscribing the concept of implication into it hardly serves Rothberg’s purpose as it eradicates any possible link between a personal sense of guilt and collective regulations such as the law. And it strikes me as strange that Rothberg on the one hand dismisses the concept of complicity as too legalistic while on the other hand citing Jaspers to insist on the political dimension of implication and collective responsibility – for the law is the primary arena of political action in most current political systems. Legal concepts alone are certainly insufficient to analyse complex involvements and prob-

18 David E. Wellbery, ‘The Pathos of Theory: Laokoon Revisited’, in *Intertextuality: German Literature and Visual Art from The Renaissance to the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Ingeborg Hoestery and Ulrich Weisstein (Rochester: Camden House, 1993), pp. 47–63 (p. 52).

19 Rothberg, p. 34; pp. 50–51; p. 202.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

22 Karl Jaspers, *The Question of Guilt*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 33.

lematic contribution, yet their shortcomings are symptomatic rather than a flaw of the field. The legal discourse is, in fact, how most political bodies act; it is how collectives speak to, and regulate, themselves. As an alternative to the 'numerous shortcomings [that] characterize Jaspers's discussion, including [...] his appeal to metaphysical, religious conceptions', which result 'in a depoliticized notion of guilt', Rothberg refers to Hannah Arendt's paradigmatic distinction between individual moral guilt and collective political responsibility.²³ Yet Arendt is far from drawing the rigorous dividing line between the political and the metaphysical that Rothberg implies. Arendt's reading of the Attic *polis* leaves little doubt that democracy's claims to equality and eternity, and the promise of justice in the law it installs, are nothing short of metaphysical. Arendt's maxim 'Where all are guilty, nobody is'²⁴ is functional: declaring everyone guilty is tantamount to forgiving everyone, labelling wrongdoing inevitable, and – in ultimate critical complicity – dropping all differentiation between moral choices. Therefore, she writes: 'We are always held responsible for the sins of our fathers as we reap the rewards of their merits; but we are of course not guilty of their misdeeds, either morally or legally'.²⁵ Rothberg reads 'the sins of our fathers' as an 'ironic metaphor to describe misapplied political guilt' that 'reveals the familial and ultimately ethnicizing tendencies of the model of collective guilt', whereas the model of responsibility does without a homogenization of the collective in question.²⁶ Heredity is indeed a strong pillar of nationalist and other imageries of homogenous political bodies, yet what Arendt alludes to is the psychological phenomenon of a trans-generational transmission of trauma wherein 'the family is what might best be called a *remembering context*'.²⁷ This has been shown for victims as much as for perpetrators, and it is exactly here where Rothberg's notion of implicated subjects could contribute to a more nuanced analysis. This, however, would require desisting from a strong affective response to traditional concepts addressing injustice, violence, trauma, and their aftermath, such as the notion of guilt. There is no need to subscribe to Augustine's blatant hostility towards the body and the sensual in the concept of an 'original sin' in order to comprehend that theological notions

23 Rothberg, pp. 45–47.

24 Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*, ed. by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003), p. 147.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

26 Rothberg, p. 47.

27 Susan Coates, 'The Child as Traumatic Trigger: Commentary on Paper by Laurel Moldawsky Silber', *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 22.1 (2012), 123–128 (p. 123).

of an original indebtedness are conceptual openings for thinking the individual's being-with-others, both synchronically (within a community) and diachronically (within a history and heritage). Guilt, in other words, is a figure for thinking relationality in the various contexts that pertain to human life, wherefore it is necessarily ambiguous. Rothberg notes:

it is possible to feel guilty for things in which one has not actively participated. Indeed, the semantic ambiguity of 'guilt', situated as it is between emotion and law, has consequences for coming to terms with implication, and analysts need to keep in mind the power of such 'mistaken' emotion.²⁸

The sense of guilt, Rothberg implies, leads analysis astray, as it diverts from terminological clarity. As much as such clarity is worth striving for, dismissing guilt in favour of collective wrongdoing ignores the fact that more often than not it is such supposedly 'mistaken' emotion that spurs the interest in comprehending the complex contribution to past or present wrongdoing, for instance in descendants of perpetrators or beneficiaries of the Shoah. The sense of guilt that links 'emotion and law' to economic and metaphysical concerns marks what concerns us, still, in spite of all rationalization or denial. Accepting the ambiguity of guilt would enhance the complexity of the implicated subject as an analytical category. Rothberg is right to observe that 'ambiguity is productive', but this is true not only because 'the difficult-to-locate position between victims and perpetrators' makes individuals 'useful to power'²⁹: Ambiguity is also *analytically* productive in that it highlights zones of transgression, affectedness, and indebtedness. Thinking implication beyond a legalistic framework calls for accepting conceptual traditions that operate in a non-binary mode, beyond the 'clear-cut categories of guilt and innocence'.³⁰ And contrary to what Rothberg's discussion suggests, the concept of guilt is prominent among these approaches to ethical complexity. Another one is morality, which Rothberg presents as tantamount to 'assertions of purity', especially in politics.³¹ While this might be true with regard to the rhetoric of contemporary US public discourse, such a definition provides a gravely foreshortened outlook onto a concept that has regulated, throughout centuries of philosophical thought, interaction and relationality.

28 Rothberg, p. 45.

29 Ibid., p. 55.

30 Ibid., p. 34.

31 Ibid., p. 49.

Rothberg, in a Nietzschean gesture, refutes morality after 'the moral and political collapse'³² of the Shoah. This refutation leaves a lacuna which Rothberg fills with an outlook onto future 'solidarity' free from implication in wrongdoing³³ under the guise of socialist internationalism.³⁴ Not every internationalism is socialist, of course, but more to the point, this promise hinges on a questionable temporality: 'guilt always points backwards toward a crime [...]; responsibility involves commitment to transforming structural injustices in future-oriented actions.'³⁵ Yet the proposed shift 'from a primary concern with how to compensate someone for loss to how to assess what beneficiaries and other implicated subjects *owe*'³⁶ aims at the second, but far from secondary, aspect of guilt, which comprises not just causation but also owing action. Guilt entails more than an attribution of blame for spilt milk. Indebtedness is a structure that addresses the problem that damage done in the past may easily forestall a future, and the question of how to respond to detrimental effects of past acts so as to enable a future.

Embracing the conceptual tradition of guilt and morality contributes to Rothberg's project of moving from the mere 'assignation of guilt [...]' toward a broader conception of what it means to participate in and be responsible for injustices'.³⁷ Rothberg appears to rule the canonical terms of guilt and morality out as markers of problematic participation order to cope with the tremendous complication that participation – an idea repeatedly mentioned in passing – is a fundamental and yet chronically neglected concept, as the next section will outline.

Participation, Criticism, and Resistance

Participation is a concept neither in Leibnitz, Kant, Fichte, nor in Schelling, Hegel, or Nietzsche. In Heidegger, the existential Being-with-others hinges on the individual and comprises no developed notion of the With.³⁸ The Greek μέθεξις (*methexis*), *participatio* in Latin,

³² Rothberg, p. 42; cf. 46.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 154–158.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), pp.154–155: 'By reason of this *with-like* [*mithaften*] Being-in-the-world, the world is always the one that I share with Others.' Heidegger's view on sharing, however, is not elaborated; he merely models

had, of course, been a concept seminal to Plato, Augustine, Aquinas and many others. It was seminal to formulating how the specific relates to its idea, and, by extension, how the mortal, specific creation relates to the immortal, divine creator. Of particular interest is Plato, who states that a particular being may participate in multiple ideas, so that the unity of that particular being is not a notion of individuality, but of community, *κοινωνία* (*koinōnia*)³⁹ – which, in Aristotle, is a political term that Heidegger translates as ‘Being-in-the-state-of-talking-to-each-other’ (*Miteinandersprechendsein*).⁴⁰ Paul’s use of *koinōnia* follows a Hellenistic adaptation of Plato’s idea, but drops the term *methexis*, participation.⁴¹ The focus on the individual in modern philosophy does not come back to it, with the result that the relational feature of human action remains largely unaddressed. Participation is left to other fields, mostly to economics, as the idea of shareholders, and to the law, negotiating the liability of individual shareholders, and how the actions of individuals are ‘woven together’ with those of others, in Latin: *cum plecto*. The complexity of agency is left to the realm of the law, where it is understood as complicity. The problem with leaving the question of participation and complex involvement to the field of the law is that while the law is highly political, it is not based on a strong concept of a community, but on individual agency and responsibility – on the very concepts that make relationality hard to grasp for philosophy.

In addressing this lack of a nuanced notion of participation – an idea and promise at the heart of democratic societies – is where Rothberg’s theory of implicated subjects could make a major contribution. Thinking implication against this background, however, requires taking it further than Rothberg does, further than regarding the implicated subject as ‘not a solution but a problem’⁴² and an effect of power structures that should, ultimately, be done away with. Operationalizing implication to understand participation requires accepting that all social life entails implication, for better or worse, that there is no political agenda capable of liberating the ‘[i]mpure subjects of historical and political

the others’ akin to one’s own being: ‘Thus in characterizing the encountering of *Others*, one is again still oriented by that *Dasein* which is in each case one’s own.’

39 Plato, *Sophist*, in *Platonis Opera*, ed. by John Burnet, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), III, 216–268 (251a ff.).

40 Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe: Zweite Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1919–1944*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2002), XXVIII: *Grundbegriffe der aristotelischen Philosophie*, 47.

41 See Rolf Schönberger, ‘Teilhabe’, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie online*, ed. by Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, and Gottfried Gabriel (Basel: Schwabe Verlag), par. 8.

42 Rothberg, p. 200.

responsibility⁴³ towards purity – which, in turn, requires thinking implicated-ness in more nuanced terms.⁴⁴ Rothberg looks primarily at works of visual art, yet the medium of language would be a good model for approaching the issue of individually responsible participation in a pre-formed communal structure, too. Literary language in particular reflects on the audience's structural participation in the discourse as it relies on readers to lend an eye, a voice, and an ear in reading or listening to a text, or watching a play. Fiction, moreover, depends on what Samuel Coleridge calls a 'willing suspension of disbelief [...], which constitutes poetic faith'⁴⁵: Reading a fictional text, for instance, implies believing in the existence of the presented characters and events without further proof, a prerequisite that comes to the fore particularly in science fiction.

Embracing the ambiguity of conceptual traditions and 'the "impurities" that characterize all identities'⁴⁶ as the field *in* which to work rather than a contaminated starting ground would make the theory of implication a much-needed contribution to thinking participation. Relinquishing the quest for purity could bring out what Christopher Kutz calls the 'hidden promise of complicity', namely 'the conception of community upon which it draws: a world where individuals shape their lives with others'.⁴⁷ In other words, thinking about complicity and problematic implicated-ness, a subject many do not want to know about, might be a good way of thinking about functioning participation and relationality. This, however, requires overcoming some comfortable assumptions about the position of the critic – a task in which Rothberg's notion of implication may prove to be very helpful.

In their introduction to a 2018 issue of the journal *kultur & geschlecht* entitled 'Between Complicity and Resistance', Wächter et al. note, not without resignation: 'It must, however, be stressed that not even a critique of complicity can ever be free of complicities.'⁴⁸ The neoliberal

43 Rothberg p. 35.

44 To avoid the relativism lurking in such acceptance, Mark Sanders's study of intellectual complicity in South African apartheid distinguishes between 'acting-in-complicity', which can be legally and ethically judged, and an underlying 'responsibility-in-complicity', a connectedness with other beings that explains how even silence or inactivity may affect the lives of others. See Mark Sanders, *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 8–11.

45 Samuel Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. by Adam Roberts, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), II, p. 208.

46 Rothberg, pp. 20–21.

47 Christopher Kutz, *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 259.

48 Cornelia Wächter and others, 'Introduction', *Social Representations: Between Complicity and Resistance* (*kultur & geschlecht special issue*, 20 (2018)), 1–3 (p. 2).

structures that continue to shape academia come to mind. Yet it is not clear whether the insight into a seemingly unavoidable complicity of critique with the criticized is necessarily paralyzing. This implication, rather, marks the relevance and urgency of thinking about the issue addressed in concepts such as implication, participation, and complicity. There is, however, a paradigm in recent critical approaches to complicity that would say otherwise, and that is concerning for very specific reasons.

This paradigm assumes that literature, and works of art in general, are instances of resistance that matter because they are a subversion of prevailing political and social structures and – vice versa – that insofar as they point out structures of language, and interaction, works of art are means of resistance against these. This assumption is heavily informed by the role of literature in nineteenth century industrialization and twentieth century totalitarianisms, yet somewhat at odds with the conditions for the production of literary works in older periods and, by extension, on the contemporary book market. It has been outlined that the assumption does not hold true for contemporary visual art and its involvement in consumer culture.⁴⁹ My point in criticizing the paradigm that literature is resistance, however, is not even one of historical materialism but, rather, that it fails to comprehend the complexity of involvements portrayed, performed, or analysed in many more of less recent literary texts – for instance in Herta Müller’s *The Hunger Angel*, which I discuss in the third section. A 2017 volume of essays on Müller is entitled *Schreiben als Widerstand* (‘Writing as Resistance’),⁵⁰ and the fundamental concerns of her works certainly justify this view: political totalitarianism as well as individual repression of guilt censor utterances, and thus call for subversion of, and resistance to, violent and silencing practices. In Ceaușescu’s Romania, the backdrop of many of Müller’s works, ‘resistance by culture’ (*rezistența prin cultură*) was even a set phrase of intellectual survival that rested on a complicity of artists and audience. This notion has, however, been criticized for retrospectively lending political relevance to practices that had, in fact, rather been therapeutic, escapist, or even opportunistic in nature.⁵¹ In 1985, the then-dissident Václav Havel criticized such notions as complicity of the multitude of average people with maintaining their oppression by way of accepting the social contract offered to them—including the private

49 Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

50 *Schreiben als Widerstand*, ed. by Pia Janke and Teresa Kovacs (Wien: Praesens, 2017).

51 Christine Vogel, *Zwischen den Literaturen*, in *Herta Müller-Handbuch*, ed. by Norbert Otto Eke (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2017), pp. 131–134.

enjoyment of resistance art in exchange for public compliance.⁵² Resistance is a misleading paradigm for reading works by Müller (and many others) as her texts address complexities of involvement that transcend, or undermine, the dichotomy of resistance versus active collaboration, such as keeping silent, not asking questions, not-wanting-to-know, or joining the majority view out of fear – instances of implication in Rothberg's sense.

The assumption that art is resistance to wrongful social structures tends to be extended onto critical readings of these texts as well, so as to strive for a position of critique that is untouched by the complicities and involvements of which others are accused.⁵³ Wächter et al. underline this notion of criticism as resistance.⁵⁴ The assumption that criticism should be – or has as its task to construct a position of being – unaffected by the complex involvement it criticizes in order to distribute blame is concerning because it imagines the critic to be a neutral, uninvolved judge. Yet this is not the position of criticism. It is, rather, one of implication in Rothberg's sense.⁵⁵ The recent discussion of complicity in the humanities and social sciences points out that a widened notion of implication might contribute to the urgent necessity of better comprehending the position of criticism.

In the introduction to their volume *Commitment and Complicity in Cultural Theory and Practice*, Begum Özden Firat, Sarah De Mul, and Sonja van Wichelen blame neoliberalism for the fact that what they call 'the committed intellectual' cannot escape complicity. The necessity of understanding complicity, they write, 'arises from an anxiety about our contemporary situation in which forms or methods of commitment – for example, environmentalism, feminism, antiracism – have been reappropriated and redefined by neoliberal and neoconservative forces.'⁵⁶ I would not think that the urgency of complicity arises primarily out of the fact that the cause and language of critique has been hijacked by hostile forces. That may well be the case, but still, the point of social

52 Christina Petrescu, 'When Dictatorships Fail to Deprive of Dignity: Herta Müller's "Romanian Period"', in *Herta Müller: Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. by Bettina Brandt and Valentina Glajar (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), pp. 57–86 (p. 72).

53 See Zoë Roth and Denise Grollmus, 'Word Literatures and the New Totalitarianism: The Politics of Reading and Resistance', *Cross-Language Dynamics: Reshaping Community*, 2 August 2017, <<http://projects.alc.manchester.ac.uk/cross-language-dynamics/world-literatures-new-totalitarianism-politics-reading-resistance/>> [accessed 11 March 2020].

54 Cornelia Wächter and others, p. 2.

55 For a discussion of the related 'postcritical' stance see Susanne Knittel, 'Memory and Repetition: Reenactment as an Affirmative Critical Practice', *New German Critique*, 137,46 (2019), 171–195.

56 *Commitment and Complicity in Cultural Theory and Practice*, ed. by Begum Özden Firat, Sarah De Mul and Sonja van Wichelen (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), p. 2.

critique and of criticism in particular had always been, literally, to tell apart and distinguish⁵⁷ the complex involvements that mark the position of individuals and groups in social, political, economic, and other interactions. The position of the critic is one among them; criticism arises from being involved, and affected (by hostility, for instance). Following the lines of the juridical discourse in a discussion of complicity, so as to claim the privileged stance of the unaffected judge in order to single out culprits forecloses a critical discussion of participation, complicity, or implication. More often than not, complicity, in the age of neoliberalism, is 'collective, shared, structural, and inadvertent', as Afxentis Afxentiou, Robin Dunford, and Michael Neu write. 'Given that non-complicity is not [...] an option', they propose the alternative aim of anti-complicity: 'Being anti-complicit is not about preserving one's purity – an exercise which only the materially privileged tend to have sufficient time and resources to engage in: it is a commitment to understanding and resisting structures that cause harm.'⁵⁸ There it is again: resistance. In approaching complicity, the insistence on aspiring to a position of resistance gestures toward a resistance of a different kind, it would seem: psychological resistance to acknowledging the extent, complexity, and seeming inevitability of involvements. Rothberg's concept of implication as a structure that can be overcome is marked by this resistance, too; hence the need to widen the notion of implication. Underlining the necessity of this acknowledgement does not entail declaring the critical approaches to complicity futile, on the contrary. Overcoming the resistance aims at avoiding a complication that Thomas Docherty describes: 'The assertion of radical independence, made in the interest of avoiding complicity with [...] corruptions, is, paradoxically, what permits the corruption to happen.'⁵⁹ Not just because it makes people look away, assured that 'it can't happen here'.⁶⁰ The assertion of holding a position that is detached from otherwise ubiquitous problematic involvements focuses on itself, and singles out the individual – no less than condemning other individuals does. Yet what would actually be necessary is to understand the relationality, and structures

57 See *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th edn, ed. by Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), s.v. 'κρίνω' <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>> [accessed 11 March 2020].

58 *Exploring Complicity: Concept, cases, and Critique*, ed. by Afxentis Afxentiou, Robin Dunford, and Michael Neu (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), p. 11.

59 Thomas Docherty, *Complicity: Criticism between Collaboration and Commitment* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016) p. 17.

60 Ibid.

of implication, that bind people to unwilling, even unknowing implication in wrongdoing. Language is at the core of this: For it is in promises and narratives of profit that complicities are formed, in the rhetoric of TINA ('There is no alternative') and in the specification of (legal, administrative, or other) vocabulary that instances of implication are covered up as individual choice, social progress, or political realism. And it is in narratives – in literature, theater, and other arts – that the logic of implication is analysed, performed, and even enjoyed.

Narratives of complicity are, of course, not a recent phenomenon, and yet the popular fascination with the issue, for instance, in crime fiction, is indicative of a particular modern urgency in thinking about willing and unwilling participation and shared agency. Arendt writes about twentieth century totalitarianisms:

In contrast to absolutism and other forms of tyranny, where nonparticipation was a matter of course and not of choice, we deal here with a situation where participation, and that as we know can mean complicity in criminal activities, is a matter of course, and nonparticipation a matter of decision.⁶¹

What makes complicity a ubiquitous phenomenon in (Western) Modernity might be the parallel of a far-reaching striving for civic participation of individuals in mass-based societies on the one hand, and the lack of sophisticated political concepts of participation outlining the relationality of the so-called Modern individual on the other. Such concepts exist, of course, but these have not, for the most part, been taken seriously politically. A prominent modern discourse negotiating the individual's relationality and its irreducible implicated-ness in social dynamics is psychoanalysis. I will briefly turn to Freud's approaches to thinking communal and private structures of relationality as they pay heed to complicity several times, providing an understanding of community and law as based on complicity in a crime. Yet Freud's notes on complicity also provide an illustration of the complication that springs from adopting the legal focus onto individual agency for the analysis of inter-actions. Freud thus helps to highlight the foundational role of implication for criticism (as opposed to the paradigm of thinking as resistance), and the consequences of adopting the judge's stance of non-involvement.

61 Arendt, p. 154: 'This freedom [sc. to choose to participate in politics] was unknown in antiquity, and it has been quite effectively abolished in a number of twentieth-century dictatorships, especially of course in the totalitarian variety.'

In his 1912 *Totem and Taboo*, Freud describes complicity as the foundational structure of society as we know it: 'In the earliest times the sacrificial animal [...] might only be killed if all the members of a clan participated in the deed and shared their guilt [*unter Teilnahme und Mitschuld des ganzen Stammes*].'⁶² Later in this hypothetical prehistory, after the father has been killed and 'the patriarchal horde [has been] replaced [...] by the fraternal clan', this mode of participation is perpetuated: 'Society [is] now based on complicity in the common crime; religion was based on the sense of guilt and the remorse [*Die Gesellschaft ruht jetzt auf der Mitschuld an dem gemeinsam verübten Verbrechen, die Religion auf dem Schuldbewußtsein und der Reue darüber*].'⁶³ To the extent that Freud's claim is true, it also implicates his own text, which is complicit in the exclusion of women – sisters – from share-holding guilt in the 'fraternal clan'. This exclusion of women from participation via complicity in the 'brotherhood of men' appears to be a trait of modernity, of thinking democratic as opposed to feudal structures. Some 140 years earlier, Goethe had written the one-act farce *The Accomplices* (*Die Mitschuldigen*).⁶⁴ In this play, all characters are involved in mutual frauds to gain money or sex, which is such great fun because both theft and adultery were punishable by death at the time. The cuckolded husband sums up the economy for the adulterer, played by Goethe himself in the Weimar production⁶⁵: '*In Summa, nehmen Sie's nur nicht so gar genau / Ich stahl dem Herrn Sein Geld und Er mir meine Frau.*'⁶⁶ (In sum, don't be all too particular / I stole from you your money, sir; you stole from me my wife.) In Freud's fragment of the 1901 analysis of 'Dora,' by contrast, there is nothing fun about the exchange of partners including the de-facto prostitution of the underage daughter, which renders her ill. Still, Freud writes: 'Her father was himself partly responsible [*mitschuldig*] [...] for he had handed her over to this strange man in the interests of his own love-affair.'⁶⁷ The blame is only *partially* on him, it seems to Freud, because Dora knows what her father is doing, yet

62 Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* [SE], ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols, reprint (New York: Vintage, 1999), XIII, 137; *Totem und Tabu*, in *Gesammelte Werke: Chronologisch geordnet* [GW], ed. by Anna Freud and others, 19 vols (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1968), IX, 167.

63 Freud, SE:XII, 145; GW:IX, 176.

64 First as one-act farce (in 1769), later (1787) as a three-act comedy.

65 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Kommentar*, in *Sämtliche Werke: 1. Abteilung*: 5, ed. by Dieter Borchmeyer und Peter Huber (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), p. 1149.

66 Goethe, *Die Mitschuldigen: Ein Lustspiel (Dritte Fassung)*, III, 9, 940f. *Sämtliche Werke* 1.5, p. 365.

67 Freud, SE:VII, 84; GW:V, 249.

ignores it: 'She had made herself an accomplice, and had dismissed from her mind every sign which tended to show its true character [Sie hatte sich zur Mitschuldigen dieses Verhältnisses gemacht und alle Anzeichen abgewiesen, welche sich für die wahre Natur desselben ergaben].'⁶⁸ It seems outrageous to declare a victim of neglect an accomplice in her own abuse; what leads Freud to do so is his adoption of legal vocabulary and logic: Divorce legislation of the time required the identification of a guilty party (and possible accomplices, i.e. lovers or others in the know).⁶⁹ Focusing on this kind of involvement sidelines those structures that prove pathogenic for Dora, including the involvement of the analyst in the libidinal exchange. Freud's implication comes to the fore in a footnote explaining why he cannot take her 'disgust' at the man pursuing her at face value: 'I happen to know Herr K., for it was the same person who had visited me with the patient's father, and he was still quite young and of prepossessing appearance.'⁷⁰ In the fragment of Dora's analysis, critical implication means that psychotherapeutic interpretation undermines the patient's emotional and hermeneutic independence, attributing to her the wishes the adult men wish the underage girl had.⁷¹ The background of Dora's treatment, at which Freud hints only in passing, and which cannot but seem obscene to later readers – that two adult men hand an underage girl over for treatment to make sure she stops complaining and assumes the social and sexual position they have allotted her – is what makes her quit treatment, and what makes Freud understand a key element of psychoanalytic theory: 'the factor of "transference"⁷² of expectations and desires from patient onto analyst and, notably, in the opposite direction. The 'Dora' case illustrates why problematic participation cannot be discussed on the level of personal agency, and in terms of complicity, as in legal discourses, but requires understanding structures of inter-action that undermine and question the individual's possibility to be responsible. It requires, in other words, understanding implication in terms of language.

68 Freud, SE:VII, 35; GW:V, 194.

69 Freud, SE:VI, 88 (where *Mitschuldige* is translated as 'correspondent'); GW:IV, 99.

70 Freud, SE:VII, 28; see GW:V, 187: 'Ich kenne zufällig Herrn K.; es ist dieselbe Person, die den Vater der Patientin zu mir begleitet hat, ein noch jugendlicher Mann von einnehmendem Äußern.'

71 See Patrick Mahony, *Freud's Dora: A Psychoanalytic, Historical, and Textual Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 63: 'In therapy and in his writing he would continue to abuse Dora and effect acceptance of his version by his colleagues and later analysts.'

72 Freud, *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, SE:VII, 12.

Implicated-ness in Language

Herta Müller's *The Hunger Angel* is one text that is particularly well suited to exploring implicated-ness in language as a wider notion of implication than Rothberg suggests – in order to take into account that relationality is an irreducible mode of subjectivity and implicated-ness, therefore, an unavoidable trait of human existence that calls for analysis and criticism all the more urgently than the assumption of implication as an unfortunate mishap. In the critical discussion of *The Hunger Angel*, the focus is usually not on the narrative itself but rather on the late Pastior's involvement with the Securitate, the infamous Romanian secret police, which came to light in 2010, four years after his death. It has often been assumed that Pastior's homosexuality (a punishable crime at the time) made him susceptible to being pressed into being an informer.⁷³ Yet a detailed reading of the Securitate files points out that it had not been his sexuality that was used as a means to exert pressure on Pastior in 1961 but, cynically, poems he had written about his gulag years – even though mentioning gulags was no longer a crime at the time, as the officer does not fail to note in the file. Yet Pastior was not aware of this, and so expected to be persecuted again.⁷⁴ This complex is important but hardly a shocking scandal. *The Hunger Angel* negotiates acting out of fear all the time, and portrays political systems that install terror by means of undermining individual agency while leaving the mechanisms of guilt well in place – even if Müller did not know about his involvement when she wrote the text together with Pastior. And even though morally outrageous, spying on fellow human beings as a Securitate informer was legal, which points to the fact that discussing implication (even in terms of complicity) often involves a complication of the norms by which to judge; this is what makes it systematically interesting, even if one is not tempted to see historic parallels between twentieth century totalitarianisms and twenty-first century neoliberalism.

In the course of its roughly chronologically, but primarily thematically organized chapters, Müller's text unfolds the issue of implication by complicating, and transgressing the limits of, the concept of complicity. The text begins with a straightforward juridical notion that joins the perspective of power, concluding with how the violations of the sense of personhood destroy the capacity to share a community. I can only

⁷³ See Daniel R. Schwarz, *Reading the Modern European Novel Since 1900* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2018), p. 268.

⁷⁴ Ernst Wichner, 'Unterschiedenes ist gut: Der Dichter Oskar Pastior und die rumänische Securitate', in *Versuchte Rekonstruktion: Die Securitate und Oskar Pastior* (Text + Kritik special issue, (2012)), 9–32 (p. 9).

touch upon a couple of passages that are relevant here; the first one is a scene of departure for deportation:

On the wooden walkway, just next to the wooden gas meter, my grandmother said: I KNOW YOU'LL COME BACK.

I didn't set out to remember the sentence. [...] It worked inside me, more than all the books I had packed. I KNOW YOU'LL COME BACK became the heart-shovel's accomplice and the hunger angel's adversary.⁷⁵

Leopold Auberg, the novel's fictional protagonist, holds a heart-shaped shovel dear, we later learn, for as long as he uses it to shovel coal in the gulag's coke factory, he is given something to eat. The heart with a handle echoes a German saying: *Dem Tod von der Schippe springen*, to cheat death by 'jumping off his shovel'. Causality would, of course, insist that hard labour kills people in the gulag, yet from the point of view of confinement, work equals life, for better or worse, and the grandmother's sentence supports this outlook onto survival. What makes the sentence an 'accomplice' rather than a supporter of the protagonist is that both the sentence and the shovel work for the inmate, and against the authorities for whom the punishment and retaliation in the gulag culminates, ideally, in the death of the workers. A later passage drops this legalistic point of view and makes the self that tries to survive the instance of judgement – the judgement, however, still does not achieve stability:

Every evening on the way home, as soon as the work site was far enough behind me and I had enough distance from the cement, I realized that we weren't betraying one another. We were all being betrayed by the Russians and their cement. But even though I knew this, the very next day I suspected everybody all over again. And they felt it. The suspected me, too. And I felt it. The cement and the hunger angel are accomplices. Hunger pulls open your pores and crawls in. Once it's inside, the cement seals them back shut and there you are, cemented in.⁷⁶

75 Müller, *The Hunger Angel*, p. 8; see Müller, *Atemschaukel*, p. 14: 'Auf dem Holzgang, genau dort, wo die Gasuhr ist, sagte die Großmutter: ICH WEISS DU KOMMST WIEDER. / Ich habe mir diesen Satz nicht absichtlich gemerkt. [...] Er hat in mir gearbeitet, mehr als alle mitgenommenen Bücher. ICH WEISS DU KOMMST WIEDER wurde zum Komplizen der Herzschaufel und zum Kontrahenten des Hungerengels.'

76 Müller, *Hunger Angel*, p. 31; see *Atemschaukel*, p. 39: 'Jeden Abend auf dem Heimweg, in der nötigen Entfernung vom Zement, mit dem Rücken zur Baustelle, habe ich gewusst, dass nicht wir uns gegenseitig betrügen, sondern alle betrogen werden von den Russen und ihrem Zement. Aber am nächsten Tag kam wieder der Verdacht, gegen mein Wissen und gegen alle. Und das haben alle gespürt. Und alle gegen mich. Und das habe ich gespürt. Der Zement und der Hungerengel sind Komplizen. Der Hunger reißt die Poren auf und kriecht hinein. Wenn er drin ist, klebt der Zement sie zu, man ist zementiert.'

Concrete and hunger are accomplices in that both weaken the narrator physically as well as mentally, so that he becomes susceptible to the paranoid glance at the others' collaboration with, and corruption by, the authorities, in the name of personal survival. The first of the instances demonstrating this is the last time the term 'accomplice' is used, the remainder of Müller's text spells out the implication this complicated term fails to grasp adequately. It is about the camp's hairdresser and his rhetoric of diversion:

what did words like MOTLEY CREW, HOTEL, and A WHILE have to do with us. The barber was not an accomplice of the camp administration, but he was privileged. He was allowed to live and sleep in his barber room, while we were stuck in our barracks, our brains clogged with cement.⁷⁷

In the ever-hardening situation of hunger and hard labor in the camp, the words of the inmates' German language lose their function as means of communicating with others; remnants of this aspect of language are preserved in the Russian words of order and work. What comes to the fore in the German words is their ability to fill the mouth, thus substituting for food:

Hunger words, or eating words, dominate every conversation, but even so, you're still alone. Everyone eats his words by himself although we're all eating together [*mitessen*]. There's no thought of [sympathy with/ participation in] the hunger of others, you can't hunger [along with someone][*mithungern*].⁷⁸

The implications of this passage might be explained with reference to Abraham and Torok's psychoanalytical notion of language as, fundamentally, not ex-expression but intro-jection first formed by the hungry infant: 'The emptiness [of the mouth] is first experienced in the form of cries and sobs, delayed fullness, then as a calling, ways of requesting presence, as language. Further experiences include filling the oral void by producing sound' so as to attain a 'transition from a mouth filled

77 Müller, *Hunger Angel*, p. 38; see *Atemschaukel*, p. 46: 'Was hatten Ausdrücke wie INTERLOPE GESELLSCHAFT, HOTEL und ZEITLANG mit uns zu tun. Der Rasierer war kein Komplize der Lagerleitung, aber privilegiert. Er durfte in seiner Rasierstube wohnen und schlafen. Wir mit unseren Baracken und dem Zement hatten keinen Witz mehr im Schädel.'

78 Müller, *Hunger Angel*, 9. 149, my brackets; see Müller, *Atemschaukel*, p. 158: 'Hungerwörter, also Esswörter, beherrschen die Gespräche, und man bleibt doch allein. Jeder isst seine Wörter selbst. Die anderen, die mitessen, tun es auch für sich selbst. Die Anteilnahme am Hunger der anderen ist null, mithungern kann man nicht.'

with the breast to a mouth filled with words.⁷⁹ In this way, which seems close to Müller's text,

[t]he absence of objects and the empty mouth are transformed into words. [...] Introjecting a desire, a pain, a situation means channeling them through language into a communion of empty mouths.⁸⁰

In Müller's text, however, the communication of wishes establishes no community, everyone fills his or her own mouth, without passing anything around. It is important to note that Abraham and Torok describe this 'communion of empty mouths' in the context of mourning. Their point is not that words can serve as a substitute for food; they are not. The point is that words allow one to accept the lack of something, or the loss of someone, to swallow it – as opposed to denying and suppressing it, and thus remaining driven by it. The return of the catastrophic, life-threatening infantile hunger in the gulag appears as a limit of this function of the symbolic. Fullness cannot be mourned, hunger cannot be accepted. Hunger destroys the symbol's relational capacity and leaves speakers incapacitated, alone with their hunger like infants. At a later point, the narrator states ambiguously: 'Inside the camp, the we-form is singular.'⁸¹ This singular 'we' denotes no community but a plurality of equally incapacitated individuals. This sense pertains in the case of the narrator: At the end of the novel, he eats the smallest of all inanimate objects that served him as dancing partners, a dusty raisin.⁸² And, returning to the passage briefly discussed at the beginning of this response, it becomes clear that the position from which to judge has been consumed, too, in the gulag:

The naked truth is that Paul Gast the lawyer stole his wife's soup right out of her bowl until she could no longer get out of bed and died because she couldn't help it, just like he stole her soup because his hunger couldn't help it [...]

That was the way [things go]: because [everyone] couldn't help it, no one could.⁸³

79 Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, 'Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation', in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Nicholas Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 125–138, (p. 127); my brackets.

80 Abraham and Torok, pp. 125–138, (p. 128); my brackets.

81 Müller, *Hunger Angel*, p. 251; see *Atemschaukel*, p. 263: 'Das Lager-Wir ist ein Singular.'

82 Cf. Müller, *Hunger Angel*, p. 251: 'I've danced with the teapot. / With the sugar bowl. / With the biscuit tin. / With the telephone. / With the alarm clock. With the ashtray.' See *Atemschaukel*, p. 296–297.

83 Müller, *Hunger Angel*, p. 218; see *Atemschaukel*, p. 230.

There are, of course, people who ‘are to blame’ for her death, who ‘could have helped’ the situation, to use the usual English translations of the German verb *dafürkönnen*; people whose crime it should be called, given that the hunger was not merely circumstantial: the camp authorities. But the German verb *dafürkönnen* aims at more: it binds a deed ‘for’ the sake of which (*für*) one acts back to a potentiality, the possibility of deciding how to act (*können*: to be able to). And here’s the catch: even though the people around the soup acted, and could thus be called guilty of causing a death, they were impotent actors insofar as they lacked the potential to decide how to act due to their starvation. It is, therefore, more accurate to say that they were implicated in the death: involved by cause yet not by intention. Hunger leaves no room for decision; there is no potentiality left to decide against it. And yet this does not settle the case, for Müller’s is not at all a legal discourse. Nor is it a strictly historical one, because the actors are fictional. The highly repetitive passage, which is actually much longer, describing the death at the table – a desolate last supper, as it were – finds nobody who could do anything ‘for’ (*für*) the victim, and against the hunger. In Arendt’s terms, the scene does not raise a moral issue, insofar as morality is about the guilt of the individual which does not apply here, as the passage repeatedly states, insisting that none of the implicated subjects could help themselves.⁸⁴ Yet this differentiation rests on Arendt’s clear-cut analytical distinction between morality and responsibility which does not comprise the emotional aspect of the sense of guilt. The question raised by the ‘naked truth’ of the scene is of course a moral one: it evokes what Rothberg calls, all too easily, the “mistaken” emotion⁸⁵ of guilt for things one cannot help. The sense of being guilty of, or complicit in, the death which none of the involved could have helped marks an implication characteristic of totalitarianisms: a guided implication that (ab)uses subjects as instruments of power.

Still, Arendt’s dichotomy of guilt and responsibility provides some insight into the scene. For what applies to it is responsibility in a very literal sense: The need to respond, to not let the deed pass unmentioned and forgotten. It has to be spelled out, not because there was anything clear or compensatory to say about it but because remaining silent would be an instance of complicity with the authority that arranged the situation of hunger, theft, and condoned killing. Spelling out the

84 For a survey of Müller’s works in terms of Arendt’s notion of totalitarianism see Brigit Haines, ‘Humanity in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt und Herta Müller’, *German Life and Letters*, 73.1 (2020), 143–160.

85 Rothberg, p. 45.

killing negotiates the question of personal profit that (legally) renders one complicit: In an earlier passage, the narrator makes clear that he stole some of the soup, too, and others at the table at least had the same intention.⁸⁶ The narrator is no distanced critic. Retelling the lawyer's deed, rather, marks the narrator's implication in the death, in fact his active participation in it, by leaving it noticeably unsaid. The passage does not aim at naming and blaming, and rejects all conventional expressions, so as to keep the question of involvement open, and to involve the audience (the reader or listener) in the disquieting concern: Although the death was not intended by anyone assembled at the table, it was brought about by them, which remains unacceptable. This instance of implication is presented in the language of the passage: the portrayal joins a pre-established practice by using conventional terms like *dafürkönnen*, even if it is just to say that they are unacceptably inaccurate. The passage is thus not a confession that seeks to relieve the speaker of guilt but a poetic instance of negotiating problematic implication by involving the reader in a dilemma of complicated guilt and impossible agency. Such involvement of contemporary audiences within historical experiences of totalitarianism is possible because implicated-ness in the pre-established forms of languages is a basic condition of human life. Problematic implication can be better understood against the background of implicated-ness in pre-established structures of language than with an outlook onto uninvolved distance and purity.

86 See Müller, *Hunger Angel*, p. 214; *Atemschaukel*, p. 225: 'I reached for her soup. Trudi Pelikan was also eyeing it furtively. And Albert Gion from across the table. I began spooning away, without counting. I didn't slurp, because slurping takes longer. I ate for myself, without Heidrun Gast or Trudi Pelikan or Albert Gion. (Ich griff nach der Suppe. Auch die Trudi Pelikan schielte nach ihr. Auch der Albert Gion von vis-à-vis. Ich begann zu löffeln, die Löffel zählte ich nicht. Ich schlürfte nicht einmal, weil das länger dauert. Ich aß ganz für mich, ohne Heidrun Gast und Trudi Pelikan und Albert Gion.)'

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