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Herta Müller:

Every word knows something of a vicious circle

Nobel Lecture

December 7, 2009

DO YOU HAVE A HANDKERCHIEF was the question my mother asked me every morning, standing by the gate to our house, before I went out onto the street. I didn't have a handkerchief. And because I didn't, I would go back inside and get one. I never had a handkerchief because I would always wait for her question. The handkerchief was proof that my mother was looking after me in the morning. For the rest of the day I was on my own. The question DO YOU HAVE A HANDKERCHIEF was an indirect display of affection. Anything more direct would have been embarrassing and not something the farmers practiced. Love disguised itself as a question. That was the only way it could be spoken: matter-of-factly, in the tone of a command, or the deft maneuvers used for work. The brusqueness of the voice even emphasized the tenderness. Every morning I went to the gate once without a handkerchief and a second time with a handkerchief. Only then would I go out onto the street, as if having the handkerchief meant having my mother there, too.

Twenty years later I had been on my own in the city a long time and was working as a translator in a manufacturing plant. I would get up at five a.m.; work began at six-thirty. Every morning the loudspeaker blared the national anthem into the factory yard; at lunch it was the workers' choruses. But the workers simply sat over their meals with empty tinplate eyes and hands smeared with oil. Their food was wrapped in newspaper. Before they ate their bit of fatback, they first scraped the newsprint off the rind. Two years went by in the same routine, each day like the next.

In the third year the routine came to an end. Three times in one week a visitor showed up at my office early in the morning: an enormous, thick-boned man with sparkling blue eyes—a colossus from the Securitate.

The first time he stood there, cursed me, and left.

The second time he took off his windbreaker, hung it on the key to the cabinet, and sat down. That morning I had brought some tulips from home and arranged them in a vase. The man looked at me and praised me for being such a keen judge of character. His voice was slippery. I felt uneasy. I contested his praise and assured him that I understood tulips, but not people. Then he said maliciously that he knew me better than I knew tulips. After that he draped his windbreaker over his arm and left.

The third time he sat down but I stayed standing, because he had set his briefcase on my chair. I didn't dare move it to the floor. He called me stupid, said I was a shirker and a slut, as corrupted as a stray bitch. He shoved the tulips close to the edge of the desk, then put an empty sheet of paper and a pen in the middle of the desktop. He yelled at me: *Write*. Without sitting down, I wrote what he dictated—my name, date of birth and address. Next, that I would tell no one, no matter how close a friend or relative, that I...

and then came the terrible word: *colaborez—I am collaborating*. At that point I stopped writing. I put down the pen and went to the window and looked out onto the dusty street, unpaved and full of potholes, and at all the humpbacked houses. On top of everything else this street was called Strada Gloriei—Glory Street. On Glory Street a cat was sitting in a bare mulberry tree. It was the factory cat with the torn ear. And above the cat the early morning sun was shining like a yellow drum. I said: *N-am caracterul—I don't have the character for this*. I said it to the street outside. The word CHARACTER made the Securitate man hysterical. He tore up the sheet of paper and threw the pieces on the floor. Then he probably realized he would have to show his boss that he had tried to recruit me, because he bent over, picked up the scraps and tossed them into his briefcase. After that he gave a deep sigh and, defeated, hurled the vase with the tulips against the wall. As it shattered it made a grinding sound, as though the air had teeth. With his briefcase under his arm he said quietly: *You'll be sorry, we'll drown you in the river*. I said as if to myself: *If I sign that, I won't be able to live with myself anymore, and I'll have to do it on my own. So it's better if you do it*. By then the office door was already open and he was gone. And outside on the Strada Gloriei the factory cat had jumped from the tree onto the roof of the building. One branch was bouncing like a trampoline.

The next day the tug of war began. They wanted me out of the factory. Every morning at 6:30 I had to report to the director. The head of the official labor union and the party secretary were also in his office. Just like my mother once asked: DO YOU HAVE A HANDKERCHIEF, the director now asked every morning: *Have you found another job?* Every morning I gave the same answer: *I'm not looking for one, I like it here in the factory, I'd like to stay here until I retire*.

One morning I came to work and found my thick dictionaries lying on the floor of the hall outside my office. I opened the door; an engineer was sitting at my desk. He said: *People are supposed to knock before they enter a room. This is my place, you have no business here*. I couldn't go home; any unexcused absence would have given them a pretext to fire me. I no longer had an office, so now I really had to make sure I came to work; under no circumstances could I fail to be there.

My friend, whom I told everything as we walked home down the pitiful Strada Gloriei, cleared a corner of her desk for me, at first. But one morning she stood outside her office and said: *I can't let you in. Everyone is saying you're an informer*. The harassment was passed down; the rumor was set into circulation among my colleagues. That was the worst. You can defend yourself against an attack, but there's nothing you can do against libel. Every day I prepared myself for anything, including death. But I

couldn't cope with this perfidy. No preparation made it bearable. Libel stuffs you with filth; you suffocate because you can't defend yourself. In the eyes of my colleagues I was exactly what I had refused to become. If I had spied on them they would have trusted me without the slightest hesitation. In essence they were punishing me because I had spared them.

Since now I really had to make sure I came to work, but no longer had an office, and since my friend could no longer let me into hers, I stood in the stairwell, unable to decide what to do. I climbed up and down the stairs a few times and suddenly I was again my mother's child, because I HAD A HANDKERCHIEF. I placed it on one of the stairs between the second and third floors, carefully smoothed it out and sat down. I rested my thick dictionaries on my knee and translated the descriptions of hydraulic machines. I was a staircase wit and my office was a handkerchief. My friend joined me on the stairs at lunchtime. We ate together as we had in her office, and before that in mine. From the loudspeaker in the yard the workers' choruses sang about the happiness of the people, as always. My friend ate her lunch and cried over me. I didn't cry. I had to stay tough. For a long time. A few never-ending weeks, until I was dismissed.

During the time that I was a staircase wit, I looked up the word STAIR in the dictionary: the first step is the STARTING STEP or CURTAIL STEP that can also be a BULLNOSE. HAND is the direction a stair takes at the first riser. The edge of a tread that projects past the face of the riser is called the NOSING. I already knew a number of beautiful words having to do with lubricated hydraulic machine parts: DOVETAIL, GOOSENECK, ACORN NUTS and EYEBOLTS. Now I was equally amazed at the poetic names of the stair parts, the beauty of the technical language. NOSING and HAND—so the stair has a body. Whether working with wood or stone, cement or iron: why do humans insist on imposing their face on even the most unwieldy things in the world, why do they name dead matter after their own flesh, personifying it as parts of the body? Is this hidden tenderness necessary to make the harsh work bearable for the technicians? Does every job in every field follow the same principle as my mother's question about the handkerchief?

When I was little we had a handkerchief drawer at home, which was always partitioned into two rows, with three stacks apiece:

On the left the men's handkerchiefs for my father and grandfather.

On the right the women's handkerchiefs for my mother and grandmother.

In the middle the children's handkerchiefs for me.

The drawer was a family portrait in handkerchief format. The men's handkerchiefs were the biggest, with dark stripes along the edges in brown, gray or Bordeaux. The women's handkerchiefs were smaller, and their edges were light blue, red, or green. The children's handkerchiefs were the smallest: borderless white squares painted with flowers or animals. All three handkerchief types were divided into those for everyday use, in the front row, and those reserved for Sunday, in the back. On Sundays your handkerchief had to match the color of your clothes, even if it wasn't visible.

No other object in the house, including ourselves, was ever as important to us as the handkerchief. Its uses were universal: sniffles; nosebleeds; hurt hand, elbow or knee; crying, or biting into it to suppress the crying. A cold wet handkerchief on the forehead for headaches. Tied at the four corners it protected your head against sunburn or rain. If you had to remember something you made a knot to prompt your memory. For carrying heavy bags you wrapped it around your hand. When the train pulled out of the station you waved it to say good-bye. And because the word for tear in our Banat dialect sounds like the Romanian word for train, the squeaking of the railcars on the tracks always sounded to me like crying. In the village if someone died at home they immediately tied a handkerchief around his chin so that his mouth stayed closed when the rigor mortis set in. In the city if a person collapsed on the side of the road, some passerby would always take a handkerchief and cover his face, so that the handkerchief became the dead man's first place of peace.

On hot summer days the parents would send their children to the cemetery late in the evening to water the flowers. We stayed together in groups of two or three, quickly watering one grave and then the next. Afterwards we would huddle together on the steps of the chapel and watch wisps of white mist rise from some of the graves. They would fly up a little ways and disappear in the darkness. For us they were the souls of the dead: animal figures, glasses, little bottles and cups, gloves and stockings. And here and there a white handkerchief bordered by the black night.

Later, when I was meeting with Oskar Pastior so I could write about his deportation to the Soviet labor camp, he told me that an elderly Russian mother had given him a handkerchief made of white batiste. Maybe you will both be lucky, said the Russian woman, and you will come home soon and so will my son. Her son was the same age as Oskar Pastior and as far away from home as he was, but in the opposite direction, she said, in a penal battalion. Oskar Pastior had knocked on her door, a half-starved beggar wanting to trade a lump of coal for a little bit of food. She let him in and gave him some hot soup. And when she saw his nose dripping into the bowl, she gave him the white batiste handkerchief that no one had ever used before. With its a-jour border, and stems

and rosettes precisely stitched with silk thread, the handkerchief was a thing of beauty that embraced as well as wounded the beggar. It was a combination: consolation made of batiste, and a silk-stemmed measure of his decrepitude. For the woman, Oskar Pastior was also a combination: an unworldly beggar in her house and a lost child in the world. Both of these personae were delighted and overwhelmed by the gesture of a woman who was two persons for him as well: an unknown Russian woman and the worried mother with the question: DO YOU HAVE A HANDKERCHIEF.

Ever since I heard this story I have had a question of my own: is DO YOU HAVE A HANDKERCHIEF valid everywhere? Does it stretch halfway across the world in the snowy sheen between freezing and thawing? Does it pass between mountains and steppes to cross every border; can it reach all the way into a gigantic empire strewn with penal and labor camps? Is the question DO YOU HAVE A HANDKERCHIEF impossible to get rid of, even with a hammer and sickle, even with all the camps of Stalinist re-education?

Although I have spoken Romanian for decades, it was only while talking with Oskar Pastior that I realized that the Romanian word for handkerchief is *batistă*. Another example of how sensual the Romanian language is, relentlessly driving its words straight to the heart of things. The material makes no detour, but presents itself ready-made as a handkerchief, as a BATISTĂ. As if all handkerchiefs, whenever and wherever, were made of batiste.

Oskar Pastior kept that handkerchief in his trunk as a reliquary of a double mother with a double son. And after five years of life in the camps he brought it home. Because his white batiste handkerchief was hope and fear. Once you let go of hope and fear, you die.

After our conversation about the white handkerchief I spent half the night pasting up a word collage for Oskar Pastior on a white card:

*Dots are dancing here says Bea
you're coming into a long-stemmed glass of milk
linens in white gray-green zinc tub
nearly all materials
correspond upon delivery
look here
I am the trainride and
the cherry in the soapdish
never talk to strange men
or speak over the switchboard*

When I went to see him later in the week to give him the collage, he said: *you have to paste on FOR OSKAR as well*. I said: *Whatever I give to you is yours*. He said: *You have to paste it on, because the card may not know that*. I took it back home and pasted on: For Oskar. And then I gave it to him the following week, as if I had left the gate first without a handkerchief and now was back the second time with a handkerchief.

Another story also ends with a handkerchief:

My grandparents had a son named Matz. In the 1930s he was sent to study business in Timișoara, so that he could take over the family grain trade and grocery store. The school had teachers from the German Reich, real Nazis. Matz may have been trained as a merchant on the side, but mainly he was taught to be a Nazi—brainwashed according to plan. After he finished, Matz was a passionate Nazi, a changed person. He barked out anti-Semitic slogans, and was as unreachable as an imbecile. My grandfather rebuked him several times: he owed his entire fortune to the credit advanced by Jewish business friends. And when that didn't help, he boxed Matz on the ears several times. But the young man's faculty of reason had been erased. He played the village ideologue, bullying his peers who were dodging the front. Matz had a desk job with the Romanian army. Nevertheless he felt an urge to move from theory to practice, so he volunteered for the SS and asked to be sent to the front. A few months later he came home to marry. Wiser for having seen the crimes at the front, he used a then-current magical formula to escape the war for a few days. The magical formula was called: wedding leave.

My grandmother kept two photos of her son Matz far back in a drawer: a wedding photo and a death photo. The wedding picture shows a bride in white, taller than he by a hand, thin and earnest—a plaster Madonna. On her head was a wreath made of wax that looked like snow-flocked leaves. Next to her was Matz in his Nazi uniform, a soldier instead of a husband, a brideguard instead of a bridegroom. No sooner had he returned to the front, the death photo came. It shows a poor soldier torn to shreds by a mine. The death photo is hand-sized: in the middle of a black field a little gray heap of human remains can be seen resting on a white cloth. Against the black, field the white cloth looks as small as a children's handkerchief, a white square with a strange design painted in the middle. For my grandmother this photo was a combination, too: on the white handkerchief was a dead Nazi, in her memory was a living son. My grandmother kept this double picture inside her prayer book for all her years. She prayed every day, and her prayers almost certainly had double meanings as well. Acknowledging the break from beloved son to fanatic Nazi, they probably beseeched God to perform the balancing act of loving the son and forgiving the Nazi.

My grandfather had been a soldier in the First World War. He knew what he was talking about when he said, often and embittered, in reference to his son Matz: *When the flags start to flutter, common sense slides right into the trumpet.* This warning also applied to the following dictatorship, which I experienced. Every day you could see the common sense of the profiteers, both big and little, sliding right into the trumpet. The trumpet I decided not to blow.

As I child, however, I did have to learn to play the accordion—against my will. Because at home we had the red accordion that had belonged to the dead soldier Matz. The straps were much too long for me. To keep them from slipping off my shoulders, the accordion teacher tied them together on my back with a handkerchief.

Can we say that it is precisely the smallest objects—be they trumpets, accordions, or handkerchiefs—which connect the most disparate things in life? That the objects are in orbit and that their deviations reveal a pattern of repetition—a vicious circle, or what we call in German a devil's circle. We can believe this, but not say it. Still, what can't be said can be written. Because writing is a silent act, a labor from the head to the hand. The mouth is skipped over. I talked a great deal during the dictatorship, mostly because I decided not to blow the trumpet. Usually my talking led to excruciating consequences. But the writing began in silence, there on the stairs, where I had to come to terms with more than could be said. What was happening could no longer be expressed in speech. At most the external accompaniments, but not the totality of the events themselves. That I could only spell out in my head, voicelessly, within the vicious circle of the words during the act of writing. I reacted to the deathly fear with a thirst for life. A hunger for words. Nothing but the whirl of words could grasp my condition. It spelled out what the mouth could not pronounce. I chased after the events, caught up in the words and their devilish circling, until something emerged I had never known before. Parallel to the reality, the pantomime of words stepped into action, without respect for any real dimensions, shrinking what was most important and stretching the minor matters. As it rushes madly ahead, this vicious circle of words imposes a kind of cursed logic on what has been lived. Their pantomime is ruthless and restive, always craving more but instantly jaded. The subject of dictatorship is necessarily present, because nothing can ever again be a matter of course once we have been robbed of nearly all ability to take anything for granted. The subject is there implicitly, but the words are what take possession of me. They coax the subject anywhere they want. Nothing makes sense anymore and everything is true.

When I was a staircase wit, I was as lonely as I had been as a child tending the cows in the river valley. I ate leaves and flowers so I would belong to them, because they knew

how to live life and I didn't. I spoke to them by name: *milk thistle* was supposed to mean the prickly plant with milk in its stalk. But the plant didn't listen to the name *milk thistle*. So I tried inventing names with neither *milk* nor *thistle*: THORNRIB, NEEDLENECK. These made-up names uncovered a gap between the plant and me, and the gap opened up into an abyss: the disgrace of talking to myself and not to the plant. But the disgrace was good for me. I looked after the cows and the sound of the words looked after me. I felt:

*Every word in your face,
Knows something of the vicious circle
But doesn't say it*

The sound of the words knows that it has no choice but to beguile, because objects deceive with their materials, and feelings mislead with their gestures. The sound of the words, along with the truth this sound invents, resides at the interface, where the deceit of the materials and that of the gestures come together. In writing, it is not a matter of trusting, but rather of the honesty of the deceit.

Back then in the factory, when I was a staircase wit and the handkerchief was my office, I also looked up the beautiful word TREPPENZINS or ASCENDING INTEREST RATE, when the interest rate for a loan ascends as if climbing a stair. (In German this is called "Stair Interest.") These ascending rates are costs for one person and income for another. In writing they become both, the deeper I delve into the text. The more that which is written takes from me, the more it shows what was missing from the experience that was lived. Only the words make this discovery, because they didn't know it earlier. And where they catch the lived experience by surprise is where they reflect it best. In the end they become so compelling that the lived experience must cling to them in order not to fall apart.

It seems to me that the objects don't know their material, the gestures don't know their feelings, and the words don't know the mouth that speaks them. But to be certain of our own existence, we need the objects, the gestures, and the words. After all, the more words we are allowed to take, the freer we become. If our mouth is banned, then we attempt to assert ourselves through gestures, even objects. They are more difficult to interpret, and take time before they arouse suspicion. They can help us turn humiliation into a type of dignity that takes time to arouse suspicion.

Early one morning, shortly before I emigrated from Romania, a village policeman came for my mother. She was already at the gate, when it occurred to her: DO YOU HAVE A

HANDKERCHIEF. She didn't. Even though the policeman was impatient, she went back inside to get a handkerchief. At the station the policeman flew into a rage. My mother's Romanian was too limited to understand his screaming. So he left the office and bolted the door from the outside. My mother sat there locked up the whole day. The first hours she sat on his desk and cried. Then she paced up and down and began using the handkerchief that was wet with her tears to dust the furniture. After that she took the water bucket out of the corner and the towel off the hook on the wall and mopped the floor. I was horrified when she told me. *How can you clean the office for him like that I asked. She said, without embarrassment: I was looking for some work to pass the time. And the office was so dirty. Good thing I took one of the large men's handkerchiefs with me.*

Only then did I understand that through this additional, but voluntary humiliation, she had created some dignity for herself in her detention. I tried to find the words for it in a collage:

*I thought about the sturdy rose in my heart
about the useless soul like a sieve
but the keeper asked:
who will gain the upper hand
I said: saving the skin
he shouted: the skin is
nothing but a scrap of insulted batiste
with no common sense*

I wish I could utter a sentence for all those whom dictatorships deprive of dignity every day, up to and including the present—a sentence, perhaps, containing the word handkerchief. Or else the question: DO YOU HAVE A HANDKERCHIEF?

Can it be that the question about the handkerchief was never about the handkerchief at all, but rather about the acute solitude of a human being?

Translated by Philip Boehm

nur ein weißer Porzellankopf sprach nur was ihn
betraf er sei der Inhaber ABER ICH
fragte, warum zünden Sie die Kerzen
AN ich habe nichts getan in den Flammen
sprangen ein Sichelhahn SCHARLACHROT Fische
RAUCHSCHWARZ wie Eisenerz Insekten bleich
wie ROSENQUARZ ich dachte AN die
stramme Rose im Herzen AN die nutzlose SEELE
WIE EIN Sieb der Inhaber fragte aber
WER gewinnt die Oberhand ich sagte
DIE Rettung DER Haut
er schrie DIE Haut ist
nur ein Fleck beleidigter
Batist ohne Verstand

