

Article

Passports of the Soul: Crossing Borders and Remembering the Self in Post-Communist Europe

Lidia Mihaela Necula 

English Department, Faculty of Letters, 'Dunarea de Jos' University of Galati, 800201 Galati, Romania;
lidia.necula@ugal.ro

Abstract

This article explores how Herta Müller and Paul Bailey transform the apparatus of state bordering, i.e., passports, permits and catechisms, into metaphors for an interior struggle between flight and belonging. In *The Passport*, *The Land of Green Plums* and Bailey's *Kitty & Virgil*, emigration is portrayed not as departure alone but as a prolonged contest between the body that moves and the spirit that lingers. Those who cross borders geographically remain anchored, often painfully, in the mental and moral landscapes of the home they leave behind. The paper examines how documents, bodies, and languages become shifting frontier zones where identity is repeatedly issued and withdrawn, shaped by the pressures of memory, exile, and biopolitical control. Müller's vision, written from within Romania's history, and Bailey's, refracted through an English consciousness yet partly set in Romania, converge in a poetics of witness that treats exile as both wound and testimony. Ultimately, these works suggest that identity survives in the liminal space between motion and remembrance where thought halts at its own threshold, memory traces its faint watermark, and the self bears its unspoken credential.

Keywords: Herta Müller; Paul Bailey; Romania; post-communism; exile; border theory; memory; translation; biopolitics

1. Introduction: From Paper Borders to Interior Frontiers

The twentieth century perfected the passport into what might be called a portable theology of belonging—a small, bureaucratic book that claims to verify the coordinates of identity and mobility. Once conceived as a neutral tool of citizenship, it has come to represent the fragile covenant between body and state, between the right to move and the power to refuse. In late socialist and post-Communist Europe, however, this document becomes less a guarantee of protection than a certification of exposure. The passport attests not to freedom but to the vulnerability of recognition, and the very act of holding it renders its bearer visible to surveillance, suspicion, and moral compromise. In this sense, the passport occupies the intersection between biopolitics and theology, a relic of faith in borders, even as borders erode.

Nowhere is this tension more palpable than in the works of Herta Müller and Paul Bailey, whose fiction translates the geopolitical divisions of the Cold War into psychological and linguistic frontiers. In Müller's *The Passport* (1989), the decision to emigrate transforms daily life into a terminal condition: "The end is here" (Müller 2009, p. 10). The repetition of this phrase turns the landscape of a Banat village into a site of suspended time, where the border enters the body long before the body reaches the border. In *The Land of Green Plums* (1993), the young protagonists live by thinking about flight, rehearsing escape as



Received: 12 November 2025

Revised: 14 January 2026

Accepted: 15 January 2026

Published: 19 January 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article

distributed under the terms and

conditions of the [Creative Commons](#)

[Attribution \(CC BY\)](#) license.

a form of thought, a mental choreography of exile. The Danube appears as an aqueous gate, an unstable threshold where fog becomes a temporary reprieve and water keeps count for bullets and dogs. In Paul Bailey's *Kitty & Virgil* (2000), the same geography of flight is reduced to a single, corporeal sentence: "he swam across the Danube ... 'with body'" (Bailey 2000, p. 2). In this moment, the passport is replaced by endurance itself; the flesh becomes both document and testimony, the only valid visa across the lethal frontier between oppression and the unknown. If the passport names the moment at which belonging is made legible to power, these novels trace what happens when that legibility is stretched across time, as waiting thickens into coercion, movement condenses into bodily risk, and freedom itself becomes another site of delayed reckoning.

The Passport follows Windisch, a miller in a German-speaking Banat village, as his application to emigrate to West Germany turns daily life into a slow economy of humiliation, barter, and bodily compromise, where permission is extracted not through paper alone but through touch, silence, and surrender. *The Land of Green Plums* shifts this drama to a group of young friends living under Ceaușescu's surveillance state, tracing how fear, betrayal, and cryptic language structure intimacy itself, until friendship becomes a practice of vigilance and memory a discipline of survival. *Kitty & Virgil* begins after the crossing: it centres on Virgil Florescu, a Romanian dissident poet who has escaped across the Danube and now lives in exile between London and Paris, where love, translation, and storytelling stage the afterlife of dictatorship within freedom. Read together, the novels trace exile not as a single act of departure but as a sequence of moral thresholds: from coerced waiting, through bodily flight, to the long labour of remembrance in another tongue.

To juxtapose Müller and Bailey is to engage in a comparative ethics of exile. This juxtaposition is neither incidental nor symmetrical, but methodologically intentional in its asymmetry. Müller and Bailey are brought into dialogue not because they share a national canon or a common linguistic inheritance, but because they inhabit different ethical moments within the same historical fracture. Müller writes from within the lived grammar of Romanian totalitarianism, where the border insinuates itself into gesture, syntax, and breath long before the body departs. Bailey, writing from elsewhere and afterwards, receives that history at a remove, translating its residue into the quieter, diasporic labour of memory and witness. Read together, their works trace a continuum of exile that moves from bureaucratic subjection, through corporeal flight, to the afterlife of displacement in language itself. The comparison thus proceeds not by resemblance but by sequence, allowing the border to be followed as it migrates inward, from paper to flesh, and finally into the fragile jurisdiction of voice.

The connection between their works is not merely geographical or historical but ontological. Müller, writing from within the linguistic and political textures of Ceaușescu's Romania, carries the sediment of a double marginality, ethnic, as a member of the Banat Swabian minority, and moral, as a dissident voice under surveillance. Her Romanian-German idiom bears the residue of state slogans, the smell of grain silos, the echo of catechisms, and the hush of betrayal. Bailey, writing in English but setting *Kitty & Virgil* partly in Romania, extends that history across languages and cities, turning London into a counter-shore where the iciness of the Danube persists in memory. If Müller writes the inside of exile, Bailey writes its afterlife, a second geography where the émigré's body lives elsewhere but the spirit remains stranded in the homeland's moral weather. Both authors thus participate in the same inquiry: how to preserve selfhood when the state has made identity a negotiable document.

The theoretical architecture of this article rests on several intersecting discourses. Border theory, as articulated by Étienne Balibar, understands borders not as lines but as zones of diffusion, where the functions of inclusion and exclusion are endlessly reproduced

(Balibar 1998). Müller's villages and Bailey's cities exemplify this diffusion; the checkpoint expands into language, gesture, and even domestic ritual. Diaspora and exile theory (Said 2002; Bhabha 1994) further illuminate how displacement fractures subjectivity into what Said calls a "plurality of vision," a double consciousness that both mourns and critiques belonging (Said 2002). Within the context of post-Communist Europe, this plurality becomes an ethical imperative: to remember the country one has fled without sanctifying it, to remain faithful to the self without freezing it in nostalgia. While the language of the "in-between," liminality, and threshold is useful here as a formal descriptor of narrative positioning and ethical hesitation, it remains contested in migration studies; accordingly, it is employed heuristically rather than as an ontological claim about migrant subjectivity.

Memory studies contribute an essential frame to this analysis. For Assmann (2011), cultural memory operates as a selective and ethical practice rather than an archival repository. In Müller's prose, memory is precisely such a selective survival, fractured by fear yet persisting through the persistence of language. In *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia further clarifies the sensibility of these texts: they do not seek to rebuild a lost homeland but to inhabit the tension of loss itself, to make exile an epistemological position rather than a wound to be healed. Similarly, in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), Paul Ricoeur's dialectic of memory and forgetting helps to read Müller's and Bailey's characters as moral witnesses who carry remembrance not as consolation but as responsibility.

Finally, biopolitical theory (Foucault 1978; Agamben 2005) reveals how the state's control of life permeates even the most intimate gestures. The passport, as a technology of recognition, is the emblem of what Foucault termed biopower: the state's administration of bodies, movements, and permissions. Throughout this article, references to "stamp," "seal," or "visa" function as metonymy for exit authorisation—permits, approvals, and bureaucratic clearance—rather than for contemporary border-stamping practice. In these novels, to possess or to lack a passport is not simply to have or lose a right; it is to exist inside the machinery of visibility, to become what Agamben calls bare life, the human reduced to its minimal political value. When Müller writes of guards with "foam on their teeth" (Müller 1996, p. 51) eating green plums until they swallow their own death, she captures the grotesque convergence of appetite and authority, life feeding upon itself. Bailey's *Virgil*, by contrast, carries the traces of this biopolitical violence into exile, his survival testifying to both endurance and contamination.

Methodologically, the paper proceeds through a series of close readings organised around three recurrent thresholds: document, body, and voice. The first concerns the passport as an object, the paper that formalises belonging while exposing fragility. The second examines the body as border, tracing how flesh bears the imprint of political inscription. The third follows the voice as passage, the moment when language itself becomes the terrain of exile. These thresholds structure the comparative argument while foregrounding the literary textures: Müller's elliptical montage, where syntax mirrors the fragmentation of experience, and Bailey's melancholic clarity, where lyrical realism transforms memory into a site of ethical care.

Together, these works dismantle the notion that migration leads to resolution. Instead, they propose that to cross a border is to extend the frontier inward: to live with the border as an internal horizon where thought pauses, memory inscribes its faint watermark, and the self carries what cannot be declared but remains, quietly, its enduring credential. Throughout, theoretical frameworks are mobilised in response to specific textual moments rather than as a governing template, with close reading serving as the primary analytic method.

2. Documents of Flesh: When the Body Becomes a Passport

In Herta Müller's *The Passport*, the passport ceases to be a neutral bureaucratic artefact and becomes an extension of flesh, a medium inscribed by the rituals of subjection and complicity. The economy of permission in the novel operates through touch, barter, and humiliation. The price of authorisation is measured in Amalie's body: the militiaman's kiss upon her shoulder, the priest's hand on her thigh. Müller renders the bureaucratic gesture as a carnal sacrament, an inverted liturgy where "the end is here" (Müller 2009, p. 10) and the border enters the body before the body reaches the border, "he sees the end everywhere in the village" (Müller 2009, p. 10). Each approval, each signature, demands a corporeal counter-signature. The language Müller uses to render these exchanges is conspicuously flat and declarative, relying on parataxis and simple sentence structure rather than figurative elaboration: the kiss, the touch, the approval are narrated without metaphor or emotional modulation, as if humiliation itself had become procedural, something carried out according to administrative routine rather than moral choice. The body itself becomes the page on which the state writes its permissions, its stains the watermark of belonging.

This conflation of document and body can be read alongside Michel Foucault's formulation of biopower: the moment when the administration of life is no longer limited to surveillance but is enacted through the management of intimacy (Foucault 1978). Thus, the village becomes a panoptic sacristy, in which the public and private blur under the gaze of authority: *The Passport* turns the pastoral detail of roses and war memorials into a theology of exposure, each sensory detail is a register of moral exhaustion. "The black telephone" that "rings among flowers" (Müller 2009, p. 88) serves as an aural reminder that corruption, too, has its own acoustics.

In this sense, Müller literalises what Giorgio Agamben calls bare life, i.e., existence stripped to biological fact, life that can be authorised or annulled by the state (Agamben 2005). When Amalie submits to the priest's touch to secure her family's departure, her consent functions as a displaced visa: her skin receives the seal that the passport will later only confirm. Müller's syntax, compressed, repetitive, incantatory, enacts this reduction of life to ritual: the visa becomes a verb; to "be seen," to "be touched," to "be counted" is already to have been read and approved by power.

Paul Bailey's *Kitty & Virgil* rearticulates this corporeal politics through the figure of endurance: Virgil Florescu's emigration is recounted with brutal brevity as "He crossed the River Danube. . . with body" (Bailey 2000, p. 2). The phrase eliminates mediation: there is no paper, no law, no proxy, only the body performing the right to exist: the swimmer becomes his own passport; the Danube itself, an immense signature written in water. The state's seal, refused in ink, is claimed in breath. Virgil's "puniness," his "more bone than flesh" (Bailey 2000, p. 2), becomes paradoxically his strength: survival as self-authorship. In the absence of legitimate documentation, the body's suffering becomes the only credential that cannot be revoked.

Bailey's minimalist framing underscores the transition from document to flesh that defines Müller's universe. Thus, the political apparatus that makes identity visible in Müller is made to disappear in Bailey: the authenticity of the exile is proven precisely by the absence of papers. If Müller shows the body branded by the state, Bailey shows the body reclaiming its signature through pain. In *The Land of Green Plums*, the metaphor mutates from inscription to ingestion. The guards who "didn't eat because they were hungry, they just lusted after the sour taste of the poverty which had so recently ruled their lives" (Müller 1996, p. 51) and who stuff unripe plums until foam rims their teeth embody a system consuming its own immaturity. The regime becomes an organism devouring itself, and the act of eating is transformed into the act of governance. Müller turns appetite into allegory: the body of power feeds on its own citizens, and each swallowed plum is

a human silence metabolised. Here the passport of flesh is internalised: bruise and ulcer replace bureaucratic clearance and the body carries what paper can only pretend to certify.

To read these scenes through Judith Butler's notion of performative vulnerability is to see how the body, far from being a stable bearer of identity, becomes a site where sovereignty and subjection are co-authored: "To be a body is to be given over to others even before one's own choice, to be susceptible to force, to violence, to care", "Our vulnerability is not a private state but a relation to a field of power" (Butler 2004, pp. 26, 29). In these novels, identity is not presented but performed under duress. The kiss, the bruise, the crossing, and the gulp of cold river water all mark thresholds between life administered and life affirmed. What these scenes collectively demonstrate is that the body functions not merely as a site of suffering, but as the primary medium through which political authority is both enforced and contested when documentary legitimacy fails.

At the same time, Müller's and Bailey's representations of corporeal exposure resonate with Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection: the state's authority depends on the constant expulsion of what threatens its purity. The unripe "green plums" (Müller 1996, p. 51) are the residue of a society that cannot digest itself. Therein, Amalie's and Virgil's bodies, marginal yet central, expose the nation's digestive metaphors, i.e., who can be swallowed, who must be spat out.

Through these textual economies of touch, hunger, and endurance, Müller and Bailey render visible a poetics of the somatic border: the bureaucratic document is transfigured into living tissue, the seal into a wound. The passport, once a token of mobility, becomes a reminder that movement is not granted but wrested, that the right to leave must first be written on the skin. In these fictions, to migrate is not to carry papers but to carry the evidence of having survived the border's appetite. The self does not present a passport; it smuggles one, hidden beneath the tongue, where speech and silence both taste faintly of metal.

3. Catechism and the House of the Fatherland: Indoctrination as Domestic Arrest

In Herta Müller's *The Passport*, the classroom becomes a model of the totalitarian home, a miniature in which language and architecture fuse to produce obedience. The children are taught that "Every house has rooms. All the houses together make one big house. This big house is our country. Our fatherland. . . Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu is the father of all the children" (Müller 2009, p. 54). The syntax is deceptively simple, the cadence reassuring, as if moral order were as natural as grammar. Yet the lesson converts domestic intimacy into political captivity: the Fatherland as a house with no exit, a structure without ventilation or alternative address. The sentence itself functions as a linguistic enclosure, where every phrase locks another door.

Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation clarifies the mechanism at work. For Althusser, ideology "hails" individuals into subject positions, transforming citizens into obedient subjects through repeated linguistic rituals (Althusser 1971). Müller dramatises this process by giving it a child's voice. The state enters language at its most formative level, education, and implants ideology through repetition and domestic metaphor. The "big house" promises shelter but conceals surveillance; the paternal lexicon of "father" and "mother" (Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu) supplants biological kinship with political parentage. The result is a nation imagined as family but functioning as prison.

This conflation of pedagogy and confinement also echoes Foucault's description of modern power as both "pastoral" and "disciplinary" (Foucault 1977). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault notes that power in the modern state often assumes the form of care, guidance, correction, education, precisely to mask its coercive structure. Müller's

schoolroom embodies that paradox: the lesson's tone is tender, but its logic is total. The home, the classroom, and the nation merge into a domestic panopticon, where affection and authority are indistinguishable; the motherly rhetoric of ideology produces not comfort but captivity; the Fatherland's walls are upholstered with slogans.

At the same time, Müller's imagery transforms political language into furniture, i.e., chairs, walls, doors, that delineate both physical and psychological confinement: the child's desk becomes a symbolic checkpoint, the recited sentence a passport to acceptability. Ideology infiltrates not only syntax but also spatial imagination: to think of the country is to picture rooms, to picture rooms is to imagine surveillance. The vocabulary of domesticity thus domesticates the self; one learns to inhabit one's own subjugation as if it were home hence ideology secures obedience not through overt coercion alone, but by reorganising the metaphors of intimacy through which subjects come to recognise themselves.

Paul Bailey's *Kitty & Virgil* stages the aftermath of such instruction, the hour after doctrine. When Virgil hears of the Ceaușescu's execution, his response is neither triumph nor catharsis but disquiet: "They did nothing to deserve this quick kindness" (Bailey 2000, p. 236). His reaction dismantles the narrative of moral victory that revolution promises: in that ironic lament, Bailey exposes what might be termed a pedagogy of closure, the new regime's desire to terminate history through spectacle. Virgil's refusal to rejoice articulates an ethics of remembrance that resists the substitution of one myth for another. Where Müller dissects the pedagogy of obedience, Bailey interrogates the pedagogy of amnesia.

The contrast between the two writers reveals a continuum of ideological interiority that persists beyond the moment of political rupture. Müller's classroom operates within the state's architecture of belief; Bailey's London flat operates within the architecture of forgetting. Both spaces testify to the lingering power of political catechism: the emigrant carries its syntax long after crossing the border. In *Kitty & Virgil*, the Romanian exile still speaks with the rhythms of a system he has fled; even his dissent is shaped by its grammar: the body may have escaped, but the language has not.

From a theoretical perspective, this continuity corresponds to what Paul Ricœur describes as the tension between memory and forgetting: every new narrative of liberation risks becoming another authorised story that erases the complexity of lived experience (Ricœur 2004). Virgil's statement refuses narrative closure and insists instead on moral ambiguity, a stance closer to what Jan Assmann calls cultural memory as ethical labour (Assmann 2011). For both Müller and Bailey, remembrance is not a monument but a discipline: an ongoing effort to hold complexity against the flattening power of ideology.

Müller's prose style reinforces this ethic: her short, declarative sentences imitate the clarity of propaganda only to expose its hollowness. The rhythmic repetition of "Every house. . . all the houses. . . one big house" mimics incantation, a language emptied of meaning through use (Müller 2009, p. 193). It is through this hollow syntax that the reader perceives the violence of simplification. Bailey's irony works in reverse: the collapse of the dictator's mythology leaves a vacuum that no new language fills. Both writers suggest that political systems survive not only through coercion but through their success in shaping the metaphors of intimacy, home, family, nation, father.

In both *The Passport* and *Kitty & Virgil*, the house becomes the master trope of captivity and loss: what appears to protect, imprisons; what appears to unite, isolates. The home, once the metaphor for belonging, becomes the architecture of ideology itself. The Fatherland's domestic catechism, repeated across generations, teaches not citizenship but containment. When the exile finally departs, the language of that containment travels with him, a portable confinement lodged in syntax and memory.

Thus, the pedagogy of the state proves enduring precisely because it teaches its subjects to confuse familiarity with safety. The child in Müller's classroom and the exile

in Bailey's London remain linked by the same grammatical chain. Both ask, in different tongues and under different skies, a question that transcends the political moment: *What story shall we permit to carry our name across the border of time?*

4. Time, Stasis, and the Chronotope of Waiting

Time in Müller's and Bailey's post-Communist geographies is not a linear progression but a circular confinement, an endless rehearsal of the same gestures under different political skies. In *The Passport*, Windisch measures his life by recurrence rather than renewal: he "counts two years by the war memorial and two hundred and twenty-one days the days in the pothole by the poplar" (Müller 2009, p. 10) each jolt a rehearsal of an ending. The rhythm of his bicycle through the village marks a ritual of inertia, where motion substitutes for progress. It becomes clear that the road does not lead elsewhere; it only circles back to the same symbolic landmarks of death and obedience. The passage of time, here, becomes the illusion of movement, a choreography of waiting enacted against the static architecture of dictatorship.

This peculiar temporality corresponds to what Mikhail Bakhtin defines as the chronotope, the literary configuration where time and space coalesce to shape the moral universe of a narrative (Bakhtin 1981, p. 84). Müller's chronotope is that of arrested transit: the road that goes nowhere, the bureaucracy that takes forever, the passport perpetually pending. Her characters inhabit a temporal loop rather than a historical line. The village exists as both geography and repetition, a place where the present cannot detach itself from the past because the machinery of the state constantly rewinds experience to the same point of subjection. The pothole becomes a temporal checkpoint, a minor geography of despair that dictates rhythm, duration, and thought.

Hannah Arendt's reflections on totalitarianism further illuminate this logic of suspended time. In a totalitarian system, Arendt argues, history itself is immobilised: the future is foreclosed by the repetition of the same political ritual, and the past is rewritten to sustain it (Arendt 1951, pp. 388–91, 460–79). Müller renders this paralysis with forensic precision. "Time standing still for those who want to stay. And Windisch sees that the night watchman will stay beyond the end" (Müller 2009, p. 10) she writes, as if the human countenance itself were fossilised under surveillance. The passport, a document ostensibly designed to enable travel, here functions as a bureaucratic paradox: it promises movement while intensifying immobility. To apply for it is to submit to a temporality that belongs to the state, to enter a queue that is moral as much as administrative. Undoubtedly, this temporal regime makes visible the fact that waiting itself functions as a form of governance, a biopolitical technology through which power is exercised not by acceleration or force, but by delay, repetition, and suspension.

In *The Land of Green Plums*, this experience of suspended time descends into *the everyday*. "We had to walk, eat, sleep, and love in fear," the narrator confesses, "until it was once again time for the barber and the nail-clippers" (Müller 1996, p. 2). Routine becomes the new ritual of control, an example of what Michel Foucault describes as biopolitical time, the governance of life through its most ordinary rhythms (Foucault 2008, pp. 296–319). The repetition of banal acts, stripped of spontaneity, becomes a method of discipline. Time is militarised not through grand events but through the minute regulation of the body: the cycles of grooming, labour, and fatigue. The phrase "once again" is crucial as it signals that each day begins not in hope but in return. The characters live within a temporal enclosure, where even biological renewal is administratively predicted and therefore neutralised.

If Müller's temporal imagination is claustrophobic, Bailey's in *Kitty & Virgil* is posthumous. London, Virgil's adopted city, is "my unanticipated city," a place teeming with languages, colours, and surprises (Bailey 2000, p. 184). Yet this abundance does not

cancel the gravity of exile; it only multiplies its echoes. The unanticipated city stands as a chronotope of aftermath, the exile's attempt to inhabit a present still shaped by the cadence of an interrupted past. The immigrant's days are full of motion, yet every moment remains haunted by stasis: each word threatens to halt his progress, a stone lodged in the throat of speech. The metaphor of language as terrain captures the survivor's predicament, rendering every utterance an act of passage across uneven ground. The time of the exile is double, suspended between recollection and renewal, always slightly out of phase with its surroundings. "He was forced to stumble in English, the words like stones in his path—'On bad days they were boulders, Mrs Kitty,' but in French he had less trouble. Now that he was living in Paris, his French path was clearer than it had been for him in Romania, with no big stones left to stop him. . . 'Then I have just pebbles to worry me. On my French path.'" (Bailey 2000, pp. 8–9)

Victor Turner's concept of liminality offers a crucial framework for understanding this experience. For Turner, liminality represents the threshold between structures, a moment of transition that precedes reintegration (Turner 1969, pp. 94–130). Yet in Müller and Bailey, liminality is not a passing phase but a permanent climate, a condition of existence. Their characters live within the interstice: neither fully within the system nor fully beyond it, neither bound nor free. Müller's emigrants wait for a document that will release them into uncertainty; Bailey's émigré lives the release but remains detained by memory. Both depict the afterlife of waiting as the human condition of post-Communist subjectivity.

From the perspective of Giorgio Agamben's theory of the state of exception, this temporal paralysis takes on political significance. The regime suspends time as it suspends law, producing what Agamben calls "a permanent provisionality" (Agamben 2005, pp. 6–7). In *The Passport*, this suspension governs not only Windisch's life but the entire community's: the moment of departure, perpetually delayed, becomes the central event around which existence organises itself. Waiting replaces living; the bureaucratic delay becomes a metaphysical state. Similarly, in *The Land of Green Plums*, the citizens' fear of the next knock, the next inspection, the next illness of the dictator, extends waiting into ontology.

Against this backdrop, Bailey's London may appear as a release, yet it too is marked by temporal fracture. The cosmopolitan bustle does not erase the internal stillness of the exile. "My unanticipated city" reads as an admission of wonder shadowed by displacement. The exile time is diasporic time, simultaneously ongoing and arrested, characterised by what Edward Said calls "a contrapuntal awareness"—"this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal," where memory and present coexist in uneasy harmony (Said 2002, p. 184). Formally, this passage shows that waiting in Müller is not empty duration but a narrated structure, produced through repetition, enumeration, and stalled movement rather than plot.

The imagery of repetition, the barber, the nail-clippers, the pothole, the queue, suggests that time in these novels is less a river than a corridor, each hour another checkpoint to pass through. If Turner names liminality a phase, Müller and Bailey turn it into a weather of the soul, a condition that shapes perception and breath. Their characters live as if in waiting rooms where the clock's second hand is a guard dog's breath, close, repetitive, impossible to argue with. In these spaces, time does not pass; it patrols.

5. Language as Border: Translation, Cryptography, Witness

Language in Müller's and Bailey's post-Communist worlds is not merely a medium of communication but a terrain of survival, a border one must learn to cross without papers. In *The Land of Green Plums*, Müller's characters open and close only their foreheads; behind

them, thought shelters like a refugee: “But in our books we learned that those doors were no shelter. All we could open or slam or leave ajar were our foreheads. And behind those were ourselves, with our mothers who sent us or illnesses in letters and our fathers who stashed their guilty consciences inside the damn stupid plants” (Müller 1996, p. 47).

The image transforms the body into a linguistic architecture: the forehead becomes the door of consciousness, the last border left unpoliced. Within that narrow refuge, speech itself is both weapon and risk. Silence is a tactic, not a void; words, when spoken, are potential betrayals. “When we don’t speak, we become unbearable,” one of Müller’s characters confides, “and when we do, we make fools of ourselves. The words in our mouths do as much damage as our feet on the grass” (Müller 1996, p. 11).

In this linguistic impasse, language ceases to function as a bridge between people and becomes instead a corridor of mirrors, reflecting the speaker’s own fear back at them. This crisis of expression corresponds to what Mikhail Bakhtin identifies as the dialogic instability of discourse, the idea that every utterance is shadowed by another’s potential response (Bakhtin 1981, pp. 280–93). Under totalitarianism, that dialogic potential becomes perilous: every sentence may be overheard, recorded, misinterpreted. Müller dramatises this anxiety through what might be termed cryptographic intimacy. Her characters develop secret languages composed of codes and gestures, hairs hidden in envelopes, punctuation marks functioning as alarms, pauses standing in for confession. These private semiotics represent an attempt to reclaim semantic autonomy in a state that has colonised vocabulary. The ordinary word becomes a smuggled object; the space between sentences, a temporary asylum. What these practices make clear is that linguistic opacity becomes a survival strategy, allowing subjects to negotiate power not by direct opposition, but by controlling the conditions under which meaning can safely circulate.

Such linguistic encryption recalls Jacques Derrida’s concept of *écriture sous rature*, i.e., writing under erasure, where meaning survives only through its own instability. In Müller’s prose, every word is written under the shadow of censorship; communication is always both assertion and concealment (Derrida 1976, pp. xiv, 60–65). Her characters’ cryptic exchanges exemplify what Derrida terms the trace: the residual presence of meaning that remains even when the word is emptied of its original referent. Under dictatorship, the trace becomes the only safe way to speak.

The tension between languages-German, Romanian, silence, creates in Müller a hybrid idiom that refuses transparency. This hybridity anticipates Homi Bhabha’s notion of the *Third Space*, a liminal linguistic zone where translation becomes creation (Bhabha 1994, pp. 37, 228–29). Müller’s bilingual condition as a Romanian-German writer infuses her style with semantic fractures and cross-linguistic echoes. Her metaphors, grain, hair, rope, skin, retain their Romanian connotations even when rendered into German or English, carrying cultural residues that resist assimilation. The result is a language of exile within the sentence itself, a syntax that remembers its displacement.

Bailey’s *Kitty & Virgil* translates this linguistic border into the register of intimacy. In one of the novel’s quietest yet most charged moments, Kitty asks Virgil to speak Romanian: “Mai bine singuratec și uitat. . .” He obliges, then bridges it into English: “It is well to be alone and forgotten” (Bailey 2000, p. 123). The utterance doubles the self; it is both the exile’s lament and his chosen posture of dignity. Between the Romanian original and its translation opens what Bhabha calls the *Third Space* of enunciation, where grief can be articulated without being domesticated by a single tongue. The translation does not simply carry content; it creates an interval in which emotion becomes legible across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

For Virgil, this act of translation is also an act of mourning. Romanian, the language of his childhood and his trauma, becomes a relic that must be both preserved and tamed.

English, the language of his survival, offers safety at the price of estrangement. Between them stretches a border neither political nor geographical but existential. The exile, speaking across tongues, performs what Roland Barthes calls a “drift of meaning,” an oscillation between precision and loss (Barthes 1975, pp. 11–13). Translation here is not a cure for displacement but its aesthetic form.

The novels converge in their understanding of voice as the final passport office: language functions as the last remaining site of political negotiation once territorial and bureaucratic forms of belonging have collapsed. In Müller’s world, permission is sought through muteness, through the capacity to speak only in metaphor or code. In Bailey’s, it is sought through the fragile hospitality of listening, the willingness of another to receive what cannot be fully translated. The stamp of belonging is not bureaucratic but emotional; it is the listener’s act of recognition. The right to speak, and to be heard without distortion, becomes the last uncorrupted form of citizenship.

This logic aligns with Julia Kristeva’s reflections on language and exile in *Strangers to Ourselves*, where she describes linguistic displacement as both a loss and a liberation (Kristeva 1991, pp. 14–16, 98). For Kristeva, the foreigner’s speech bears the residue of other grammars, each sentence haunted by its former accent. Müller’s fractured idiom and Bailey’s bilingual dialogues embody this condition: they stage language as an ethical threshold where identity is continually rearticulated.

In both authors, the linguistic border is internalised as a spiritual discipline. To speak at all is to cross a frontier; to translate oneself is to risk fragmentation. Yet translation also stitches the self together, not as healing, but as endurance. The act of translating becomes a quiet form of resistance against erasure.

Ultimately, the border of language outlasts the political border. In Müller and Bailey, the sentence replaces the state as the site of negotiation; each utterance is a checkpoint, each silence a crossing. Translation does not mend the wound, but it threads it, ensuring that the soul does not come apart.

6. Ethnos and Graveyards: The Politics of Memory

Memory in Müller’s and Bailey’s fiction is not an archive but a battlefield, an ethical terrain where remembrance and forgetting contend for legitimacy. In *The Passport*, the priest’s pronouncement that “the graves of the Romanians don’t belong in the churchyard,” and that they even “smell different from the graves of the Germans,” exposes the degree to which ethnicity extends beyond life (Müller 2009, p. 39). Death itself becomes a bureaucratic category, the cemetery a continuation of the passport regime. Burial, which in most traditions symbolises communal reconciliation, is here transformed into an act of segregation. The priest’s taxonomy of smell transforms decay into doctrine; the senses themselves are enlisted to sustain ideology. Therein, memory becomes a site of political struggle precisely where the state seeks to regulate belonging beyond life itself. Müller’s imagery makes clear that the village, ostensibly united in death, remains a divided polity, its soil partitioned by lineage, its grief racialised.

This politicisation of death belongs to what Paul Ricoeur calls the dialectic of memory and forgetting. For Ricoeur, memory is never neutral recall but an ethical act, “a promise to the dead to tell their story truthfully” (Ricoeur 2004, pp. 85–87, 495–96). Müller’s characters inhabit precisely this ethical tension: to remember is to expose complicity, yet to forget is to perpetuate violence. The priest’s churchyard sermon becomes a miniature of historical denial, the rewriting of guilt through ritual. The distinction between Romanian and German graves enacts what Ricoeur might describe as the “abuse of memory,” where remembrance is instrumentalised to sustain exclusion rather than to redeem it.

In *The Land of Green Plums*, Müller internalises this geography of death. The narrator's father keeps the graveyards deep in his throat, his mouth "drinking schnapps made from the darkest plums" while singing "heavy and drunken songs for the Führer" (Müller 1996, pp. 24–25). The father's throat becomes a crypt, his voice a reliquary vibrating with unconfessed crimes. Memory, lodged in the body, becomes inescapable; every utterance exhumes the past. This grotesque intimacy between history and anatomy dramatises Jan Assmann's notion of cultural memory as an embodied process, a way in which societies, and by extension individuals, store the past not in documents but in gestures, rituals, and speech (Assmann 2011, pp. 36–43). The father's voice carries the mnemonic burden of an entire regime, reproducing its rhythms long after its collapse. The graveyard is no longer outside; it has been swallowed.

Müller's recurring imagery of consumption, guards eating unripe plums, fathers drinking dark schnapps, and earth exhaling the smell of divided graves, reveals how remembrance operates as a corporeal economy. The past is not digested; it festers. The state may dictate official history, but memory leaks through taste, smell, and song. In this sense, Müller transforms memory into a form of haunting that cannot be silenced because it is physiological. The past lives in the muscles of the mouth, in the syntax of prayer, in the recurring nausea of recognition.

Paul Bailey's *Kitty & Virgil* extends this logic from the collective to the hereditary. Virgil's lineage carries the scar of historical violence: his father was a former military officer in Romania, a butcher, a man who slaughtered others as though they were beasts. "My father, Constantin Florescu, is its inspiration, Kitty. He [Cerberus] is the cunning dog with three heads" (Bailey 2000, p. 54). Guilt here is inherited, transmitted like a second language. The past does not die with the perpetrators; it circulates through generations as moral residue. When confronted with xenophobic insults, "Romanians are thieves and peasants. . . a race made from rapings and dirty fucks", Virgil's quiet response, "I hear you," becomes an act of moral resistance (Bailey 2000, p. 146). His composure refuses both humiliation and revenge. It enacts what Ricœur describes as "just memory": understood as the ethical acknowledgment of historical injury without capitulating to hatred (Ricœur 2004). In Bailey's rendering, dignity becomes a form of remembrance; silence, a counter-discourse to stereotype.

Where Müller's landscapes are haunted by the collective mechanics of memory, Bailey's urban exilic spaces explore its diasporic ethics. London, the "unanticipated city," functions as an arena of testimony in which memory must coexist with misunderstanding. The exile's task, Bailey suggests, is not to resurrect a purified homeland but to preserve the integrity of its ghosts. Virgil's memories of Romania, filtered through translation and narrative, resist both nostalgia and denial. He tells his stories not to restore what was lost but to keep forgetting in check, to inoculate himself and his listeners against amnesia's ease.

This attitude resonates with Svetlana Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia, which dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging rather than seeking restoration (Boym 2001). For Boym, reflective nostalgia does not reconstruct the homeland; it recognises loss as a permanent condition and transforms it into aesthetic and ethical reflection. Müller's and Bailey's characters inhabit precisely this reflective mode. Windisch's yearning for home, the narrator's mourning in *The Land of Green Plums*, and Virgil's quiet melancholy in exile, all testify to a longing tempered by lucidity. They remember enough to remain human but not enough to return.

At the intersection of these writers' visions stands the graveyard, a recurring metaphor for the archive of the living. In Müller, graves are contested property; in Bailey, they are invisible but carried within. Both authors expose the fragility of communal memory in

societies fractured by ideology. If, as Maurice Halbwachs suggests, memory is always social, then the destruction of shared frameworks, family, church, nation, leaves individuals to shoulder remembrance alone (Halbwachs 1992, pp. 38–45, 182–83). Müller’s villagers and Bailey’s émigrés become solitary archivists, each maintaining a private covenant with the dead.

In their worlds, remembrance is not redemptive but resistant. The graves of the Romanians and the Germans, the graveyards buried in the father’s throat, the butcher’s lineage, all stand as warnings against the moral comfort of forgetting. To remember truthfully is to admit contamination, to recognise that no history is untainted. These writers refuse the moral hygiene of amnesia and the easy catharsis of revenge. Their work insists that the only just memory is one that keeps the wound open without letting it fester, memory not as monument but as vigilance.

Ultimately, *The Passport*, *The Land of Green Plums*, and *Kitty & Virgil* enact a politics of remembrance that replaces triumph with tenderness. They do not build homelands in prose; they plant graveyards. And yet those graveyards, divided though they are, remain sites of moral reclamation. The dead, as Müller and Bailey understand them, continue to speak, not in accusation but in the quiet demand that history be narrated without anaesthesia. Their fiction fulfils that demand, holding memory to its promise: not to restore the world that was, but to keep watch over the one that remains.

7. Economies of Loss: Selling the House Before the House Sells You

In *The Passport*, emigration is not a journey but a liquidation. The cupboards are emptied, the flour parcelled out, and the family’s possessions converted into the slow currency of permission. As Windisch’s wife trades her linens, mirrors, and memories for the bureaucrat’s favour, the novel reveals a system in which objects no longer mediate comfort but consent. The domestic inventory becomes an index of disappearance. When the last object is sold, only the body remains, and even that becomes negotiable. “The militiaman kisses Amalie’s shoulder,” Müller writes, “the priest strokes her thigh” (Müller 2009, p. 88). In this corrupt barter, the state accepts not money but intimacy, not documents but flesh. The bureaucracy feeds on what cannot be invoiced.

The moral economy of Müller’s village mirrors what Michel Foucault describes as the biopolitical regime: the state’s governance of life through the administration of its smallest gestures and exchanges. Here, biopolitics is rendered as domestic arithmetic, how much touch equals one visa, how many heirlooms equal one inch of permission (Foucault 1978, pp. 135–45; 2003, pp. 239–45; 2008, pp. 313–19). Every bribe is an act of counting life, every emptied cupboard a subtraction of self. The passport is no longer a right but a receipt: proof that something irreplaceable has been surrendered. Therefore, emigration operates as a form of forced commodification, in which life is rendered exchangeable precisely at the moment it seeks freedom.

The kitchen, emptied of bread and filled with silence, becomes an emblem of self-cannibalising survival. In *The Land of Green Plums*, the scene grows darker still. The young women in the dormitory “share a fridge with a tongue and a kidney,” an image of sustenance turned macabre (Müller 1996, p. 16). The guards gorge on unripe plums until foam rims their teeth, while the poor chew on their own silence:

“The guards kicked the plums that fell on the ground into the grass, like little balls. They fished the other plums from the crooks of the elbows and stuffed them into the already bulging cheeks. I saw the foam on their teeth and thought: You can’t eat green plums, the pits are still soft and you’ll swallow your death. [...] People walked past them quickly and quietly. They recognized one another from before. That’s why they walked so quietly” (Müller 1996, pp. 51–52).

Consumption here is not metaphor but mechanism. Müller turns the act of eating into a political vocabulary of hunger, exposing a society where power consumes and the powerless metabolise fear. Food and flesh blur; appetite replaces justice.

This grotesque appetite aligns with Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, the collapse of boundaries between what can be assimilated and what must be expelled. The guards' unripe plums and the girls' preserved organs become symbols of a state that digests its subjects only to excrete them as waste. The abject, in Kristeva's sense, marks the border of the self, the moment when meaning is threatened by what it cannot contain (Kristeva 1982, pp. 1–5, 56–58). Müller's world exists precisely on that border, where nourishment and decay are indistinguishable.

The economy of loss that governs Müller's fiction is not simply financial but ontological. The act of selling one's home becomes a ritual of un-housing the self. "The kitchen cupboard is empty," the narrator observes, yet that emptiness is more than material, it signifies the stripping away of history, the conversion of memory into currency (Müller 1996, p. 191). What remains unsold is the soul, though even that must be packed light. Müller's villagers learn to migrate by subtraction, divesting themselves of everything that might delay departure.

Paul Bailey's *Kitty & Virgil* transposes this economy of loss into a new key. London offers goods in abundance, yet what sustains the exile is not possession but narration. Virgil's survival depends on his letters, poems, and stories—light things that carry identity better than furniture over rough borders; Bailey's inventory is textual rather than material. For the exile, every sentence becomes portable property, every story a deposit of the self. The contrast between Müller's material barter and Bailey's verbal one underscores a shift from the economy of bodies to the economy of words.

Where Müller's characters trade flour for departure, Bailey's trade speech for survival. In this sense, *Kitty & Virgil* dramatises the literary afterlife of biopolitics: when the state ceases to control the body, language assumes the burden of accounting. Virgil's writing becomes both compensation and resistance, a form of spiritual bookkeeping that tallies loss without erasing it. Each sentence is a coin with a face, Bailey implies, stamped not by the sovereign but by the self. The written word functions as a moral currency that cannot be devalued by regime or market. "'I have only this,' said Virgul Florescu, giving her a fifty-pence coin. 'I am not rich in money'" (Bailey 2000, p. 19).

The logic behind both economies, Müller's barter and Bailey's narration, reflects what Karl Marx identified as the alienation inherent in commodification (Marx 1975, pp. 324–34; 1976, pp. 163–77). Under capitalism and totalitarianism alike, value migrates from human experience into exchangeable form. In *The Passport*, memory itself becomes a commodity: the heirloom, the photograph, the body's touch, all rendered equivalent. In *Kitty & Virgil*, this process persists but mutates, the stories that once testified to life now circulate as symbolic capital within exile's marketplace of empathy. The result is a melancholic humanism: even dignity must be traded to be understood.

Walter Benjamin's reflections on ruin and material decay offer a final interpretive frame. For Benjamin, the ruin is history's most honest monument: an object that exposes the transience of possession and the inevitability of loss (Benjamin 1968, p. 257; 1998, pp. 178–83). Müller's emptied house and Bailey's bundle of manuscripts are both ruins of a kind, material and textual relics of a world that has already collapsed. Each novel suggests that survival depends on learning to inhabit ruin without attempting to restore it.

The politics of loss thus become a poetics of endurance. In Müller's landscapes, life is reduced to the last usable fragment, flour, photograph, flesh. In Bailey's London, the fragments are verbal, lines of poetry, letters, and unmailed sentences. Freedom does not

abolish poverty; it merely changes its medium. The passport that once cost a cupboard now costs a confession.

If Foucault's biopolitics represents the state's attention to life's small economies, Müller and Bailey expose how those economies are reckoned in bodies and in words. This economy ultimately reveals that departure itself is produced as a market transaction: the state monetises emigration by converting domestic life, intimacy, and dignity into exchangeable units of permission. The ledger of survival is kept not in gold but in gesture. To live under such conditions is to understand that every exchange, whether of touch, silence, or syntax, is a negotiation with disappearance. And yet, within this arithmetic of loss, something persists: the faint surplus of meaning that outlives possession, the sentence that carries more than itself, the story that, light as paper, refuses to vanish.

8. City, River, Graveyard: Liminal Geographies

In the literature of displacement, geography becomes a moral language, the topography of inner weather. In Müller and Bailey, space is not backdrop but verdict. The Danube, the road, the field, the city, and the graveyard are not mere locations but border apparatuses, thresholds where identity is negotiated, revoked, or reborn. The Danube, recurring in both Müller's and Bailey's work, functions as both frontier and font: a river that divides nations but also baptises bodies into new states of being. To cross it is to perform a ritual of unmaking. In *Kitty & Virgil*, the moment of crossing condenses the entire theology of exile, Virgil "swam the Danube . . . with body" (Bailey 2000, p. 2). The preposition is everything: not *across* but *with*: the italics highlight this choice because the preposition carries the core semantic and ethical weight of the statement. In the phrase "swam the Danube . . . with body" (Bailey 2000, p. 2), the meaning hinges on the contrast between *across* and *with*; therein *across* would imply successful traversal, directionality, and mastery of space, whereas *with* suggests accompaniment, burden, and exposure. The act fuses geography and flesh; the body itself becomes the vessel of passage, sanctified and scarred by cold water: the river is not something the body conquers but something the body endures and enters into relation with. The frontier is liquid, but the ritual is irreversible. By italicizing *with*, the sentence foregrounds this shift from movement as achievement to movement as vulnerability; the preposition becomes the site where the politics of escape is redefined, from crossing a border to inhabiting it corporeally. The italics therefore mark the word as an interpretive key rather than a mere connector.

In *The Land of Green Plums*, Müller extends the metaphor of crossing into a collective condition. "The flowing water, the moving freight trains, and the fields full of grain were all places of death" (Müller 1996, p. 61). Here, mobility and mortality coincide. The river and the railway, icons of transit, have been refunctioned into sites of disappearance. The geography of movement is converted into a cartography of erasure. Each corridor of potential escape doubles as an execution ground. Müller's Romania is a landscape of liminal stasis, in which every horizon is both promise and trap. The field becomes a holding cell, the train a hearse.

The same geography of entrapment structures *The Passport*, though now the village itself becomes terminal. Windisch's world is bordered not by fences but by habit, rumour, and fear. The war memorial, the pothole, the priest's rectory, all are micro-borders, each checkpoint regulating passage from one moral zone to another. The novel's rural claustrophobia inverts the logic of exile: the desire to leave transforms the village into a customs post of the soul. Every road out is also a return inward, every departure haunted by the sense that "the end is here" (Müller 2009, p. 10). The border no longer lies at the edge of the map; it runs through the body, the family, the language.

Bailey's London, by contrast, expands geography outward yet keeps its fragility intact. For Virgil, the city is "my unanticipated city," a Babel where every street contains another translation of survival (Bailey 2000, p. 184). The metropolis is polyglot and porous, a place that allows multiplicity without granting resolution. In this sense, London becomes what Marc Augé calls a non-place: a space of transit defined not by history but by circulation, where the individual's presence is provisional, and belonging is momentary (Augé 1995, pp. 77–84, 103).

Yet Bailey infuses this impersonality with tenderness. London shelters the exile even as it estranges him. Its multicultural hum, its "every race, every colour, every language", turns estrangement into community, if only fleetingly (Bailey 2000, p. 184).

Still, the city remains a border zone. Bailey's narrative maps a series of checkpoints that mirror the bureaucracies left behind. There is checkpoint London, where Virgil endures a xenophobic diatribe; checkpoint kitchen, where Romanian is spoken, then immediately translated into English; checkpoint cemetery, where national and linguistic divisions persist even in burial. Each of these spaces tests the possibility of recognition, asking for documents the state cannot issue: empathy, memory, witness. Étienne Balibar's conception of borders as diffuse zones of inclusion and exclusion endlessly reproduced clarifies this structure. For Balibar, borders have migrated inward, dissolving the distinction between inside and outside (Balibar 2004, pp. 2–3, 78). Müller's and Bailey's geographies exemplify this diffusion: the border is not crossed but continually inhabited. What these spatial configurations ultimately demonstrate is that geography in these texts functions as a moral regime, organising inclusion and exclusion not through fixed boundaries but through lived thresholds that must be continually negotiated.

The spatial logic of these texts thus transforms external cartography into psychic architecture. Following Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, one might say that these writers relocate the notion of dwelling from the physical house to the interior of consciousness (Bachelard 1994, pp. 6, xxxv, 184). The Danube, the city street, and the graveyard are no longer exterior landscapes but rooms of the mind, each charged with the residue of exile. The self inhabits them not as owner but as tenant, aware that every claim to permanence is provisional.

Michel de Certeau's idea of spatial practice further illuminates this dynamic. For de Certeau, walking through the city constitutes a form of enunciation, a way of writing oneself into space (de Certeau 1984, pp. 91–99). Although Müller's later urban exile text *Travelling on One Leg* (Reisende auf einem Bein) would offer an even more direct counterpart for de Certeau's walking-as-enunciation, the present article limits itself to *The Passport* and *The Land of Green Plums* to keep the comparative corpus consistent. In Bailey's London, Virgil's movement through the city's polyphonic streets becomes precisely such a practice: an act of rewriting geography through memory. His itineraries are not urban but moral, tracing invisible paths between survival and recollection. Every street he names, every language he hears, becomes a counter-narrative to the silence of the Danube he once crossed.

The graveyard, recurrent in both Müller and Bailey, closes this geography of passage. In *The Passport*, the priest's division of graves by ethnicity perpetuates the politics of exclusion even beyond death. In *Kitty & Virgil*, by contrast, the dead form the only borderless community. "You miss them too, gentle lady?" Virgil asks; the answer, "We miss them, yes. They will always be in our thoughts", redefines mourning as hospitality (Bailey 2000, p. 266). Where Müller's graveyard segregates, Bailey's unites. Death becomes the final cosmopolitan condition.

Across these landscapes, village, river, city, graveyard, the liminal becomes permanent. Victor Turner's theory of liminality as a transitional phase finds in these novels its extended

form: the threshold no longer leads elsewhere but becomes the dwelling itself (Turner 1969, pp. 94–97). The emigrant, the exile, the survivor all live in the interval, between languages, between nations, between the living and the dead. Their geography is neither mapped nor stable; it is a climate, mutable and porous.

Müller and Bailey ultimately reimagine space as ink that will not dry, a medium that blurs the boundaries it seeks to fix. Their rivers baptise with cold, their cities breathe in borrowed tongues, their cemeteries continue to segregate even as they promise peace. Each location demands a document that bureaucracy cannot supply: proof not of nationality but of endurance. The result is a cartography of the in-between, a world drawn in smudged ink, where the self presses against the page and finds, in the refusal of clean lines, the faintest evidence of life.

9. Form as Border Regime: Montage, Elegy, and Checkpoint Syntax

If Müller and Bailey write of borders, they also write as borders: in both authors, form performs the work of control and release, surveillance and passage. The sentence becomes a site of inspection, the page a frontier where the reader is momentarily detained. *The Passport* and *The Land of Green Plums* are composed of short, recursive chapters, patrols rather than narratives, each enforcing a rhythm of interruption. Müller's fragments arrive like checkpoints along an unending road: brief, recurrent, insistent. The repetitions of objects, the pothole, the belt, the rope, the plum, act as stamps reimpresed by an unseen official's hand, as though the text itself were undergoing bureaucratic processing. Notably, these objects recur without narrative escalation: the plum does not "develop" symbolically, nor does the pothole deepen into allegory; instead, each reappearance feels administratively identical to the last, mirroring the static temporality of bureaucratic waiting. Reading Müller is to move through paperwork, to feel the friction of the rubber seal against the page. This formal regime is not merely descriptive but operative: fragmentation becomes the means by which power is both mimicked and exposed, turning narrative itself into a bordered space governed by delay, repetition, and inspection.

This fragmented architecture recalls Walter Benjamin's understanding of montage as a form of historical cognition. For Benjamin, montage interrupts narrative continuity in order to reveal the fractures that history conceals (Benjamin 1968, p. 263; 1999, pp. 462–63). Müller's prose operates in precisely this register: each vignette exposes the violence of the everyday, each pause becomes a cut in the film reel of ideology. The narrative never smooths its surface; instead, it insists on its seams. Form, here, does not transport the reader across borders, it keeps the reader waiting at them, performing the temporal and moral suspension that defines life under surveillance.

The brevity of Müller's chapters also resonates with Theodor Adorno's concept of the fragment as resistance. In Adorno's view, the fragment refuses the totalising closure of systems, embodying instead the ethic of incompleteness (Adorno 1974, p. 247; 1997, pp. 40–48). Müller's refusal of narrative coherence enacts this resistance formally: each sentence ends abruptly, leaving the reader before an unanswerable silence. In this way, Müller reproduces the condition of her characters: suspended between fear and expression, between statement and retraction. Her syntax is a checkpoint syntax, simultaneously opening and denying passage. Form here does not merely represent political constraint; it reproduces it, compelling the reader to undergo the same suspension, interruption, and scrutiny that structures the characters' lives. To read her is to experience the anxiety of inspection, to advance under the gaze of authority, even if that authority is now textual.

If Müller's form is carceral, Bailey's is elegiac and permeable. *Kitty & Virgil* moves with a different cadence: sentences lengthen, clauses breathe, silences are hospitable rather than disciplinary. Where Müller arrests time, Bailey elongates it, creating spaces where

memory can unfold without justification. His prose invites what might be called an ethics of attention: reading as vigil rather than judgement. The reader is asked not to adjudicate trauma but to keep company with it, to linger over the delicate crossings between languages, between lovers, between past and present.

This stylistic generosity parallels Roland Barthes's notion of the writerly text, a text that does not dictate meaning but opens it to the reader's participation (Barthes 1974, pp. 4–6; 1975, pp. 4–10). Bailey's rhythm, gentle yet insistent, turns reading into a collaborative act of witness. The pauses, ellipses, and translations within his prose function as ethical apertures: they ask for patience rather than interpretation. The form itself becomes a counter-politics to the authoritarian syntax that Müller depicts. Where Müller's concision mimics control, Bailey's expansiveness models care. Together, they demonstrate that the aesthetics of pacing, the interval between sentences, the space between words, can constitute a moral geography.

Yet both writers converge in their understanding of form as a border regime of consciousness. Each employs structure not to impose meaning but to map the experience of constraint. In Müller, fragmentation reflects a world policed by repetition, where survival depends on speaking elliptically. In Bailey, the elegiac flow embodies the afterlife of that constraint: freedom that still remembers captivity. If Müller's syntax embodies the patrol, Bailey's performs the crossing.

The contrast can also be illuminated through Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of chronotopic form: the inseparability of time, space, and narrative voice (Bakhtin 1981, pp. 84–85, 243). In Müller, the chronotope contracts, each paragraph encloses a compressed moment of fear, a second of awareness preserved like a photograph. In Bailey, it dilates—London becomes a dialogic space, allowing multiple voices and tenses to coexist. Both writers make form enact temporality: the former as repetition, the latter as resonance.

From another perspective, one might describe Müller's fractured syntax and Bailey's narrative drift as forms of linguistic deterritorialisation (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), though this dynamic remains secondary to the texts' shared concern with pacing, interruption, and ethical address. Müller deterritorialises syntax itself, each image escapes semantic capture, each scene dislocates its referent. Bailey deterritorialises memory, translating trauma into narrative drift. The reader, in both cases, becomes the migrant moving through sentences, learning to read as one learns to cross.

If *The Passport* enforces its own checkpoints, *Kitty & Virgil* offers rest areas along the same route. In Müller, the page interrogates: *Who are you? What are you carrying?* In Bailey, it asks instead: *What have you lost? What do you remember?* Both positions are necessary. Together they remind us that literature, like the border, is a system of passages that can wound or shelter depending on how it is administered.

Ultimately, form becomes the writers' truest metaphor of exile. The syntax of surveillance and the cadence of elegy enact the dual condition of the émigré imagination: to be detained and to keep moving, to speak and to wait one's turn. The page becomes a border crossing of consciousness, where every reader is briefly held, questioned, and, if patient, allowed to proceed. Müller and Bailey thus transform style into ethics, and reading into testimony. Their sentences patrol and console in equal measure, reminding us that the structure of a text can itself bear the shape of history, that even in language, there are lines we must cross to remain human.

10. Comparative Synthesis: Three Crossings

The three novels, Herta Müller's *The Passport* and *The Land of Green Plums*, and Paul Bailey's *Kitty & Virgil*, together chart a cartography of exile where documents, bodies, and words become interchangeable tokens of survival. Across them, three crossings emerge:

from paper to body, from fear to ethical memory, and from monologue to polyphony. Each crossing redefines the passport, not as a bureaucratic object but as an existential form, a mode of passage through which the self is continually remade. This comparative synthesis thus demonstrates that exile, in these novels, is not a condition to be resolved but a practice to be sustained—one that transforms documents into bodies, fear into ethical vigilance, and speech into shared responsibility.

10.1. From Paper to Body

In *The Passport*, authorization converges upon the body. The official's stamp, denied on paper, is exacted instead through touch, Amalie's shoulder, the priest's hand, the body as both threshold and toll. The moral economy of Müller's world depends on this displacement: paper proves nothing, flesh everything. Bureaucracy invades intimacy until the difference between confession and transaction dissolves. What should have been a certificate of identity becomes a rite of surrender, a conversion of ethics into anatomy.

In *Kitty & Virgil*, Bailey inverts this transaction. Where Müller shows the body subjected to power, Bailey shows it supplanting paper altogether. Virgil swims the Danube "with body," carrying no document but endurance itself. The act collapses the distinction between authorisation and existence, the swimmer becomes his own credential, the river his borderless ink. Here, the passport is no longer stamped but embodied; identity persists not as entitlement but as motion.

The Land of Green Plums renders this economy biological: the state metabolises itself through the imagery of ingestion. Guards gorge on unripe plums until foam crowns their mouths; the body politic feeds on its own immaturity. In this grotesque economy, Müller collapses rule and appetite, suggesting that totalitarianism is less a system of order than a cycle of hunger. The regime consumes what it governs; the subject survives by becoming indigestible. Together, these variations trace the passage from documentary control to corporeal inscription, revealing that in post-Communist literature, the body becomes the last reliable archive of truth.

10.2. From Fear to Ethical Memory

Each novel transforms fear, the ruling affect of dictatorship, into a form of ethical vigilance. In *The Passport* and *The Land of Green Plums*, language itself is endangered. Speech, surveillance, and silence constitute a triangular regime of fear, where every word risks betrayal. Müller's characters therefore invent cryptographic modes of friendship: hairs slipped into envelopes, punctuation used as alarm. These micro-languages of trust enact what Foucault calls the "microphysics of resistance," the small, embodied practices by which power is subverted from within (Foucault 1977, pp. 26–27; 1978, pp. 95–96). Fear becomes the medium through which solidarity is composed.

Bailey writes the aftermath of such terror, the moral vertigo of post-revolutionary freedom. When Virgil refuses to celebrate the Ceaușescu's execution, remarking that they "did nothing to deserve this quick kindness," he performs an ethics of restraint that stands against historical simplification (Bailey 2000, p. 174). His resistance is not to power but to the seduction of closure. This stance corresponds to Ricœur's ideal of just memory, the commitment to remember truthfully without succumbing to vengeance (Ricœur 2004, pp. 87–88, 495–96). Bailey's prose translates fear into conscience, silence into endurance. The result is an ethics that outlives ideology: fear becomes memory's moral tutor, a discipline rather than a residue.

In both authors, memory functions not as monument but as vigilance. The past remains active, unsettled, and ethically demanding. Here Boym's notion of reflective nostalgia applies: these works do not seek to restore a lost homeland but to remain alert to

the seductions of forgetting (Boym 2001, pp. 41–55). The exiled subject carries memory as both burden and ballast, an inner border that must be crossed daily.

10.3. From Monologue to Polyphony

Across these narratives, the language of authority gradually yields to the language of encounter. The schoolroom catechism in *The Passport*, “Every house has rooms. All the houses together make one big house”, embodies the totalitarian dream of a single, unified voice (Müller 2009, p. 54). The syntax is circular, paternal, unbroken: a nation imagined as a household of obedience. Yet across Müller’s corpus and into Bailey’s, that monologic voice fractures, giving way to polyphonic intimacy.

In Bailey’s London, the kitchen becomes a dialogic space, a counter-room to Müller’s national “house.” When Kitty asks Virgil to speak Romanian, “Mai bine singuratec și uitat. . .” (Bailey 2000, p. 85) and he translates it as “It is well to be alone and forgotten,” (Bailey 2000, p. 86) language becomes a site of mutual hospitality. Two grammars coexist without hierarchy; translation is not domestication but listening. This encounter realises Bakhtin’s ideal of the dialogic imagination: meaning generated not by mastery but by exchange (Bakhtin 1981, pp. 277–93). The “big house” of ideology is thus replaced by the kitchen of dialogue, a space where languages braid rather than exclude. Such polyphony marks the third and most profound crossing: from isolation to reciprocity, from speech controlled to speech shared. The passport of the soul is issued not by the state but by recognition, when someone else says, in any tongue, *I hear you*. The act of listening becomes a moral border-crossing, a movement from the singular to the plural self.

These three crossings, of body, memory, and voice, trace the arc from subjection to witness. Müller and Bailey write not only of leaving home but of learning to inhabit exile ethically, to turn survival into attentiveness. Their novels convert bureaucratic ordeal into moral art, exposing how identity is continually rewritten at the intersection of loss and relation.

If Müller’s syntax patrols and Bailey’s elegy consoles, both reveal that the soul’s passport is renewable only through others. It is stamped in recognition, renewed in listening, and carried not in paper but in breath.

11. Conclusions: The Unseen Document

What, finally, do these novels propose? That the truest passport is not what one presents at the border but what crosses with the body, unseen yet indelible. In the worlds of Müller and Bailey, the self’s legitimacy is not confirmed by paper or seal but by endurance, by the body that remembers cold water, by the voice that can translate itself without dissolving, by the memory that refuses the twin seductions of propaganda and amnesia. Identity, here, is not conferred but carried.

Across *The Passport*, *The Land of Green Plums*, and *Kitty & Virgil*, authorisation shifts from the external to the interior, from document to conscience. Müller’s fiction exposes the checkpoint as a state of mind, a rhythm of inspection that survives the fall of the regime. Her sentences patrol their own borders: short, recurrent, withholding, as if syntax itself were a form of surveillance. The reader, too, becomes subject to this border logic, detained by fragments, searched by silence, released only provisionally. In Bailey, the function of witness replaces that of the inspector. The tone widens, language loosens, and hospitality, linguistic, emotional, ethical, takes the place of vigilance. If Müller writes the checkpoint, Bailey writes the arrival hall: a space where stories declare, rather than documents, grant entry.

Together they compose a cartography of in-betweenness, an atlas of the meanwhile that defines post-Communist subjectivity. Their characters do not emerge into a clean

after, a world neatly restored to order; they live instead in a durative exile, where borders have entered memory and waiting has become a way of time. This condition aligns with Balibar's dispersed borders, Boym's reflective nostalgia, and Ricœur's just memory, all theoretical frames that converge on one truth: that the aftermath of ideology is not liberation but vigilance (Balibar 2004, pp. 1–3; Boym 2001, pp. 41–49; Ricœur 2004, pp. 87–88, 495–96). The post-Communist subject must learn to inhabit transition as permanence, to dwell in the provisional without losing integrity.

The unseen document that sustains these lives is neither paper nor passport but a moral and imaginative credential, one written in what remains unsayable. Thought becomes a border post, measuring each crossing between fear and articulation. Memory leaves its watermark, faint but unmistakable, on every gesture of survival. And the self carries its record under the tongue, where speech and silence meet in the taste of metal, both wound and signature.

Müller and Bailey teach that exile is not the opposite of belonging but its hidden form. To live after dictatorship is to continue reading the world as though it were still under surveillance, to recognise that every freedom carries the outline of its prior confinement. Their work insists that history does not end at the border; it follows, stamped into the flesh of syntax and the quiet discipline of remembrance.

The unseen document, creased by fear, authenticated by endurance, countersigned by love, remains, miraculously, legible. Read together, Müller and Bailey do not offer parallel accounts of exile, but consecutive ones: a passage from the interiorisation of the border, through its violent crossing, and into its survival in memory and language, where the self continues to negotiate belonging long after the paperwork has lost its authority. In its faded script lies the soul's final visa: the right not to forget.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- Adorno, Theodor W. 1974. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. Translated by Edmund F. N. Jephcott. London: Verso.
- Adorno, Theodor W. 1997. *Aesthetic Theory*. Edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Althusser, Louis. 1971. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation). In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, pp. 127–86.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1951. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company.
- Assmann, Jan. 2011. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Augé, Marc. 1995. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Translated by John Howe. London and New York: Verso.
- Bachelard, Gaston. 1994. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bailey, Paul. 2000. *Kitty and Virgil*. London: Harper Collins.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1981. Discourse in the Novel. In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson, and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Balibar, Étienne. 1998. The Borders of Europe. In *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*. Edited by Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 216–33.
- Balibar, Étienne. 2004. *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*. Translated by James Swenson. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Barthes, Roland. 1974. *S/Z*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Barthes, Roland. 1975. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1968. On the Concept of History. In *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, pp. 253–64.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1998. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. London: Verso.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1999. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland, and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.
- de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, Michel. 2003. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*. Edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. Translated by David Macey. New York: Picador.
- Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*. Edited by Michel Senellart. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. 1992. *On Collective Memory*. Edited and Translated by Lewis A. Coser. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1991. *Strangers to Ourselves*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Marx, Karl. 1975. “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts” of 1844. In *Early Writings*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone, and Gregor Benton. London: Penguin Books.
- Marx, Karl. 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books, vol. 1.
- Müller, Herta. 1996. *The Land of Green Plums*. Translated by Michael Hofmann. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt.
- Müller, Herta. 2009. *The Passport*. Translated by Martin Chalmers. London: Serpent’s Tail.
- Ricœur, Paul. 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey, and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Said, Edward W. 2002. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Turner, Victor. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.