

Marina Ortrud M. Hertrampf

(Romani) Biofiction as World Literature: A Case Study of Núria León de Santiago's *Mahler's Angel*

Abstract

The following article analyses the biofiction *El ángel de Mahler* (*Mahler's Angel*), published in 2014, by the Spanish Romani female author Núria León de Santiago to illustrate the extent to which a productive overlap exists between the genre of biofiction on the one hand and that of Romani literature as world literature on the other.

León de Santiago's biographical novel offers an excellent example of cross-cultural representation: a world-famous Jewish-Austrian musician, Gustav Mahler, becomes the protagonist of a work by a Romani author writing in Spanish. Moreover, *Mahler's Angel* is a "veiled autobiography" (Layne/Tóibín 2018, 151), in so far as the book not only presents a new perspective on Mahler's life but also negotiates the writer's autobiographic concerns regarding ethnic minorities in general and the multiple in- and out-group discriminations of Roma-women in particular. Thus, León de Santiago's biofiction is a paradigmatic example of contemporary world literature "on the move" (Ette 2003) in a globalized world.

1. Reflections on Biofictions and/as World Literature

The roots of literary fictions that process (auto-)biographical elements have been around for over a hundred years, and since then authors all over the world have been exploring the possibilities of storytelling between fact and fiction. Since the 1980s, however, the form of 'fictional biographies' or 'biographical fictions' emerged as an autonomous genre under the catalytic influence of postmodernism and postmodern theory. In fact, the French critic Alain Buisine conceptualized the literary trend by coining the term 'biofiction' in 1991.¹

¹ In German-language research, the term was introduced by Middeke/Huber (1999).

As a worldwide literary trend, biofiction has the character of world literature.² In fact, there are several arguments for considering this hybrid genre as world literature, i.e., as a literature that is dedicated to Goethe's ideal of the *Bildungsroman* insofar as it uses the process of education and development of an individual to shed light on our shared world and its values. Furthermore, the capacity of the genre of biofictions to encompass worldly themes lies in the fact that they contribute to bridging the gap between canonical literature and popular mainstream literature. The genre thus strengthens the cross-cultural revival and contemporary re-evaluation of important historical personalities from around the world by integrating cultural icons from the world canon into the cultural consciousness of new generations regardless of their social, cultural and ethnic origin. Therefore, following David Damrosch's conception of world literature as a mode of reading rather than a selection of canonical works, biofictions could be understood as world literature insofar as they configure a vision of the world, not only through presenting diverse literary influences, transcultural hybridity, and cultural recycling, but also through revealing parallel developments across spatio-temporal, ethnic, and political spaces. Not least, biofictions partake of world literature through their ideological/political stance, that is, their very individual re-interpretation of normative facts that emphasizes the constructive and, not least, hegemonic character of national, cultural, and biographic narratives.

2. Romani Literature as World Literature

Romani literatures not written in Romany but in the languages of the majority are artistic expressions of the deterritorialised and transnational diaspora community of Roma.³ In fact, these literatures always differ from national literatures with their aesthetic standards and literary canons. Following Cécile Kovacsazy (2009, 137) Romani literature be-

² The great interest that researchers have taken in this genre is reflected in the conference "Biofiction as World Literature" at the Catholic University at Leuven (1.–4. September 2021), see <https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/biofiction-as-world-literature>.

³ For a comprehensive discussion of Romani literature as diasporic literature, see Hertrampf (2021a).

comes an exemplary case of de- or polycentered notions of world literature. Postcolonial as well as diasporic perspectives:

call into question the nation-based, proleptic emphasis of world literature, and the modernity of the world economic system that underpins it. Rather than a literary history comprised of national masterpieces that will be surpassed by transnational expressions, diasporic writers conjure a literary past marked precisely by the circulation, translation, and revision which Goethe identifies as hallmark of the contemporary era of world literature. (Frydman 2012, 233)

In his *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity* (1996, 66), Édouard Glissant describes Roma as the epitome of a people of diversity characterized by cultural *métissage*, world openness, and transgressive dynamism. Consequently, the literary self-expression of Roma is “without fixed abode” (Ette 2003) and is characterized by its aesthetic diversity; Romani literature is therefore a paradigmatic example of multiple border-crossing “literatures on the move” (I use here a term coined by Ottmar Ette 2003). At the same time, we see the proximity to Damrosch’s understanding of world literature when he states:

World literature is [...] always as much about the host culture’s values and needs as it is about a work’s source culture; hence it is a double refraction, one that can be described through the figure of the ellipse, with the source and host cultures providing the two foci that generate the elliptical space within which a work lives as world literature, connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone. (Damrosch 2003, 283)

Therefore, Romani literatures and especially biofictions written by Romani authors can be understood as world literature insofar as they configure a transcultural and hybrid vision of the world, recycle and combine diverse literary traditions, and present a re-interpretation of past realities by emphasising political and social continuities.⁴

3. Núria León de Santiago: Spain’s First Female Romani Writer

Like in all European countries, written Romani literature (in Spanish) is a fairly recent development in Spain, emerging only at the beginning

⁴ Also see Hertrampf (2021b).

of the 20th century.⁵ The Sevillian poet, artist, and revolutionary Helios Gómez is generally considered the first Romani author to write in Spanish.⁶ Not least because of Franco's reprisals against all Spanish minorities, any literature penned by Roma was subsequently rendered virtually non-existent. A certain exception, however, is flamenco poetry, although it should also be noted here that, apart from José Heredia Maya, only a few Roma flamenco poets have achieved national recognition. But even after the period of transition to democracy after the death of Francisco Franco in 1975, literary productions by Roma remained virtually invisible. A certain turning point can only be seen from the 1990s onwards. Nevertheless, Roma writing in Spanish who, as mediators, deliberately cross cultural-ethnic boundaries between the surrounding society and their own group, continue to be the exception to this day.⁷

Although Spanish Romani literature had its origins in lyrical works, today's Romani literature production is almost exclusively concentrated on narrative texts. Furthermore, it is striking that literary work and political engagement are closely linked. Joaquín Albaicín, undoubtedly the best-known and most productive Spanish Romani author of the present day, is a founding member of the International Romani Writers' Association and, in addition to his literary activity, works as a socio-politically active journalist. Spanish Romani authors of younger generations like Sally Cortès Santiago,⁸ Marcos Santiago Cortés or Núria León de Santiago appear confidently in public and on social networks as *gitan@s* and are involved in various NGOs and Romani associations for the empowerment of Roma in general and Romani women in particular.

In fact, Núria León de Santiago is an outstanding personality. The daughter of the famous flamenco legend La Chana is the first female Spanish Romani author. She is quite consciously open about her Romani origins, but repeatedly emphasizes with vehemence that she is also a Spanish author who wants to be perceived as such:

⁵ Cf. Hackl (1987); Hertrampf (2011 a und b).

⁶ In contrast to other countries, it is striking that there is no written literature written by gitanos in Caló, Spanish variant of Romany.

⁷ For more detailed surveys see Hertrampf (2011a and b), (2019).

⁸ See my other chapter in this book, entitled "Female empowerment through literary overwriting of stereotypical images of Romani femininity: An exemplary analysis from Spain: Sally Cortés' novel *When the stars are silent* (2018)".

So, like any other writer, I write about what excites me: about Mahler, and another book is coming out soon, 'Cenizas en la boca' ('Ashes in the Mouth'). Neither of them is about Gitanos. Because I see no reason to write about Gitanos. Because I am a writer and I am also Gitana; and apart from Gitana, I am a writer. For me, the two are so fused that I don't care what order you put it in. (Ibarz 2016, 16; translation MOH)

By placing Gustav Mahler, i.e. a historical *payo* personality, at the center of her first novel *El ángel de Mahler* and by only marginally establishing thematic references to the minority group, León de Santiago emancipates herself from thematically self-referential forms of aesthetic expression by Romani authors.⁹ In addition to this, León de Santiago uses aesthetic patterns of majority literary production and thus distances herself from the attribution as minority or "gitano" literature and inscribes her novel in the literary field of international contemporary literature, in which biofictions belong to the fictional mainstream.¹⁰

4. Núria León de Santiago's Biofiction *Mahler's Angel* as World Literature

By placing the world-famous Austrian musician at the centre of a Spanish-language novel and linking his biography to the fate of a young woman from the Romani diaspora, the author hybridises European music history with the fate of structurally discriminated and disadvantaged Jews and Roma, thus creating a biofiction of truly world-literary content.¹¹ It is noticeable that in addition to Mahler's prominent historical personality, the focus is primarily on socially marginalised women. In addition to the first-person narrator, Fanah Leonovah, a Russian Romni, plays an important role in the life of Mahler's literary character. According to the narrator, Mahler meets the gracefully dancing Romani street

⁹ For a more detailed analysis of the novel see Hertrampf (2020).

¹⁰ In fact, this also applies quite specifically to biofictions about Gustav Mahler's life. In German contemporary fiction *Mahlers Tode: Ein Gedankenspiel* (Mahler's Deaths: A Game of Thought; 2010) by Axel Koppetsch, *Die Heimkehr: Vom Sterben und Leben des Gustav Mahler* (The Homecoming: On the Death and Life of Gustav Mahler; 2011) by Guy Wagner, *Das brennende Herz: Gustav Mahler* (The Burning Heart: Gustav Mahler; 2017) by Hassan Ardjah and the story "Mahlers Heimkehr" (Mahler's homecoming; 2014) by Walter Kappacher have appeared.

¹¹ For an interpretation of the novel see also Hertrampf (2022).

musician Fanah by chance in the German Hanseatic city of Lübeck in 1891. He feels so strongly emotionally attracted to her that he intends to marry her immediately. It is interesting that León de Santiago uses this encounter to stage Mahler's special sensitivity and knowledge of human nature, which transcends all social prejudices and clichés and underlines the fact that music and dance have a cross-border and unifying effect in transnational communication.

Although the plot is set at the beginning of the last century, the author works out the supra-temporal moments with her current reinterpretation and reassessment of Mahler's life. Despite his character flaws, Mahler's courageous decision in favour of the socially marginalised Romani woman makes him a person to identify with and a role model. In this way, the author updates the historical setting and shows the timeless omnipresence of the most diverse forms of exclusion in a supposedly so tolerant and transnational cultural community, in the way that the European elites understand today's Europe.

Like any biofiction, *Mahler's Angel*, which runs to around 800 pages, relies on passages of indeterminacy that are filled imaginatively. The composition and structure of the novel show a high degree of literary composition, whereby the special trick is that the author pretends to base her literary production on the documents of a certain Elisabeth Mahler, which she claims to have received in the year 2000 with the estate of Aureore Montoya, a friend of La Chana (the author's mother). "Despite the doubts they may raise, the documents contained in this book do exist." ("Pese a las dudas que puedan suscitar, los documentos que contiene este libro existen", 12), the author asserts in her preface to the novel. While León de Santiago supposedly relies on actual written documents, which she pretends to have translated from German into Spanish, studied meticulously for over four years, and supplemented with further research on Mahler's personality, it remains unclear whether the supposed contemporary documents are authentic or already the result of a process of fictionalisation. Therefore, the real existence of Elisabeth Mahler shows just as little evidence of authenticity as the notes (allegedly) made in Weimar shortly before her death in 1971. According to these documents, however, Gustav Mahler met Elisabeth in 1891 when she was a nine-year-old orphan girl, first made her his foster daughter, then his mistress, and remained in close contact with her until his death in 1911.

According to Bethany Layne and Colm Tóibín, biographical fiction is not only "Anchored Imagination" but

[...] in a way, like all fiction, a sort of veiled autobiography made of elaborated versions of the self that would otherwise remain hidden—using the bare bones or a set of facts that are available to deliver on feelings that have not until then had a focus. (Layne/Tóibín 2018, 151)

In fact, this is the case in *Mahler's Angel*, which not only depicts Mahler's life but at the same time negotiates autobiographic concerns of the author. Núria León de Santiago grew up in a family influenced by music and became enthusiastic about Mahler's work at an early age. This very personal interest, combined with the musician's eventful and moving biography, prompted the author to also deal with him in literature. One aspect in particular is of importance to her. That is the racially motivated discrimination that Mahler faced in the form of anti-semitic campaigns and that are parallel to experiences of Romani minorities. In an interview, Núria León de Santiago states: "The fact that Mahler was Jewish was an extremely important part of the concept. What happened at that time left a terrible impression on me, and that somehow caused me to take special care of Mahler, Mahler as a literary figure." (Ibarz 2016, 16; translation MOH) Thus, for the author, who sees herself as a *gitana* and a Spaniard in equal measure, and above all as a Spanish-speaking author who defends equal rights for all people, it is not central to stand up exclusively against discrimination of Roma, but against every form of disadvantage and exclusion. And yet, even though her main character is not a representative of the Roma minority, the invention of the character Fanah shows that she is also concerned with her own cause, that is, with the struggle for acceptance of the Roma.

The novel's direct socio-political engagement with the transnational topic of stigmatisation and discrimination also involves the biofiction in a world dialogue about overcoming the timeless theme of the powerlessness of minorities. Thus, the novel is a plea for tolerance and acceptance of individual and collective diversity on the one hand, and, on the other hand, for the return to the greatest value of humanity, which is unconditional love that overcomes. In this way, *Mahler's Angel* can be read as an attempt to develop a transcultural as well as trans-ethnic (Romani) aesthetic—right in the sense of world literature.

Bibliography

- Buisine, Alain (1991): “biofiction”, in: *Revue des sciences humaines* 4/224, 7–13.
- Damrosch, David (2003): *What Is World Literature?*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Ette, Ottmar (2003): *Literature on the move*, Amsterdam, Rodopi.
- Frydman, Jason (2012): “World Literature and Diaspora Studies”, in: D’haen, Theo/Damrosch, David/Kadir, Djelal (edd.): *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, London/New York, Routledge, 232–241.
- Glissant, Édouard (1996): *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, Paris, Gallimard.
- Hackl, Erich (1987): *Zugvögel seit jeher. Freude und Not spanischer Zigeuner*, Wien, Herder.
- Hertrampf, Marina Ortrud M. (2011a): “Camelamos naquerar. Literarische Stimmen spanischer Roma-Autoren”, in: Hertrampf, Marina Ortrud M./Blandfort, Julia (edd.): *Grenzerfahrungen: Roma-Literaturen in der Romania*, Berlin, LIT, 169–188.
- Hertrampf, Marina Ortrud M. (2011b): “‘España también es gitana’ – Literatur spanischer Roma”, in: *Hispanorama* 132, 66–77.
- Hertrampf, Marina Ortrud M. (2022): “Núria León de Santiago. El ángel de Mahler (2014)”, in: Schmelzer, Dagmar/Junkerjürgen, Ralf et al. (edd.): *Wegmarken der spanischen Literatur des 21. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin, Erich Schmidt, 123–132.
- Hertrampf, Marina Ortrud M. (2021a): “Roma als ‘andere’ transnationale Diaspora”, in: *Quo vadis Romania?* 56, 117–133.
- Hertrampf, Marina Ortrud M. (2021b): “Romani Literature(s) As Minor Literature(s) in the Context of World Literature. A Survey of Romani Literatures in French and Spanish”, in: *Critical Romani Studies* 3/2, 42–57.
- Hertrampf, Marina Ortrud M. (2020): “Der ‘andere’ Mainstream: Núria León de Santiagos biofiktionaler Roman *El ángel de Mahler*”, in: Hertrampf, Marina Ortrud M./Hagen, Kirsten von (edd.): *Ästhetik(en) der Roma – Selbst- und Fremdrepräsentationen*, München, AVM, 97–115.

- Hertrampf, Marina Ortrud M. (2019): “Roma Literature in Spain. An Overview”, in: *RomArchive*, <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/literature/literature-countries-and-regions/literature-spain/> [28.01.2023].
- Kovacshazy, Cécile (2009): “Littératures romani. cas exemplaire de la littérature-monde?”, in: *Études tsiganes* 36/1, 13–145.
- Layne, Bethany/Tóibín, Colm (2018): “The Anchored Imagination of the Biographical Novel”, in: *Éire-Ireland* 53/1, 150–166.
- León de Santiago, Núria (2014): *El ángel de Mahler*, Barcelona, Bellaterra.
- Middeke, Martin/Huber, Werner (edd.) (1999): *Biofictions: The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*, Camden East, Camden House.