

IMAGINATIONS

REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE ▪ JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES



IMAGINATIONS

JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy
and instructions for contributors:

<http://imagination.csj.ualberta.ca>

New Research on East Germany

Editorial Team: Brent Ryan Bellamy, Daniel Laforest, Andriko Lozowy,
Tara Milbrandt, Carrie Smith-Prei, Sheena Wilson

May 21, 2017

To cite this article:

Robinson, Benjamin. "Troubled Faces: The Melancholy Passion of Anna Seghers's
Die Entscheidung." *Imaginations* 8:1 (2017): Web (date accessed) 126–141.

DOI: 10.17742/IMAGE.GDR.8-1.9

To link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.GDR.8-1.9>



The copyright for each article belongs to the author and has been published in this journal under a [Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial NoDerivatives 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) license that allows others to share for non-commercial purposes the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal. The content of this article represents the author's original work and any third-party content, either image or text, has been included under the Fair Dealing exception in the Canadian Copyright Act, or the author has provided the required publication permissions.

TROUBLED FACES: THE MELANCHOLY PASSION OF ANNA SEGHERS'S *DIE ENTSCHEIDUNG*

BENJAMIN ROBINSON

Abstract | Among the plotlines in Anna Seghers' 1959 novel of socialist construction, *Die Entscheidung*, the love story remains the most realistic allegory for understanding passionate motivations for socialism. This reading reveals how Seghers has moved the locus of insight from characters in her early novels who gain ideological consciousness in mortal struggle against repression to characters who discover ideological limits in the face of creaturely involvements. The sacrifice of the Catholic wife of a communist engineer points to the persistence of the body, labour, and birth, with their concomitant emotions of compassion and romance. By directing attention away from doctrinaire elements, my reading explores how the particulars of care encounter the generalities of collectivism.

Résumé | Dans le roman d'Anna Seghers de 1959, *Die Entscheidung*, roman de construction socialiste, l'histoire d'amour reste l'allégorie la plus réaliste pour comprendre certaines motivations passionnées pour le socialisme. Cette intervention montre comment Seghers a déplacé le lieu de connaissance de la lutte forcenée contre la répression (dans ses premiers romans) aux personnages qui se heurtent aux limites idéologiques devant leurs engagements corporels. Le sacrifice de la femme catholique d'un ingénieur communiste pointe vers la persistance du corps, du travail et de l'accouchement, avec leurs sentiments de compassion et de rêve. En écartant l'attention des éléments doctrinaires, cette intervention interroge les façons dont les particularités des soins rencontrent les généralités du collectivisme.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

—Romans 8: 18-21

Introduction—Love as Socialist Allegory

Anna Seghers's 1959 novel, *Die Entscheidung* (*The Decision*) is an epic chronicle of the reconstruction of heavy industry on socialist terms in the rubble of the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany. In one of the most memorable plotlines, the engineer Ernst Riedl finds himself separated from his beloved wife, Katharina, by geography and conviction. Riedl received his engineering training before the war and had his first position in a giant Bentheim Steel Works plant in the Elbe River town of Kossin, and then returns after the war to Kossin, now in the Soviet Occupation Zone. He is attracted by the workers struggling on their own to get the plant back into operation, deciding for reasons not altogether clear to himself to throw in his lot with them and settle in Kossin. His wife meanwhile is surviving the postwar wreckage in the village of Kronbach near Riedl's hometown in the American Occupation Zone on the river Main. He first met her on a trip home during a university holiday before the war and has been mostly away from her since then

at work or at war. She is a truehearted Rhineland Catholic, “the sweetest thing he knew” (*Entscheidung* 156), young, innocent and committed to the remnants of the peasant community in the villages along the Main.¹ She faces the postwar devastation around her without discontent or pity. Neither a social climber nor an activist, she is reconciled to her place in the world and above all eager to be helpful to those in need. Katharina, we immediately perceive, is a good woman—but since she is not committed to changing the world, we know just as immediately that the plot will demand she undergo some transformation or come to some decision, as the title promises. We get to know her husband Riedl as a dedicated, rather awkward person, likewise neither a striver nor quite a malcontent, but a melancholic, unwilling to let people into his confidence.² His sense that he belongs on the Elbe in the East is as vague and as deep-seated as Katharina’s that she belongs on the Main in the West. Both are motivated by faith and both committed to the underdog. Yet Riedl’s newfound solidarity with the East separates him from his wife and birthplace; that is, his decision would seem to demand some sort of articulate, enlightened account from him—one that he, like many laconic Seghers heroes from Andreas Bruyn to Benito Guerrero, proves unable to formulate. The direct communication that might save their relationship instead becomes a freighted allegory of socialism and redemption.

Before Seghers returned from Mexican exile to the Soviet Occupation Zone in 1947, her writing—although set in realistic sites of political resistance and exile—adopted the elevated diction and iconography of religious tradition to reveal a humane passion for socialism. In contrast to the insights of doctrine, revelation here is a specifically aesthetic sort of

knowledge. She uses allegorical means to bridge the gap between descriptive and affective registers, where the intensity of the feeling of insight stands in little proportion to the modesty of what is described. Seghers achieved her effects of knowledge especially through a narrative structure that juxtaposed routine and danger, monotony and exaltation. Indeed, in Seghers’s work the genre “socialist realism” can be understood as just the allegorical attribution of socialist significance to major and minor plot events.³ “Allegory,” wrote Walter Benjamin in the *Origins of German Tragic Drama*, “established itself most permanently where transitoriness and eternity confronted each other most closely” (224, qtd. in Santner, 21).

After 1947, the socialist state, once the exalted goal of so much charismatic sacrifice in Seghers’s earlier writing, became the mundane setting of her historical chronicles of socialist construction. Committed to the literary affirmation of a state that, when it appeared on the back of the occupying Soviet army rather than with the hoped-for workers’ uprising, did so in the severe form of a bureaucratic party apparatus, Seghers faced a new aesthetic challenge. Socialism had to be depicted as the inherent tendency of the age, not as a deferred future expressed negatively as opposition to a damaged present. Her heroes had to rise to the occasion of single-party rule and collective labour discipline, not resistance and strikes. In such wearying and often parochial circumstances, the opportunity to risk one’s life was not so readily available for eliciting revelation. While the passion for socialism remains central to her two postwar novels of contemporary history, its depiction becomes more indirect and the parties to the struggle have less chance to disclose

their deeper motives—often not transparent even to themselves. In *Die Entscheidung*, Seghers’s allegorical structure of meaning-making is as pervasive as ever, but shifts its manifest setting into more mundane life situations. Ironically, her allegorical intensification of meaning becomes more inescapable as the situations in which it is expressed become more commonplace. In Riedl and Katharina’s story, the mysteries of socialist desire (the physical as well as political dimensions of *choosing* socialism) are conveyed allegorically through their trials of unfulfilled romantic passion and displaced faith. The almost absurdly deferred reconciliation of the star-crossed lovers is charged with lifting the narrative load that Seghers’s plots of political martyrdom once would have carried.

What reads as most realistic in Seghers’s novel after the 1989 collapse of real socialism in the Eastern Bloc is not the genre-typical grit of craggy workers testing their open-hearth furnace or vigilantly matching wits with supervisors, but rather the way Riedl and Katharina conceal from themselves the objects of their attachment and loss (the unplumbed space between authentic faith and self-deception). Their struggle to find the truth of their characters expressed in an emblematic social choice proves self-deceptive in a way that does not expose some novelistic bad faith, but instead captures the very beat of faith and irony and resistance and conformity that emerges in the interference pattern of engaged realism set against the disillusioned history of our present today. The lovers’ tragedy anticipates how socialist realism relates to the sad fate of real socialism in the hands of postwar history. It casts into relief not just the different time-spans of individual and collective desire, but also the

different temporalities a person inhabits when she is loving or exhausted, ambitious or troubled. Most important perhaps, the pair's tragedy shows how difficult it is to coordinate passionate faith with practical judgment. "As a rule," Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt observe in their *History and Obstinacy*, "strong motives (for example, 'I feel responsible for the future and the development of my children,' 'my faith is inalienable') are less likely to ally themselves with the motives of other humans than are weak motives," such as the pragmatic calculations of daily life (402).

Lovers, Tormentors, and Bodies at Risk

Given the harsh situation of destroyed, occupied, and morally fraught postwar Germany, two lovers finding themselves drawn apart by circumstances is not an especially surprising plot construction; one could read it as demonstrating how the greedy, recidivist interests of the West run roughshod over humble lives. Yet Seghers makes it clear that Katharina and Riedl remain not only genuinely in love, but also practically capable of reconciling their future plans. They are thwarted by something deeper than the various Cold War machinations and ideological misprisions that constitute the narrative stumbling blocks in the novel's more tendentious episodes. With its utopian theme of absolute love coming together in a community of caring, this plot thread might also be read as a foil for the more overtly topical threads, implicitly underscoring the unsuitability of any option available in Cold War Germany for delicate souls in hardscrabble times.⁴ The Soviet Zone and early GDR, Seghers shows us, are no place for gentle people. Even if the late 1940s are

no longer Bertolt Brecht's "dark times" of fascism—the period of Seghers's most celebrated novels, *The Seventh Cross* (1942) and *Transit* (1944)—they surely remain a time for sober self-discipline. Though characters are not called upon to make mortal sacrifices, they must still forfeit the radiant life of achieved community.

Yet Riedl is not an otherworldly romantic. He is not organized in the Communist party, but nevertheless hews imperturbably to the party line, less hesitant than even his party-member acquaintances. His inner doubts pertain to his person, not to the Soviet course. His commitment to making machines work, to the manageable goals of uncomplicated workers, illustrates the sort of steadfast attitude for which shifting party lines and power struggles are turbulences to which his deeper faith in good work pay little heed. He is, in other words, less a stranger to the practical world of postwar reconstruction than he is guided by a non-intellectual intuition of a bigger picture, rooted in things other than the daily struggle in which hardened workers and party agitators are absorbed. He is, arguably, the book's prime example of someone who has chosen his choice, motivated as he is by an existential decision for the better Germany. However, in a crucial twist, the intuitions guiding him belong to the effervescent Katharina rather than to the melancholic Riedl. Riedl grasps neither his own optimistic commitment nor his stubborn melancholy. His character weakness, his lack of self-confidence, derives, at least in comparison to the activists around him, from his missing the stark authority of death in his biography. The strong-willed cadre supervising the Kossin mill or prowling the Occupation Zone to recruit a new political infrastructure share a background of

mortal sacrifice in clandestine party work during fascism or in the Spanish Civil War. To use Sigmund Freud's famous distinction between mourning and melancholia, the activists frankly mourn the comrades they have lost, and turn loss into a determined affirmation of the future. Riedl, as a melancholic, does not even recognize what it is that he has lost, and is thus incapable of avowing it—the authority of his character, such as it is, depends on an intuition, both idealized and enigmatic, rather than his having known death and surmounted it in action.

What Riedl does have, and the other serious people at the plant do not, is Katharina. Katharina embodies, in the gracious form of the human figure, Riedl's intuition of repaired humanity.⁵ Her own generous faith, however, will not let itself be organized into the particular ideological present, as Riedl attempts to do with his faith in order to wrest it from its melancholy indefiniteness. He insists on the pathos of the present in a way that Katharina cannot. To put it in terms of genre conventions: while Katharina's timeless faith will not let itself be written according to the partisan conventions of official socialist realism, Seghers cannot do without expressing it—it is still the literary model of what faith must be. This tension between the organized particular (the historically sectarian) and the untrammelled universal—refracted through registers of social and existential worlds, manifest and latent experiences, political and natural history, theoretical and revealed truth—gives force to the tragic impulse that Seghers weaves into the novel's sweeping chronicle as a whole. Yet as it turns out, this thread, instead of tying together the shattered historical world in which it unfolds, is like Hansel and Gretel's bread crumbs: it draws us deep into

the real socialist woods, but leaves us lost as to what would be established for us there—if not an untrammelled world, then the ideological coherence *Die Entscheidung* aims to secure. It would therefore be wrong to read the tragic love story as a foil for the political strands and their doctrinal moral coordinates. On the contrary, Riedl and Katharina's love points to a persistent characteristic of Seghers' politics of the aesthetic, which a disappointed Marcel Reich-Ranicki claimed the novel had forfeited, namely her focus on "simple people" who can barely express their "strong feelings and few thoughts" (Reich-Ranicki). Since her 1926 story, "Grubetsch," Seghers's plots invariably harbour a moment of revelation that hints at a passionate alternative to the monotony of the life to which her simple protagonists are condemned. Literature in her aesthetics is a way to envision an ecstatic community against a horizon of historical mortification.

In the conflict-laden years of the Weimar Republic, Seghers' humble characters were workers, housewives, and drifters. Many of her key scenes juxtaposed experiences of bodily exhaustion with those of the body extending itself into the world and bending toward the bodies of its fatigued fellows. The exhaustion of a labourer's body obliterates all experience besides physical pain—there is nothing left to say, the moral self no longer appears in words or deeds, and the character withdraws into the silent vanishing point of his or her creaturely nature.⁶ The body extending outward, by contrast, opens itself to risk, palpates the presence of others in wary anticipation of a touch—a communion (when the body meets a lover or comrade) or a blow (when it meets a cop or informer). Through its extension, the beset human figure

exposes its embodied moral qualities to the judgment of fellow human beings, risking the possibility of companionship or affliction. In her 1928 story *Aufstand der Fischer von St. Barbara* (*Revolt of the Fishermen of Santa Barbara*) we learn in the first sentences what will happen to the agitator, Hull, and the striker, Andreas. Their authority in the unfolding story derives from our anticipating Andreas' death on the cliffs when fleeing the police, and Hull exposing himself to a physical jeopardy he needn't assume. Indeed, Hull's body-at-risk is what draws Andreas from the enclosed drudgery of his poverty into a world that opens onto love and death. In stark relief against their physical duress, both characters assume a mythical gravitas that Seghers writing laconically conveys. In her subsequent work under the new circumstances of fascist victory and her exile from Germany, the historical scale of the violence she depicts expands, yet her exhausted charismatics—such as Georg Heisler, the escaped concentration camp prisoner from *The Seventh Cross*—continue to give focus to Seghers's incomparable balancing act: on the one hand, the horrible moral burden her heroes bear for drawing ordinary people into often fatal danger; and on the other, the uplift they provide us by giving history's otherwise private and complicit bystanders the opportunity to disclose their righteousness.

Although fascism drives her to France and Mexico, danger is not an exotic milieu for Seghers but rather the negation that lies latent in all routine, whether that of daily labor or the discipline of living on the lam, underground, or in exile. In a damaged world, danger arises from keeping faith with oneself despite the compromise and corruption all around. Danger culminates in an ecstasy, often only per-

ceived through the fragmented senses of a tortured body, pointing beyond the routines of work and obedience. The death that ensures the consistency of a protagonist's faith also ensures its relevance, indeed, its perennial youth—as the title of Seghers's first postwar novel, the 1949 epic *Die Toten bleiben jung* (*The Dead Stay Young*), programmatically announces. What changes in her work, from the Weimar Republic, exile from fascism in Germany, and finally to the Soviet occupation and the construction of the GDR, is an increasing tendency to frame these moments of ecstasy—often immersed in primordial settings and concentrated by the limits of the struggling body—in larger and more historically explicit chronological spans with scarcely veiled theses about the proper course of events. At the same time, the natural body at the cusp of death remains the key source of narrative force. The relevant body at the center of the voluminous *Die Entscheidung*, where a variation on Seghers' characteristic drama of catalyst and bystander plays out, is, surprisingly, Katharina's.

Landscapes with Ruins and Faces, Sullen and Radiant

We first meet Riedl through the party's eyes, when his opacity rather than his promise stands out. Robert Lohse, another one of the novel's protagonists, describes Riedl to his childhood friend and Spanish Civil War comrade, the functionary Richard Hagen: "He was employed here before the war. Then he came back and helped us. I still haven't seen into his heart. [...] I can scarcely imagine why such a person would want the plant to belong to us" (77). What is significant for our sense of Riedl's authenticity is that, unlike Lohse, who

has been starved for recognition since childhood, he is not particularly eager for the collective's acknowledgment. Mostly, though, Riedl is an enigma to himself. We repeatedly hear him described as "boring [...] gloomy, sullen" (89), "sullen and gray" (286), or "awkward, sluggish" (356), and he only responds morosely to attempts to draw him out, even the attempts of his one-time close friend and engineering school comrade, Rentmair—who will eventually commit suicide due in no small part to the failure of his friend's intimacy and trust. The only insight we get into Riedl's heart comes from his worrying about Katharina. Indeed, he feels needed by the workers, and responds gratefully as we would expect of an engineer, absorbing himself in their technical challenges; yet that is as far as his class solidarity goes—there is no pronounced ideological awakening in Kossin that visibly swells his heart.

His wife writes him about the life she is trying to re-establish for them back in the West, near his hometown in a Main village by the steel works still under Bentheim's ownership; she offers him hope that "the light is always there in all the darkness and confusion" (155). Riedl thinks about the workers he met on the grounds of the expropriated Kossin plant and writes back to his wife with the same phrase, "the light is always there" (155). "But when his wife wrote him back puzzled and sad, he felt that she hadn't understood him" (156). This exchange—ambiguous about what sort of light Riedl has seen and what sort of convictions he communicates to his wife—sets up the conflict between Riedl and Katharina that ends in her death in childbirth while crossing the border into the GDR on foot to meet her husband in Kossin.

In his first visit to Katharina in the novel's narrated time, Riedl travels to Rödersheim on the Main River in the West to negotiate with a supplier. Rödersheim is his hometown, where his mother, sister, and older brother still live. Katharina lives a step further along the Main in the small village of Kronbach, a short train ride to Stargenheim and then a two-hour walk, with a ferry ride across the river at Heidesheim. Riedl witnesses a bustling scene along his walk through Rödersheim. The Bentheim Works stretch along the river between Rödersheim and Hadersfeld. The reconstruction is impressive, not only of the factory, but also of the houses and shops. The visible success spurs Riedl to pose the key question that organizes his conscious perception of the cultural and natural landscape along the Main: "Whatever Riedl saw, he compared with his own experiences; the thought never left him, he turned it over endlessly in his mind: Can Katharina understand what distinguishes life here from life over there?" (311).

His perceptions do him no favors. The prosperity of the West outshines anything in Kossin. In the 1968 sequel to *Die Entscheidung*, the novel *Das Vertrauen (Trust)*, Riedl will encounter in the West the very worker whose plea for help rebuilding the Kossin plant moved Riedl to stay in the East, setting in motion the sequence of tragic plot events. In the sequel, the uncomplicated but faithless worker explains to Riedl, "here [in the West] we're well off. A blind man sees that. Even better than I imagined (27).⁷ Already in the first novel, instead of finding visual confirmation of the rightness of the socialist course, Riedl notices only prosperity in the West. Seeing how "one full shop came after another" (311), he reassures himself with another way of looking at things. While

he remains consciously focused on the distinction "here" and "there," at a deeper level he organizes his perceptions according to a different distinction, namely, that between inside and outside. Anticipating his imminent reunion with Katharina, he imagines a conversation that shifts attention to the second axis: "It seems so meager on our side. Here, one wants whatever makes people greedy and wild to earn more. Back home people are transforming themselves. That happens on the inside. It isn't displayed in shop windows" (311). However, because this internal change is not visible, Riedl immediately concedes to himself the uncertainty of his knowledge, interrupting his imagined dialogue: "He balked. Is it true? Are there really many who've changed?" (311). Although he introduces the internal-external distinction to shore up his faith, the new distinction only compounds his uncertainty, adding another, intensive dimension. If the first uncertainty appears in the novel's landscapes, the second appears in the novel's faces. The tension between two dimensions, intensive and extensive, is especially apparent in Riedl and Katharina's story, where the faces and landscapes alternate with each other in a rhythm of tension and release. As his reunion with Katharina approaches and his doubt becomes ever more intolerable, the overwhelming beauty and familiarity of his native landscape reasserts itself (which is also Seghers's native landscape). No longer primarily an industrial and commercial landscape, which would invariably cast the economically inferior East into the melancholy obscurity of its rainy grays, the West German landscape that opens up before Riedl's senses has been drawn back into nature. The natural landscape, narrated with a rich sensual vocabulary as a retardation of action, is transformed into a

scene that transcends the variable, excitable temporality of economic and political life.

In her 2001 study, *Anna Seghers: The Mythic Dimension*, Helen Fehervary argues that Seghers, rather than being primarily a psychological or lyrical writer, was “the quintessential pictorial writer. Everything she wrote revolves around pictures and derives its significance from them” (13). Fehervary emphasizes how Seghers’ deep familiarity with the tradition of the Dutch masters allowed her to describe settings saturated with the iconography of northern European painting, a mythic doubling of the story locale that lends her prose an atmosphere of messianic weight. This rich topographic descriptiveness, with its implicit temporal depth, emerges as Riedl walks along the Main from the station at Stargenheim to the ferry at Heidesheim. Abandoning his imagined dialogue with Katharina, with its fruitless dialectic of doubt, Riedl gives himself over to his senses, which promise him a deeper truth than his own hesitant and uncertain voice:

Riedl was tired and relaxed [...]. The tension, the anxiety around seeing Katharina again, was gone [...]. The thicket smelled of blossoms. And something dwelled in this scent, these hills, this warm wind that he’d long done without. Something at once wild and gentle, an intimation of the south, an abiding faith in the beauty of the world. (314)

I want to linger over this image, since so much of what structures the novel, is put into play here: the problems of conversion and recognition, of correlating inside/outside with here/there, and inner states with their reflection in landscapes.

Two plots are superimposed, one involving political consciousness, the other romantic intuition. In one plot, Riedl’s bodily exhaustion draws him in from the West’s extroverted economic landscape, which wearies him just because he perceives how it undercuts his decision for the people’s property of the East. Like Riedl’s own sullen and unrevealing face, the eastern landscape seems opaque by contrast to the exuberant commercial activity of the West. His exhaustion, rather than absorbing him as pain would into the solipsism of physical embodiment, releases him from the tension of his interminable inner dialogues. His sensual awareness attunes itself to the scents, breezes, and hills to which his body reaches out. The attunement restores his faith in an undivided world expressed through its transcendent beauty. The other plot entails how romantic love, confronted with the lovers’ silence and misunderstanding, reassures itself with reference to the landscape that constitutes the common world in which they relate to each other. The subjective landscape that emerges through exhaustion is not a modernist collage of fragmented perceptions but rather the shared setting in which the lovers step back from their ceaseless changeability and observe each other observing, aware of each other from a reflexive, at times almost elegiac, distance, as the unity of an experiencing subject.

There is another aspect of the image worth lingering over. As the story progresses, Riedl’s tense body gradually attunes itself to a peaceful landscape, relaxing from the rigors of distinguishing and deciding. In terms of literary genre, we see a protagonist being relieved of the strenuous demands of socialist realism, which insist that characters align with a positive or negative tendency in the novel’s urgent social world.

The scenic asserts priority over the dialogic or didactic. In the attunement of beholder and beheld, interior and exterior align with each other. The scene is cast in the mild light of forgiveness rather than praise or blame. Lulled by the sight of the ferry gliding across the river, Riedl has relinquished the tension of judgment with a rhetorical question his body has already answered, “to what end [...] this tormenting decision?” (315).

When Katharina quietly catches up with Riedl at the boat, she does not surprise him or disturb the balance: “He turned his head, he wasn’t taken aback, not even surprised” (315). Like the landscape, her appearance has taken on a nearly unchanging demeanor: “She even wore the same dress that she wore at their last parting. It was only a bit faded, bluish instead of blue” (315)—only enough change to let in a breath of the melancholy that mortal life recognizes in the face of the transcendent. Riedl’s moodiness when he is separated from Katharina dissipates as he sees himself reflected as a whole in her steady gaze: “She looked directly at him without smiling, only her gold brown eyes. It was like old times” (315). While the context of East and West is changeable, here he sees her seeing the same loving subject, the same unity of past, present, and the anticipation of the future. The lovers, the mild evening, the scent of grasses and flowers, even the ruins of wartime are reconciled in the landscape: “The boat, the clouds and the hills, the riverbank with the bombed out city hung in the pink air” (316).

The ruined city in the landscape is, to borrow Walter Benjamin’s famous image for the storyteller’s placid art, as natural and inevitable as the “reaper [...] in the processions around

the cathedral clock at noon” (95). Not the lovers’ biographies with their tormented record of decisions counts in the riverbank’s pink air, but rather their organic bodies and animal sensitivity. Personal history turns into natural history, with its creatureliness and its intimacy with death and the passage of time. As Eric Santner writes in *On Creaturely Life*, “the ambiguity at the heart” of this vision of natural history is that “the extreme response of our bodies to an absence of balance in nature presupposes a nature already thrown off its tracks [...] by human history” (99). In her characteristic visual idiom, Seghers asserts the style of the farmer’s almanac tale—the chronicle form Benjamin took as the model of the storyteller’s art—against the busy and sometimes bullying style of engaged political literature. As Benjamin elaborates, the chronicle differs from historiographic writing precisely in refusing to *explain* the concatenation of events. Rather than explanation, the chronicler offers interpretation, “which is not concerned with an accurate concatenation of definite events, but with the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world” (Benjamin 96).

The intuition of the *longue durée* remains, however, of only short duration. Riedl cannot maintain the scene’s sublimity. The trace of socialist realism, in the emphatic sense of a more or less intact socialist value system, lies too heavily over his character for him to break out of the Cold War’s subjectification. The pink air is too perfect, the characters bathed by its light too imperfect. Riedl falls back into the banality of political dialogue, commenting on the stray bomb that destroyed the buildings, explaining that hollow cylinders such as smokestacks and church spires do not explode in the air pressure. Katharina recognizes the breach of style: “Kathari-

na said quickly, in the way one speaks to a child [...] ‘do you think so? I don’t understand a thing about it’” (316). With a romantic gesture, tossing her bouquet of wildflowers into the current, she tries to steer the novel away from socialist realism and Riedl’s attention back to the unfinished tasks of love. However, the scenic spell of the unifying landscape has been broken, and unlike the smokestacks and spires, Riedl gives way to the pressure of having to analyze the scene, drawing the story back into the changeable temporality of definite events.

Having disrupted the idyll, Riedl goes on to confuse ideological and romantic idioms in analyzing the quality of Katharina’s love: “He thought: in a moment we’ll be on the spot that is holding her. Then I’ll know why she doesn’t want to come to me” (316). The increasingly few readers versed in the conventions of socialist realism immediately understand the need to break the romantic spell, but those expecting (perhaps only with self-conscious estrangement from the genre) that love will conquer all may be disturbed by Riedl’s stubborn clumsiness. The shifts speak to an intransigence of the Cold War’s socialist realism, which demands that multiple motives be sorted into ideological categories that psychological realism resists.⁸ The confusion clears, however, if one refuses to be either a socialist-realist reader or a psychological-realistic reader and understands the conventions of the genres as standing in an allegorical relationship to each other. Just as a love story cannot be reduced to matrimonial closure, the political tale cannot be reduced to the choice to live in the East or West. The romantic issue for the already married Riedl and Katharina is not matrimony, but rather the authenticity of their love. Niklas Luhmann, has argued

that love is coded by the distinction between *amour/plaisir* as well as that between passion/reason (85; 95). Likewise, the true socialist is coded by two central distinctions: working to realize oneself through collective property as opposed to working for the pleasure of buying consumer goods; and the revolutionary’s sacrificial readiness as opposed to the dogmatist’s self-righteousness. Neither set of distinctions can be settled by a declarative sentence. The experience of truth follows a structure of withholding and deferral, punctured by intuitions of a latent presence within. To be sure, love, unlike socialism, is addressed intimately. The bourgeois novel, with its rich techniques for focalizing the narrative on individual characters, evolved in tandem with the conventions of romantic experience. Yet socialism, a reality that appears for the first time in the 20th century, is missing a comparable code for grasping its interiority. Seeking to portray subjectivities with which readers could plausibly identify (as opposed to the unattainable ego-ideal represented by the Spanish Civil War fighters), Seghers positions the individual love story allegorically with reference to the collectively addressed passions of socialism.

In this sense, Riedl’s apparent psychological confusion between Katharina’s affections and her political convictions cannot be read as a character failing (or the failure to sketch a plausible character). Rather, this dilemma points to the love story as being the realistic vehicle to make the story of socialist passion allegorically accessible to the reader. In his 1933 book, *The Socialist Decision*, the theologian Paul Tillich held: “No one can understand socialism who has not experienced its demand for justice as a demand made on oneself. *Whoever has not struggled with the spirit of socialism can*

speak about it only from the outside, which is to say, in fact not at all" (7, emphasis in the original). The characterization is not unlike that of love, whose nature can only be experienced from the inside—a beloved is just another person to someone not in love, and the struggle of lovers to know each other's minds and bodies is otiose to the outsider.

The Creaturely and the Promethean

Unable to adopt the new convictions of her husband, Katharina receives counsel from her priest Father Traub, who helped her survive the postwar crisis. He directs her to the smallholding of the widowed and disfigured peasant Alois Seiler. Here she rebuilds a household destroyed by fascism and war through her care, a power as gentle as it is rare. In a vivid image, when Riedl finally arrives at the spot on which his jealousy has been fixated—Seiler's farmhouse—he discovers not a romantic rival but a scene of traditional domesticity, a warm glow in dark times:

The kitchen at first appeared very deep and very dark to Riedl. He gradually figured out that the oven, which was as big as the table, was pushed up against the back wall; he discovered the massive, weakly glimmering copper spoons, attached to a bracket. The crucifix hung alone on the side wall. The dark wooden cross was large, while the crucified one was small, almost delicate, turned from ivory. (317-18)

The picture is reminiscent of one of Jan Steen's richly toned portraits of a peasant family at mealtime, piously saying

grace in the dark recesses of the kitchen, copper tools lambent in the fire of the hearth—except for the one disruptive element that intrudes on Riedl's inventory: "the year 1950 leapt to his eye from the calendar" (318). With this detail in Riedl's eye, Seghers sets up the opposition between the present-day historical temporality and the Catholic temporality of salvation. After their night together, Riedl wakes with the roosters and instructs Katharina to get ready to come with him. She has arranged to take the day off to spend with him, but it quickly becomes apparent that he means she should come with him immediately back to Kossin. She quietly goes down to the kitchen to warm the coffee; the hired hands are still in the field, the room is still: "There was an inkling of home in it. And the four walls and table and oven around her seemed to say: stay. You're man and wife." (319) The domestic image, however, cannot hold; the tear of calendar time already cuts through it. The mythic hearth, the forge of domestic and community consciousness, draws the readers into a world of quiet contemplation, while the calendar spits us out along with the two lovers and their quickly dashed hope for a communion that will last longer than a single night of conjugal bliss.

As Katharina and Riedl retrace their walk back to the ferry, her face is transformed from radiant unity with the landscape into pure division:

Katharina sat upright in front of him in the boat. She avoided his gaze, and chatted away with the ferryman. He saw now, though, how pale her mouth was; he saw her desperation, and the purple world was still more beauti-

ful than it was in the evening, even the reflection of the bombed out city in the river was beautiful. (319-20)

Katharina's face is still beautiful in the morning light, but it has withdrawn its gaze from Riedl's in punishment for his repeated abandonment. Her mouth seeks to make itself unavailable, dispersing itself into idle chatter, out of tune with the landscape. Nonetheless, the despair she seeks to dispel refocuses not on the words but the pallor of her mouth, which leaps out of the purple air to Riedl's eye. The salience of her mouth, however, is different than the salience of the Cold War calendar date. It re-centers the image's beauty despite her evasive blathering with the ferryman. The morning of the destroyed relationship is even more beautiful than the evening of the hopeful relationship. On the first crossing, Riedl evaded amorous communication with his own blather about bombs and air pressure; on this crossing, Katharina's evasion evokes no effort by Riedl to reintegrate the voice and image of Katharina's mouth. He reads her despair aesthetically like he reads the reflection of the destroyed city; neither interpretation involves his subjectivity in action. He returns to his melancholy, unable to act on the inside/outside distinction, displacing his will grimly back into the topography of this side/that side.

Since the train to Rödgersheim does not depart for another three hours, Katharina, in a final gesture, pleads with Riedl to visit her priest. As a compact set piece, Riedl's conversation with Father Traub stages the allegorical dynamics of his visits to the West and anticipates the dynamics of Katharina's mirrored crossing over the East-West border at the novel's end. The conversation has two main threads: draw-

ing Riedl out to speak about the socialist difference at the level of appearances, and then challenging him to disclose whether there is a corresponding difference along the axis of (non-appearing) depths—to disclose, that is, his own moral self. Father Traub allays Riedl's distrust with his peaceful visage and searching eyes, courting Riedl's reluctant voice with a simple question about why he enjoys living in the Russian zone. His answer is surprising since it expresses enthusiasm for the labour morale of the East, something that the novel has not described him experiencing. On the contrary, Riedl's interior monologues have only expressed doubt about the morale in the East and whether the workers have really transformed themselves. The irony is that Father Traub's uncomplicated face penetrates Riedl's glum physiognomy only to discover behind it an orthodox narrative of the labour situation. Indeed, the melancholic Riedl is possessed by a loquacious enthusiasm: "Traub's eyes no longer captivated him. He was captivated by what he was relating [...]. The more Riedl said, the more occurred to him to say. Much more than ever occurred to him when Katharina was listening" (324-325). Father Traub remains placid but responds to Riedl's enthusiasm skeptically, suggesting that such perennial bursts of human effort are a flight from "two little words: *Creatus sum*" (325).

While the provenance of the words is not elaborated, given Father Traub's Catholicism, a suggestive reference point is the opening line of St. Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, "*Creatus est homo*" (man is created). In a 1940 lecture, Carl Jung called the words "a psychological declaration of the first importance" (Jung, online). For Jung, they point to the moment an ego realizes that "I happen to myself." The relevant

question of faith posed by the recognition that I am not the cause of myself is whether I am to choose submission to the plan of providence or whether I am left with only the absurd facticity of existence, of being "thrown into the world": transcendence or nothingness? In some sense, the latter option, the anti-religious insight of existentialism pervasive among intellectuals of the era, would be as unsympathetic to Seghers as it would be to Father Traub. To be sure, as Christiane Zehl Romero has pointed out, Seghers's engagements with the existentialism of Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky shaped her intellectually from an early age (104-5). At the same time, however, existentialism in the 1940s and 50s was a rival to Marxism and sharply rejected by György Lukács and other prominent intellectuals of the Eastern Bloc (Lukács). Existentialism, ostensibly the more pious option, captures a common gesture of Christian and communist. True faith, according to St. Ignatius's Exercise 234, involves a *sacrificium intellectus dei*, a leap by which the faithful exchange their earthly will for the gift of God's grace. While the communist position espouses a secular humanism, in Seghers's chiliastic allegories it also displays an aesthetic rather than discursive faith in a supra-individual providence. This is the faith that Father Traub recognizes in Riedl—and in the orders of the Soviet General heading the Military Administration in Germany—but whose pathos of novelty he finds inauthentic:

What do you see so new in all that? [...] You know all the attempts that have been made over the last two thousand years to establish the kingdom of God on earth [...]. Didn't Calvin already claim that the grace of God revealed itself in success? [...] When I listen to what you're saying,

and let the orders of the Russian general run through my head [...] I'm struck by something similar. (325)

For Father Traub the issue comes down to the overreach of Riedl's enthusiasm for human Promethean autonomy—one belied by the bombed cities Riedl gazes upon, whose overgrown ruins, as W. G. Sebald argued in his study, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, have "drop[ped] out of what we have thought for so long to be our autonomous history and back into the history of nature" (66).⁹ It is, after all, resplendent nature, not human daring, that has seized Riedl on his visit—a resplendence that points to a cognate sense of *creatus sum* found already in the medieval concept of the Book of Nature: natural creation is an objective revelation as sacred as that of scripture. Against the river landscape of hills, lavender, and bombed-out factories, humans appear frail and finite. With their pale lips and evasive chatter, they are creatures of original sin, incapable of perfection in historical time and saved for divine time only by the hidden grace of providence. Traub is perceptive enough to recognize the doubt behind Riedl's productivist bravado. He alludes to the mass rapes committed by the occupying Red Army, which Riedl, eager to mitigate the brutality of socialist forces, has to recognize as a sign of the Soviets' human frailty. Traub's special reason to fear a Promethean arrogance is that, by casting its subjects as infinite creators, it shows little mercy for the finite creation. Katharina's message to Riedl, to which Traub hopes to make him sensitive, is of her care. Moreover, earlier in the visit when Riedl first learns of Katharina's position on the farm caring for the widowed and disfigured Seiler, he becomes jealous of her distribution of care: "Do you think you're wanted only here?" (317). His melancholic disposi-

tion—the pervasive sense of loss whose source he cannot identify—is what draws him to Katharina’s ministering gaze.

Traub has found Riedl’s sensitive point. The interview ends perfunctorily when Traub asks him to consider whether Katharina could really survive, let alone thrive, in the life he envisions for her in Kossin. Riedl bursts out, “Doesn’t a wife belong to her husband?” (325). The priest does not respond ideologically, but instead admonishes him to considerateness. If he does not want simply to order her, but to have her share his faith in the Soviet occupation, then he has to leave the decision to her. Faith is the last dimension of freedom for the creature of the finite world.¹⁰

Katharina’s Final Crossing

In the final segment of the story, Katharina, who has conceived in the train station hotel during one of Riedl’s subsequent visits and is now late in her pregnancy, finally decides to cross over to the East on her own and, out of fear of the official border, to do so illegally on foot.¹¹ Both of Riedl’s intervening visits have been cut short by unexpected bad news out of Kossin: the suicide of the couple’s friend Rentmair and then the defection of his firm’s top leadership (due to Cold War intrigue). The news does not exactly evoke confidence in the bonds of care holding life together in Kossin. However, Katharina’s place in the Main river landscape has meanwhile been shaken. Seiler’s sister has moved to the farm and the family has taken over running the household. Seiler’s disfigured face—whose mixture of ugliness and composure reflected back at Riedl the vanity of his jealousy

while laying the basis for Katharina’s comforting presence at the hearth—has made way for a new economy of glances around the kitchen table: a faster pace of exchanged looks, thrifty and avaricious, signaling the domestic temporality of the West’s economic miracle. Katharina is already preparing her inevitable move to an office job in the city. Her vulnerability could not be more complete. Separated from the caring household she has fostered, loosed from the agrarian Catholic tradition and estranged from her husband, Katharina is deceived by one final hope for reunion in the West. Although she has concealed news of her pregnancy from Riedl, he is informed by Father Traub and hastens across the border to see her. The very evening he arrives below her window at the farmhouse, the newspapers are carrying news of the defection of the Kossin firm’s directorate, listing Riedl as one of the defectors. Katharina believes he has come to stay. As soon as she confides her expectations, thereby alerting him to the turmoil back at the factory, his consternation and solicitousness about the pregnancy turn into dismay about the defection—on a moment’s notice he drops his visit, pregnancy and all: “Afterwards man and wife said little. Katharina didn’t go downstairs with him. Her arms hung so loosely it was as if he had shaken them off” (515). In this confluence of crises, intimate loyalty and ideological avowal appear irreconcilable in the simultaneity of their urgency. The fateful decision in this moment is all Riedl’s—or providence’s—and it falls on the side of the factory.

Katharina’s decision to cross the border illegally at the very end of her pregnancy is psychologically realistic only if we understand it as a gesture of suicide brought to Riedl’s doorstep. Yet as Fehervary has emphasized, Seghers’s imagina-

tion is not drawn to fine-grained psychological portraits. The rage that Katharina in her natural piety would never admit to herself goes likewise unrecognized in the story of her border crossing. The villages at the border of Franconia and Thuringia and the bands of birch and fir forests she traverses become mythical landscapes rather than geopolitical regions; historical and intimate temporalities—so incapable of resolution in biographical time—become metaphysical ones. The topography of her border crossing resembles nothing so much as the explicitly mythological setting of Seghers’s 1948 story “Das Argonautenschiff” (“The Ship of the Argonauts”), interpreted by Fehervary as an allegorical treatment of Seghers’s own decision to return from exile to the Soviet Zone in Germany (38-41).

Katharina, throwing herself into physical activity to the point of exhaustion, assumes—at the very moment of her greatest social, emotional, and bodily need as wife and expectant mother—the full burden of guilt for Riedl having abandoned her during her pregnancy: “Am I lying here all alone? Is he gone? Gone for good? And she asked herself whether she could really have said: I can’t go to you anymore. It’s impossible with the child. Who’s going to help him there? she thought lying in her bed at night, doesn’t he need the two of us more than ever?” (595). Riedl’s moral exemption is not just from Katharina’s limited subjective point of view; the narration likewise elides any hint of his responsibility, as though his socialist passion has possessed his will so fully that he is as much an object of his beliefs as their subject.¹² Our sympathy with Riedl, such as it is at this point, depends on whether we recognize him, despite the bravado he dissembled for Traub, as a creature of both power strug-

gles and the political passions they have fostered. His salvation as a character in the novel depends on our acceptance of Traub's *creatus sum*.

Yet, if Riedl lies somewhere on the spectrum of creaturely life, Katharina lies at its most extreme position. As much as she seems to approach sanctification through her mortification, she cannot be a sacrificial hero like the dead of the communist resistance or the Spanish Civil War. Rather, because of her very real faith in Catholicism—what a communist would consider a false belief—she becomes the scapegoat for Riedl's guilt and the guilt of all the hesitant and melancholy people living in bad faith in the shadow of the Cold War. We witness her abandoned, if not by God then by a Catholic community that has abandoned piety for venality, as well as by a communism whose bold and timely stories of people's property and the workers' party cannot accommodate her untimely story of abiding faith, hope, and caring love, where, as St. Paul advises us, "the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Katharina's decision to cross over comes to her not through rational deliberation on social systems but rather as a premonition: "In her head the idea came to her—like a response one has been nervously awaiting and when it finally comes doesn't at first understand—, that she soon had to go over to him" (596). The thought arises on its own and comes to her vividly but indistinctly. It appears in the form of an aesthetic intuition that is otherwise hard to achieve in the novel's sober world. Even as Riedl is the manifest object of the pronoun in the phrase, "soon had to go over to him," we recognize in the diction the figure of death (with or without

salvation). The only time she finds peace is when she thinks of her decision to cross to the other side, not what she will find there: "Then all the doubt, all the fear of the last years, her difficult loneliness and her brief, no less difficult meetings with her husband, and even the decision which stood before her, seemed only a matter of the path, of crossing the border" (597).

Her journey is marked by the oscillation of her consciousness from her body's pain and exhaustion in labour to the calm observation of the landscape. A market woman whom she befriended during her pregnancy described for her the path over the Thuringian Highlands to the GDR. Initially, the plan Katharina worked out with the market woman was that the woman's cousin would guide her, but Katharina has put off the journey for so long that the cousin is no longer there. When she finally sets out from the country road where the bus has dropped her, her companion is a crone with a black straw hat who had been traveling in the same bus, the spitting image of Alois Seiler's sister. She seeks to ingratiate herself with Katharina by warning her of danger from the police, who will be on heightened lookout for suspicious people due to the World Festival of Youth in East Berlin. Katharina finally shakes off her unwelcome guide with a coin that the old woman snaps from her hand "with fingers like a beak" (600). The crone's presence, reminiscent of the devilish gondolier in Thomas Mann's "Death in Venice," lends a hallucinatory aspect to the journey that is only intensified as she climbs the hills toward the woods. The higher she goes, the more the edge of the forest recedes from her, until at some point it finally stops climbing and welcomes her into its peaceful foliage: "The forest no longer

climbed away. It waited peacefully. She shuffled through the leaves. Now the air above her was moist and fresh. There were red and bright yellow patches as though autumn had already snuck up. Katharina would have had nothing against remaining here, if she could, instead of hiking farther and farther" (601). At this point of momentary solace, several children and an older girl appear out of nowhere, babbling about the Festival in East Berlin and the Western police efforts to prevent them from attending. Katharina understands little in the torrent of words and names, recognizing only an uncanny appearance of appetite, youth, and life in her rapidly dimming world: "She understood only the note of insistence, of overcoming boundaries. She would have liked to ask: What's the point of all that? Why? For the sake of what? [...] But there was no time for that, she was already alone again.—She listened, astonished by how long the rustling and cracking went on" (602).

In brief moments of lucidity, she perceives the firs rising like Gothic arches, but the sheltering branches open themselves ever more reluctantly to the light of her gaze, whipping back instead across her face, marring its placid beauty and leaving her looking like both the image of Jesus with the crown of thorns and *mater dolorosa*:

Her face was soon all scratched up from the branches snapping back. She got some rest on a tree trunk. Between the stiff branches there were still a few clouds and mountain peaks and villages and even a sun, ripe and near enough to pick. However much she [sie] struggled, she [sie] was pressed into the great cold shroud, the brightly patterned world. (603)

In German, the third person feminine pronoun “sie” identifies Katharina with the entangled sun (also feminine), resisting, but inevitably folded into the winding sheet of the colourful world. A distant sound of chopping draws Katharina out of her enveloping exhaustion to a pair of woodsmen, the first of whom responds to her attentively while the other accuses her of being a nuisance to others by climbing through the woods in such a condition. Her strength suffices only for her to utter, “I can’t go any further” (603) and passed out. The first woodcutter brings her to his aunt, where she regains consciousness. She does not have the strength to stop crying. The peasant woman tries to reassure her that they can get her to a hospital in time, but Katharina says she is crying because she hoped to make it across the border. The woman reassures her that she has indeed made it—and she spells it out—to the German Democratic Republic. All Katharina can say to the news is “I? Here?” (604) before she closes her eyes. “In the midst of her joy the labor pains began anew. Her thoughts stopped. Astonishment and fear were stronger than anything” (605).

Katharina dies naturalistically, in pain, without any certain revelation, only the ambiguous recognition, “I? Here?” that she has made it to the other side. Her final fear and astonishment defer any answer to the question of her sanctification, recalling for us so many narratives that end with the hero suspended between holy sacrifice and simple death—from Jesus’ cry, “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46) to the double judgment pronounced on Margarete in the last scene of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust*, “She’s condemned! She’s saved!” to the wasting death of Robert Musil’s simple Tonka in his eponymous story, tak-

ing with her a child that may have been immaculately conceived. Perhaps the most telling parallel, however, is with the death of the young mother, Elisabeth, in Seghers’s preceding novel, *The Dead Stay Young* (1947).¹³ A Baltic German aristocrat and the wife and cousin of the sadistic SS officer Lieven, Elisabeth is an impossible vehicle for revelation. Nonetheless, her death in the snow with her child bears the novel’s most powerful moment of aesthetic intuition. The scene’s iconography is quietly evocative of Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s winter landscapes and the Russian winters that have repulsed invaders. As Elisabeth wanders the country roads behind her family estate in a snowstorm, trying to escape the partisans retaking Nazi-occupied Lithuania, she gradually loses her orientation in the cold. Seghers slows the narrative tempo to almost a *nunc stans* in which we follow Elisabeth’s constricting consciousness as she tends to her beloved boy, who at first walks happily beside her, then warms himself in her arms until she begins to falter and becomes indifferent to the time of day, then to time itself as her memories swirl and depart, and finally her spirit withdraws even from her tightly cradled child.

Given their social positions and non-communist faiths, what aspects of Elisabeth and Katharina as characters brings the texts to the verge of revelation? Two things. First, both characters are witnesses of something our primary characters are unable to behold. Second, they belong to a circle of action that compels them to disclose themselves in proximity to (or embrace of) death. Importantly, the truth of the world that both witness, and the worldly selves that both disclose at death, remain inchoate—they do not coalesce into transcendental significance. Instead, the characters

preserve in their faces a disfiguring tension caught between hope and care. Elisabeth, alone among the legion of characters in *The Dead Stay Young*, indirectly witnesses the Holocaust through overhearing the SS officers gathered at her estate laughing at the naked bodies of the Jewish women they see on the transport train. Katharina witnesses nothing so devastating.¹⁴ Like Elisabeth, she is headstrong and practical, both depicted and seeing in concrete sensual terms. Yet where Elisabeth witnesses people reduced to the animal finitude of their bodies, Katharina witnesses people denied the same finitude, her undeterred eye grasping the neglect of the creature that leads to fear, suicide, defection, and bad faith. Of course, what they each behold, genocide and failure of compassion, is not equivalent—yet there is a certain fortuity of character to be found among those at the edge of the manifest social struggle, where the pace is slow enough to grasp biography and the body, history, and nature. From such eccentric proximity, anyone’s eyes might open, however briefly, to the light of revelation.

Katharina and Elisabeth approach revelation ever so closely, but if Seghers confirmed their vision by sharing it with her readers, it would surely prove to be kitsch. By dying on the cusp of their central insight, they ultimately withhold it. By contrast, the one unambiguously haloed face of *Die Entscheidung*, that of the beautiful Spanish Civil War nurse, Celia, does reflect back at us the light of truth. In a makeshift field hospital, Celia tends to three wounded partisans, Robert Lohse, Richard Hagen, and Herbert Melzer, who become three positive heroes of the novel. Indeed, Celia’s light is the gift that keeps them focused on the ultimate prize. The pure spectrum radiated by her face is the metaphor that secures

the partisan meaning of the novel's explicitly tendentious plots. With the light it gathers, Celia's face reflects back to all who behold it stable, enduring, indeed, transcendent signification:¹⁵

Celia, the nurse, used the narrow light that for a brief time every day lay across the cleft in the rock, on flesh and blood, on bandage strips, on eyes in which the light of the world was gathered. Everyone tried in this moment to sate themselves on the sight of her young and loyal face. It was more beautiful than any they'd ever seen [...]. It would never fade from their memory. It could never again disappear in the darkness. (35)

How one of those surviving partisans, the author Herbert Melzer, depicts Celia in his novel within the novel becomes a turning point of Seghers's novel. Instead of giving due respect to Celia's loyalty to the cause, Melzer conjures a happy marriage for her, a private reconciliation that pleases Melzer's American publisher. Yet in a key moment among stalwart comrades, Melzer realizes he has betrayed his epiphany of Celia: "She never holed herself up in a family. I don't dare destroy her image" (338). Herbert takes up the novel again and in the new draft has Celia die in a ravine on a mission for her party: "Though her limbs are shattered by the fall, she lies in incorruptible youth at the bottom of the crevice" (338).

After a sentence like that, one waits for the body to turn to dust, like that of the youthfully preserved groom in Johann Peter Hebel's "Mines of Falun," Walter Benjamin's example the storyteller's art. The problem with the symbolism of

Celia is that, while she escapes the private reconciliation of marriage that had threatened her in Melzer's novel, in Seghers's novel she is all-too-conveniently reconciled with the positive message. As beautiful as the epiphany is that the partisans behold in her eyes, her face has no inchoative aspect, no ambiguity of becoming, just the look of a finished figure of meaning. Celia's beauty is the same sort as that of the peasant girl who, in the last scene of *Die Entscheidung*, brings Riedl his surviving baby, "a beautiful girl [...] like an apparition from another world" (605). It is the beauty of explicit signification that needs its proper seal. Accordingly, we read that the girl "later becomes a crane operator" (606), just as a socialist angel must. What keeps Katharina and Elisabeth from debasing their revelations by beholding them all too dogmatically is the ultimately naturalistic finality of their death. Celia's tidy death, in contrast to theirs, has no biographical finality, no individuating effect; instead, her dying only makes her luminous visage brighter, until it is only a blank spot to be filled by another determined young visionary, deferring the concrete death that might disclose a life.

At the end of Riedl and Katharina's story, his pervasive melancholy has left its gloomy trace across the novel, counter to the bright signs of the socialist martyrs and activists. Both traces are etched into the landscapes and faces—the activist's face surveying the landscape as a field of action while the melancholic's wrestles with becoming absorbed into it. The melancholy disposition recognizes the loss of the creaturely in socialism's Promethean gestures but cannot reconcile the loss with the affirmative pathos that his or her faith requires. The dominant pattern of Seghers' writing set in earlier periods of resistance and struggle is the dangerous lying latent

just beneath the mundane. Under those circumstances the risk of exposing one's life was offset by the opportunity for its authentic humanity to disclose its orientation toward hope. In the era of real socialism, Seghers retains the pattern of juxtaposed routine and extreme but inverts their polarity. The exceptional situation of the long-awaited event of socialism's arrival has become the order of the day. It admits of no ordinary private satisfaction. Its positive protagonists, like the leading functionary, Martin, whom we first meet as a young man in *The Dead Stay Young*, have relinquished the mundane life of personal interiority for the pure externality of the cause. Distinguished only by a trifecta of righteous attributes—Civil War veteran, concentration camp survivor, and party sage—Martin bears no personal attributes: "Since he didn't have any family of his own anymore [...] he apparently possessed no ordinary life of his own, with numerous trivial details, with tiny secrets, tender, sad, frustrating, meaningful only for him, but without trace and consequence for others" (167).

If the order of the day is extraordinary, then it will be illuminated only by the mundane harbored within it. The task of socialism, the plot of Katharina and Riedl implies, is to find in the midst of the extraordinary the courage to bear its dreary routines. As the catalyst for such revelation, Riedl draws Katharina into the space of disclosure by inviting her to submit to socialism's routinized authority, while denying that it is anything but extraordinary. This is to submit to the judgment of the party without admitting that the party is submitting the human creature to demands it would be impossible fully to meet in good faith. Katharina is not called upon to resist unjust power in public, but to submit to

presumably just but creaturely indifferent power in private. Riedl needs her to confirm his faith in the socialist cause in the light of her faith in God. He needs the illumination of her light since his own hesitating light does not participate in the irreproachable luster that shines forth from Celia, neither metonymically by virtue of having been with the other heroes in the medic tent in Spain, nor metaphorically by virtue of the narrator condensing the meaning of his light with theirs. Called by Riedl's flight from her ordinary care to finally cross over to his side, Katharina is too much a creature of her time, place, and body to become the mobile metaphor Riedl needs her to be. While she is Riedl's light, embodying his intuition of a repaired world, her light proves to be of an entirely different part of the spectrum than Celia's. Called to the other side, the spectrums do not combine into the pure white light of an untroubled socialist vision but rather into the rainy industrial grays of East German socialism, a palette of a historically specific, fluctuating, and ultimately tragic faith.

The peasant midwife who reluctantly delivered Katharina's baby asks Riedl's driver if he will pay for replacing the blood-soaked mattress. The banal persistence of practical needs recalls Breughel's ploughman indifferently watching Icarus fall to the sea in W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts":

*About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or
just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting*

*For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood*

The hard-working people here in the GDR do not care especially about the pure light of Katharina's astonishment, "I? Here?" The brusque pragmatism of replacing a soiled mattress disrupts any ideological composure the novel might have conveyed and that we might have taken as a *decision*. This zero point is one last trauma: Katherina dies a stranger. The mess left behind by her blood indexes a moment altogether foreign to the ideological and erotic longings on which the narrative attention has been focalized. Instead of reconciling the competing desires it has brought into play, the novel, in an unguarded instant, pulls the floor out from under its generic expectations. We cannot save the *creatus sum* we witness here at the intersection of the transcendental and the secular-momentary, wherever else the story might take us. We have encountered something upon whose misrecognition any eventual decision will have to rest.

Works Cited

- Albrecht, Friedrich. *Bemühungen: Arbeiten zum Werk von Anna Seghers 1965-2004*. Peter Lang, 2005.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. 2nd Edition, U of Chicago P, 1958.
- Auden, W. H. "Musée des Beaux Arts." <http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/auden.html>. Accessed 1 May 2017.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne, Verso, 1998.
- . "The Storyteller." *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt, Schocken, 1968, pp. 83-110.
- The Bible*. New International Version. biblehub.com. Accessed 3 June 2016.
- Bischoff, Simone. "Gottes Reich hat begonnen." *Der Einfluss chiliastischer Hoffnung auf die DDR-Romane von Anna Seghers*. Peter Lang, 2009.
- Fehervary, Helen. *Anna Seghers: The Mythic Dimension*. U of Michigan P, 2001.
- Fore, Devin. *Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature*. MIT Press, 2012.
- Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. *After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present*. Stanford UP, 2013.
- Hell, Julia. *Post-Fascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History, and the Literature of East Germany*. Duke UP, 1997.
- Jung, Carl. Lecture VIII, 12 January 1940. carljungdepthpsychology.blogspot.com/2015/03/carl-jung-one-day-we-found-ourselves.html. Accessed 14 June 2016.
- Kluge, Alexander, and Oskar Negt. *History and Obstinacy*. Translated by Richard Langston, Zone Books, 2014.
- Loyola, St. Ignatius of. "Principle and Foundation" and "234. Contemplation to Gain Love." *The Spiritual Exercises*. orientations.jesuits.ca/SpExx%20Jensen.pdf. Accessed 18 July 2016.
- Luhmann, Niklas. *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*. Translated by Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones. Harvard, 1986.
- Lukács, Georg. "Existentialism." *Marxism and Human Liberation: Essays on History, Culture and Revolution*. Translated by Henry F. Mins, Dell, 1973, marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/1949/existentialism.htm. Accessed 24 July 2016.

Reich-Ranicki, Marcel. "Die Anna Seghers von heute. Zu ihrem Erzählungsband *Die Kraft der Schwachen*." *Die Zeit*, 28 January 1966, zeit.de/1966/05/die-anna-seghers-von-heute/komplettansicht. Accessed 28 June 2016.

Romero, Christiane Zehl. *Anna Seghers: Eine Biographie 1900-1947*. Aufbau, 2000.

Santner, Eric L.. *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*. U of Chicago P, 2009.

Sebald, W. G. *The Natural History of Destruction*. Translated by Anthea Bell. Modern Library, 2004.

Seghers, Anna. *Die Entscheidung*. 1st edition, edited by Alexander Stephan and Birgit Klein, Aufbau, 2003.

—. *Das Vertrauen*. Aufbau, 1968.

—. *Die Toten bleiben jung*. Aufbau, 1952.

—. Letter, to unknown, Berlin, no date, presumably May 1947. *Hier im Volk der kalten Herzen. Briefwechsel 1947*. Edited by Christel Berger, Aufbau, 2000.

Tillich, Paul. *The Socialist Decision*. Translated by Franklin Sherman, Harper and Row, 1977.

Urang, John. *Legal Tender: Love and Legitimacy in the East German Cultural Imagination*. Cornell UP, 2010.

Vilar, Loreto. *Die Kritik des realen DDR-Sozialismus im Werk Anna Seghers: Die Entscheidung und Das Vertrauen*. Königshausen und Neumann, 2004.

Endnotes

1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

2 I follow Seghers' convention in the novel and refer to Ernst Riedl by his surname and Katharina Riedl by her given name.

3 I refer to socialist realism as a "genre" in the following rather than the alternatives of "style" or "tradition." Usage is not consistent in the secondary literature, but the advantage of using "genre" for my purposes is that it better captures the element of a worldview expressed by socialist realism that is broader than any specific stylistic markers.

4 In *Legal Tender: Love and Legitimacy in the East German Cultural Imagination*, John Urang—though he only briefly deals with the early period of GDR culture, primarily in reference to DEFA films—is mordant about their failure to recognize the "self-determination" of love stories in the socialist realism. He characterizes the general problem of the love story in East Germany "as that of an imposition of the socialist symbolic economy—that is, of socialist ideology's self-understanding and ordering of the world—onto the love story's erotic economy" (31). However, in Seghers' work the problem is different, not so much the imposition of an alien economy as an investigation of the problem of choosing (desiring) socialism through the means of romantic allegory.

5 As Devin Fore argues in *Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature*, the human figure returns emphatically after the WWI despite modernism's bold efforts to dehumanize art. Yet the return to the human figure, as Fore demonstrates, "was a deeply conflicted proposal" due to the very lability of the definition of the human (3), especially in connection with the Promethean project of modernist social constructivism.

6 See Hannah Arendt's description in *The Human Condition* of physical pain as an experience that impoverishes a person's condition of being in the world, reducing him or her to nature (50-51).

7 In an undated and unaddressed 1947 letter Seghers comments on the ambiguity of the German labour morale she witnesses when she first returns to destroyed Germany. She encounters a Berlin worker: "he made a virtue of necessity and took up the career of 'commercializing rubble.' That could well show something of 'German labor morale,' this virtue in service of angels and demons" (43).

8 One is reminded here again of John Urang's inquiry into audience pressures on "hyperpoliticized socialist-realist love plots" (19) in the GDR. While Seghers, as an artistically and ideologically ambitious author, hews on the story-level to what Urang calls "the rigorously ideological couplings of 1950s socialist realism," on the discourse-level her text struggles with love motifs as an allegorical double for socialist passion. In the 1968 sequel, *Das Vertrauen*, however, Riedl's memories are narrated without this tension and the prose assumes an almost bizarre (were it not so generic) hierarchization of socialism and eros. Riedl recalls the moment he decides to stay in the Soviet Zone: "Something seized him then as nothing has ever seized him again, not even love to an individual person, not even if that beloved person was Katharina [...] The most important thing in his life. But the second most important thing won't on that account become any less" (24-25). The character Ella Busch, singled out in *Die Entscheidung* for both her loyalty to socialism and her beauty and desire for erotic joy (she is repeatedly tagged with the epithet of being proud of her bust) is accordingly sacrificed in *Das Vertrauen*. Trampled by striking works trying to invade the Kossin plant during the June 17, 1953 uprising against

the SED, Ella embodies the incompatibility of a certain kind of joy with socialism. On the story-level, we can read that as an orthodox ideological prioritization, but when we consider the pathos of the discourse, we are compelled to read it the other way, as melancholic recognition that the wished-for society indeed has failed to unite ideological demands with authentic erotic motives.

9 Sebald discusses a short story by Alexander Kluge about the WWII air bombing of Kluge's native town, Halberstadt. In a caption underneath a picture of the ruined Halberstadt, Kluge quotes Marx from the *1844 Manuscripts*, "We see how the history of *industry* and the now *objective* existence of industry have become the *open* book of the *human consciousness*, human *psychology* perceived in sensory terms" (qtd. in Sebald 66). Sebald concludes we can no longer believe industry is the open book of human thought and feeling; its ruins instead take their place in nature, whether or not we want to read nature as the open book of God's creation.

10 In *On Creaturely Life*, Santner emphasizes a definition of "creaturely" distinct from the simple common ground shared by humans and animals. It is, rather, the traumatic moment where the ego's sense of autonomous agency is deranged by its relationship to the other, whether that other is animal life, nature, or the neighbor, whose conscious life is never directly accessible to us. The trauma comes not just from loss of conscious control by the ego, but from the positive recognition that the distinction between the self and the creaturely other is insupportable (xvii). Thus, the creaturely points to a distinction between living and dying based on the politicization of the material substrate of life itself: "The essential disruption that renders man 'creaturely' [...] names the threshold where life becomes a matter of politics and politics comes to inform the very matter and materiality of life" (13). The politics

Santner has in mind in his readings of Rilke, Benjamin, and Sebald is precisely not the politics of sovereign or Promethean self-determination but rather the biopolitics of the other, the outcast, the "undead," "between real and symbolic death" (xx).

11 Of the many discussions of this episode, two have been especially suggestive. Loreto Vilar has argued that Katharina signifies a natural spirit that cannot survive in the technical-industrial context of the GDR (84-86). Simone Bischoff interprets her as both a romantic and Christian symbol (174-75). In both cases, she is seen as an allegorical figure of utopia that goes beyond her relationship to Riedl to express Seghers's own utopian commitments.

12 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, somewhat overstating the observation, remarks on the hierarchy of moral struggles in partisan leftist narratives of the postwar years, in which interpersonal and especially erotic-romantic ethics plays a markedly subordinate role: "Parties who embraced the ideologies of the Left were freed of all self-reflexive struggle by the moral certainty of a clean conscience" (97-98).

13 Ella Busch from *Die Entscheidung* (Ella Schanz after marrying in *Das Vertrauen*) fits a similar model of the mother who dies. Although Ella is a loyal socialist who dies defending her factory from rampaging strikers on June 17, 1953, she is also a character distinguished by her desire for joy—a desire portrayed as distinct from though not in opposition to her desire for socialism. Her abrupt trampling with her unborn child on June 17 is not narrated with the same focalization as Katharina and Elizabeth's death—in part because she, like the partisan Herbert Melzer who is clubbed by police at a strike in the west, meets her death in a moment when

her actions are harmonized with her socialist convictions not with her need for basic sensual joy.

14 In her brief discussion of Elisabeth Lieven in *Post-Fascist Fantasies*, Julia Hell notes the uniqueness of this Holocaust narration in Seghers' oeuvre and how the description of Elisabeth's wandering through the snow "resembles Seghers's own experience in 1941 [...] it establishes a parallel between character and author, allowing us to read this variation on Seghers's dominant literary figure as the fantasy of identifying with the bystander" (86-87). Not only does Elisabeth's status as bystander matter, but also the proximity of her death and her son's to those she witnesses—the communion of death setting a final seal of authenticity on a narrative sequence. Understanding the gravity of death as an organizing principle of life is a critical feature of Seghers's strongest characters. The privileged focalization on such characters is as much a cause as it is the narrative effect of identification. In order to convey the mythic insight into the *creatus sum*, Seghers's needs techniques that highlight discourse over plot action, bringing the narrative into close alignment with a consciousness at its most contemplative and, in many ways, most impotent.

15 See the always perceptive commentary of Loreto Vilar on the role Celia (191-92). Friedrich Albrecht argues that the exceptional situations ("Ausnahmezustände") in which Celia is exclusively portrayed lend her the aura of a saint. He contrasts her with the Celia of Seghers's 1977 story "Begegnungen" ("Encounters"), who is portrayed in the routine of everyday life—there she appears more as a nun than a saint (463-64).