

Article

'Once Upon a Time in Marseille': Displacement and the Fairy Tale in Anna Seghers' *Transit*

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Received: 15 July 2019; Accepted: 31 October 2019; Published: 1 November 2019



Abstract: Written in 1941, while she was living in exile in Mexico, and published in 1944 in Mexico and the United States, Anna Seghers' novel *Transit* replicates on a formal level an experience of displacement, statelessness, and exile. In the following analysis, I examine *Transit* as a text of forced migration. Several features of the novel attempt to produce an experience of displacement: the narrative situation, the incorporation of descriptions that place the events of World War II into a longer history of forced migration, and the use of references to the genre of the fairy tale. The descriptions that engage with past forced migration and displacement attempt to universalize the historical specificities of the time period, whereas the references to fairy tales generate a sense of timelessness associated with this genre. Through these strategies, Seghers' novel itself attempts to displace time. Seghers situates *Transit* within a long history of forced migration and exile, in which the categories that are often used to define and divide populations—such as nationality, ethnicity, and religion—are in flux. By emphasizing the role of mistaken identity, Seghers destabilizes the concept of immutable identities in a period of upheaval and transition.

Keywords: Anna Seghers; displacement; exile; identity; migration; refugees; fairy tale

Hannah Arendt's essay "We Refugees," written in English in 1943, once she had emigrated to the United States after spending time in Gurs, a French detention camp, directly addresses the experience of having arrived, displaced and divorced from one's previous life, in a new country. Although her most famous, opening line, "In the first place, we don't like to be called 'refugees,'" highlights the processes of identity formation that are caused by external factors, I would like here to call attention to another telling line from Arendt's essay (Arendt 2007, p. 264). In a section in which she describes how frequently their freedoms are limited based on their prior residencies, for example as Germans living in France or as Germans living in the United States, Arendt contends: "Our identity is changed so frequently that no one can find out who we actually are" (Arendt 2007, p. 270). Her argument suggests that such processes of continual identity shifting dislocate one's feelings of self. Anna Seghers' novel *Transit* depicts these complicated processes of identity shifting that Arendt highlights in her essay but does so by portraying the effects of one key character, the first-person narrator, as an example in the extreme. The narrator's constant negotiations among himself and the other two identities he adopts using false papers mirror the upheaval that outside forces—war, displacement, exile, and forced migration¹—inflict on an individual's concept of personhood. Reading Seghers'

¹ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) distinguishes between refugees and migrants. A refugee is "someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence," who "has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group" (UNHCR 2019b, "What is a Refugee?"). This current international definition was first adopted at the 1951 Refugee Convention in Geneva, Switzerland, after *Transit*'s publication. Nevertheless, this definition aptly describes the situation of

Transit in 2019, then, urges us to examine the same crises of war, turmoil, dislocation, and forced migration that remain all too pertinent during Seghers' time, in the twentieth century, and in our own twenty-first century.² As evidence of the continued relevance of this widespread issue, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) cites the 2018 figure of 70.8 million "forcibly displaced" individuals (UNHCR 2019a, "Refugee Statistics").

While *Transit* is not an autobiography, the novel incorporates her autobiographical experiences to inform her fictional text. Seghers fled from Paris to Marseille in 1940 and remained in Marseille until she was able to procure a visa for Mexico. Seghers and her family sailed on the Paul Lemerle in April 1941, which stopped at Martinique, before they continued onto Mexico (Jennings 2018, pp. 60–61, 67). She began writing *Transit* while onboard the ship and finished the novel in 1941 after her arrival in Mexico (Fehervary 2001, p. 165). Published in 1944 in Mexico and the United States, the novel replicates on a formal level an experience of displacement, statelessness, and exile. In the following analysis, I examine *Transit* as a text of forced migration. Several features of the novel attempt to produce an experience of displacement: the narrative situation, the incorporation of descriptions that place these events of World War II into a longer history of forced migration, and the use of references to the genre of the fairy tale. The descriptions that engage with past forced migration and displacement attempt to universalize the historical specificities of the time period, whereas the references to fairy tales rely on the timelessness associated with this genre, seemingly also divorced from a clearly delineated time. Through these associations, Seghers' novel itself attempts to displace time. Seghers' novel calls attention to narratives of forced migration by featuring a cast of characters, particularly the figure of the first-person narrator, attempting to leave the European continent. Seghers situates *Transit* within a long history of forced migration and exile, in which the categories that are often used to define and divide populations—such as nationality, ethnicity, and religion—are in flux. By emphasizing the role of mistaken identity, Seghers destabilizes the concept of immutable identities in a period of upheaval and transition. Furthermore, by charting a potential path for her own writing while in exile, Seghers positions herself as a representative of the German Jewish literary sphere beyond the borders of the European continent ravaged by war. As a result, Seghers' discussion of immutable identities illustrates her engagement with the complex interconnectedness between the German and Jewish during World War II. In her decision to continue writing in German, Seghers establishes a path of negotiating these two identities that does not involve a singular rejection of the German and acceptance of the Jewish. Rather, her writing continues to engage with these interrelated negotiations of the German and Jewish.

Seghers' novel *Transit* contains a complicated plot that does not lend itself well to a cursory summary. In the following section, I will summarize the main plot points, attempting to provide a limited amount of information while at the same time allowing for enough detail that the finer points of my argument related to instances of mistaken identity and displacement can be better appreciated. The narrator is initially in Paris, in the path of the approaching German army, when the story he relates to the addressee begins. He has been held in a concentration camp for an unnamed crime but escaped due to the chaos of the approaching German army. While in Paris, an acquaintance, Paul Strobel, whom he knows from his incarceration, asks him to deliver a letter to a famous writer, Weidel, from the

Seghers and others in Marseille in 1941. For the purposes of this analysis, I use the following definitions of forced migration, displacement, and exile. Forced migration is "a general, open-ended term that covers many kinds of displacement or involuntary movement" but has no "universally accepted definition" (UNHCR 2018). Forced migration and displacement are synonymous and often accompany one another, in the sense that refugees who are forced to leave their country of origin are displaced. Exile, as I use it in this analysis, refers to the state of being unable to return to one's homeland. To write in exile, as Seghers did beginning in 1933 when she moved from Berlin to Paris after the National Socialists came to power, can occur without an individual being involuntarily displaced, and can certainly involve fear of persecution and violence. As both a Jew and a member of the Communist party, Seghers was a representative of two groups that the Nazis actively persecuted.

² Christian Petzold's filmic adaptation of *Transit* (2018), set in present-day Marseille, creates an analogous feeling of suspense Seghers produces in her novel, and further emphasizes the ongoing engagement with Seghers' work in the twenty-first century.

famous writer's wife. Upon attempting to deliver the letter, the narrator learns from the hotel clerk that Weidel took his own life two nights prior.

On a whim, the narrator takes the suitcase of the dead man, where he finds enclosed Weidel's unfinished novel, a tome of 300 pages; a letter from Weidel's wife that brusquely explains she is leaving him; and a letter from a publisher saying that they no longer publish such stories. Not knowing what to do with Weidel's belongings, and in an attempt to find out more information, the narrator opens the letter Paul had given him to take to Weidel. It contains a note from Weidel's wife, urging him to come as quickly as possible to Marseille, as well as a second letter from the Mexican consulate in Marseille informing Weidel that a visa and travel funds are waiting for him upon his arrival. After reading these letters, the narrator attempts to deliver them and Weidel's belongings to the Mexican consulate in Paris, but the consulate refuses to take it, saying this dead author could have applied and been accepted by another country.

Not wanting to be captured once again by the Nazis, the narrator flees from the German invasion of Paris, and seeks shelter with the daughter of a French family he has befriended, the Binnets. He briefly dated the daughter, but she is now remarried and living in a small village in France. Through her husband's connections, she is able to procure a refugee certificate for the narrator, since he no longer has any official papers. The narrator takes on the identity of this man, named Seidler. We never learn the narrator's true name. Able to travel more freely with official papers, and through a connection with the Binnet family in the port city, the narrator relocates to Marseille.

Once in Marseille, the narrator visits the Mexican consulate to return Weidel's suitcase. The consulate officer mistakes the narrator for the dead author, and taken initially by surprise, the narrator does not correct him. Realizing that the dead man no longer needs a visa and seeing how quickly the author will be able to leave Marseille, the narrator begins to impersonate him. While sitting at multiple cafés to fill the empty, long days, the narrator sees a beautiful woman who quickly searches the occupants, scanning the crowd of faces in the hopes of finding someone. After seeing her multiple times, the narrator comes to realize that this young woman is actually Weidel's wife, Marie. She fled Paris in the company of a doctor, whose name remains unknown. She and the doctor are currently romantically involved, despite Marie's desperate search for her husband, Weidel. Marie has heard from the Mexican consulate that her husband is in Marseille. As a reminder, Weidel, at this point, is Seidler. Having fallen in love with her, the narrator attempts to find passage for the doctor and to simultaneously place Marie on the visa assigned to Weidel as his wife. In a moment of realization that Marie will never stop searching and waiting for Weidel, even after having finally procured passage on a ship, the narrator gives up his ticket and decides to remain in France.

In *Transit*, Seghers engages with these issues of forced migration and exile, which are crystallized in the problems encountered by a rotating cast of characters, all caught in a Catch-22: waiting in the French port city of Marseille, they need permission from a host country to leave France for a new one, but permission from the authorities in Marseille to leave as well. They have been given legal permission to stay for a limited time in Marseille, only on the guarantee that they want to leave the city. A significant portion of the novel revolves around the intricacies of the rules and regulations by which the refugees have to abide. The depiction of this interminable bureaucratic red tape in the novel reflects the historical conditions of refugees in this specific context of Marseille, the last port of departure in Vichy France. Historian Eric Jennings recounts the minutiae of rules the refugees had to follow: "Life for uninterned refugees in Marseille in 1940 and 1941 revolved around endless meetings with aid agencies, interminable queues at consulates, months of anguish over visa procedures, and constant rumors about boat departures and possible new exit avenues, be they via Spain or North Africa" (Jennings 2018, p. 25). Seghers' novel creates a feeling of expectancy surrounding the question of whether the narrator will actually leave, the question of whether he will be found out, whether Marie will discover his true identity, and whether or not, if he had indeed left, he would have been any better off for it—as the likely tragic fate of the Montreal demonstrates, securing passage on a ship does not necessarily translate into arriving safely to one's destination.

The narrative situation fosters uncertainty regarding the events that culminated in the narrator remaining in Marseille. It begins with an unidentified first-person narrator telling an unidentified addressee about a ship that is reported to have sunk. In the opening paragraph of the novel, the narrator invites someone to join him for a glass of rosé and a slice of pizza, using the second person address of “you” (Seghers 2018, p. 5). As he tells the person sitting at his table: “Ich möchte gern einmal alles erzählen, von Anfang an bis zu Ende. Wenn ich mich nur nicht fürchten müsste, den andern zu langweilen. Haben Sie sie nicht gründlich satt, diese aufregenden Berichte? Sind Sie ihrer nicht vollständig überdrüssig, dieser spannenden Erzählungen von knapp überstandener Todesgefahr, von atemloser Flucht? Ich für mein Teil habe sie alle gründlich satt” (Seghers 2018, p. 6). In stating that he would like to tell everything from the very beginning to the end, the narrator appears to be searching for someone to whom to narrate; the fact that this person remains a stranger, is, at this time in Marseille, expected. The narrator’s point, however, that one has become bored listening to harrowing stories of survival, since they are all too common, establishes the narrative he has to tell as belonging to that same category. And yet, he still chooses to tell his story to an addressee. The narrator repeatedly makes interjections to his addressee, explaining that his more circuitous narration will make sense soon: “Haben Sie bitte Geduld mit mir! Ich werde bald auf die Hauptsache kommen. Sie verstehen vielleicht. Einmal muss man ja jemand alles der Reihe nach erzählen” (Seghers 2018, p. 11). Other interjections of “Bitte verzeihen Sie diese Abschweifung! Wir stehen dicht vor der Hauptsache” and “Sie werden später verstehen, warum ich das alles genau erzähle” serve to remind the reader of the narrative situation, thereby interrupting the flow of the novel (Seghers 2018, pp. 15, 47). These interruptions serve an important function within the reader’s experience of the text by emphasizing this friction between the aural and written word. In other words, the interruptions remind the reader she is supposed to be listening to a tale, and not solely reading one. Seghers’ insistence on the narrator’s anonymity operates as a means of universalizing the experience of all refugees who have been forced, in varying ways and measures, to leave their homelands. That is, her refusal to name the narrator encourages us to read the narrator as a figure that has the potential to be any and all of us. For this reason, the use of the first-person narrator plays a significant role.

The figure of the narrator contains three levels of naming: on the first level, the reader never learns of his actual name with which he was born. On the second level, the narrator uses the name of Seidler, but it is a borrowed name of another refugee from the Alsace area. On the third level, the narrator Seidler adopts the identity of Weidel, at least officially. Only the consulate officials in the Mexican embassy identify the narrator Seidler as Weidel. To justify why part of his paperwork includes the name Seidler, the narrator explains that Weidel is a *nom de plume*. At one point the consulate official addresses the narrator as “Herr Weidel-Seidler” (Seghers 2018, p. 142). Similarities certainly exist between the surnames Seidler and Weidel: both are two syllables long, with the letters “eid” appearing as the second, third, and fourth letters. In contrast to his established identity as Weidel-Seidler in the Mexican consulate, Marie and the doctor only know him as Seidler. The other former concentration camp inmates know his real name, and know Weidel and Marie, but they do not know the narrator is masquerading as Weidel. Encountering the narrator once again in Marseille, Paul Strobel calls out the narrator’s name, catching him off guard. The narrator, however, comforts himself with the knowledge that others in the city are like him, with multiple names: “Und jetzt und immer beruhigte ich mich, dass fast alle Leute hier unter allerlei Namen herumliefen, und sei es auch nur, weil sie ihren Namen in fremde Sprachen übersetzten” (Seghers 2018, p. 166).

The novel ends—and as the reader comes to realize, begins—with a declaration that the ship Montreal, on which Marie and the doctor had finally received safe passage, has reportedly sunken off the coast of Africa after encountering a mine. In hindsight, from the very beginning, in which the narrative situation between the narrator and addressee was established in the opening pages, the closest version of an ending appears. Much like the opening scene which reveals the destruction of the ship Montreal, thereby coming full circle, Seghers’ narrative, on a formal level, is also cyclical—the narrator repeatedly encounters the same cast of characters trying desperately to leave Marseille: the

old orchestra conductor who tells him to focus on his transit visa; the woman who will only be able to emigrate to America because she is caring for the two beloved large dogs of two American citizens; a woman who has been denied passage and spends her remaining money on oysters, to name but a few. The narrator meets them at the embassy offices, the local offices, and in the cafés. This rotation and at times, monotony, of encounters becomes part of the novel's circularity—the characters remain always on the move within the city, attempting to leave the city, but always never having left yet. The continued rotation of encounters in the narrative mirror the cyclical, repetitive experiences of the characters during their time in Marseille. In this perpetual process of having departed, but not having ever yet arrived, characters are in limbo, waiting for permission to leave that might not ever come. Helen Fehervary, in her monograph *Anna Seghers: The Mythic Dimension* (2001), identifies this “cyclical quality” as an overarching feature of Seghers' writing: “its reliance on recurrent character types, topographies, and epic constellations, gives evidence of the same approach to the subject matter that is at once immediate and timeless, at once historically specific and mythic” (Fehervary 2001, p. 47).

The simultaneity Fehervary detects in Seghers—between the “now” of the present, or to use Walter Benjamin's term, the “Jetztzeit” and the past—brings me to a discussion of a similar tension in Seghers' work especially relevant to an analysis of *Transit*: that of historical universality and historical particularity (Benjamin 1980b, p. 701). Seghers disconnects her descriptions of historical events and time periods from their corresponding historical particularity. That is, she makes references to events and epochs ranging from as wide a period as the biblical world, to ancient Greece and Rome, and to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Such descriptions, placed intermittently throughout the narrative, usually in regards to a description of Marseille or of a minor character the narrator encounters, disrupt the narrative time of present-day Marseille. By placing previous historical references and markers of other time periods within the more descriptive setting of the novel, Seghers attempts to provide continuity regarding a longer, global history of displacement and forced migration. One example illustrates how Seghers generates a comparison between a present-day observation and a previous historical reference through the perspective of the narrator. As he wanders around Marseille, the narrator consistently relates his present-day view of the city to its past. Observing the activity at the port, the narrator envisions the age-old interactions at the same harbor: “Uraltes frisches Hafengeschwätz, phönizisches und griechisches, kretisches und jüdisches, ertruskisches und römisches” (Seghers 2018, p. 292). This description places the experiences of forced migration and exile into a broader timeline of history, while concurrently refusing to provide too many specifics regarding years. Fehervary notes this same passage, using the narrator's description of the harbor to support her argument that the novel “contextualizes the desperate flight of Europeans driven to the edge of the Mediterranean in 1940-41 in historic-mythic terms” (Fehervary 2001, p. 165). She describes this moment of the narrator viewing the harbor as a “suspension in time” (Fehervary 2001, p. 165). This quality of timelessness brings to mind the genre of the fairy tale, which also engages with depictions of a larger, more general time that is difficult to locate in its historical specificity. For this reason, and for other reasons that I explain later, my analysis focuses on the adaptations Seghers makes to the fairy tale genre. I examine how she brings this genre in conversation with issues of displacement and forced migration.

The narrator, who consistently remains fascinated by the simple process of making pizza, likens one such pizza maker to an immortal figure: “Sie [die Pizzabäckerin] glich allen Frauen der alten Sagen, die immer jung bleiben. Sie hatte immer auf diesem Hügel am Meer auf ihrem uralten Gerät die Pizza gebacken, als andere Völker dahergezogen waren, von denen man heute nichts mehr weiß, und sie wird auch immer noch Pizza backen, wenn andere Völker kommen” (Seghers 2018, p. 290). The narrator places this immortal pizza maker into a history reaching back thousands of years. Most importantly, the narrator recognizes that this process of population movement into and out of Marseille—which he pairs with the making of pizza—will continue into the future. The continuity he identifies in this passage regarding the preparation of pizza and the arrival of different population groups in Marseille serves as a marker of cyclical time. Although historical events are distinct in their particularity, the circumstances that produce forced migration, displacement, war, violence, and injustice can contain

similarities throughout different time periods. As he does earlier in reference to the immortal pizza maker from an old legend (“Sage”), the narrator likens the ship Montreal to the stuff of legends as well, describing it as “ein Sagenschiff, ewig unterwegs” (Seghers 2018, p. 299).

To further destabilize the time period of the novel, Seghers incorporates archetypal sets of characters: the young man on a quest; the beautiful young woman on a quest; the witch; otherworldly creatures; and supernatural forces. These archetypes, in turn, call to mind the characters one often encounters in fairy tales. As part of a long oral tradition, fairy tales feature archetypal characters that are not always identified by name. This absence of names permits listeners and readers to more easily identify with characters who are defined more by their social relations and occupations than by their individual identity. The characters we encounter in *Transit*—the doctor, the woman with the two dogs, the orchestra conductor, the narrator—are similarly unnamed. In depicting characters that are more archetypal than they are fully multidimensional, Seghers encourages such an interpretation of her novel as a narrative that incorporates features integral to the fairy tale. Seghers relies on these character tropes and features of the fairy tale to situate her novel *Transit* in the context of a longer history of forced migration and exile.

Other writers and critics, such as Christa Wolf and Fehervary, provide support for the idea that Seghers often engages with the fairy tale genre. In characterizing Seghers’ writing in an essay entitled “Zeitschichten” (1983), Wolf, whom Seghers mentored, asserts: “Mythologische Tiefe haben die zeitgenössischen Erzählungen, zeitgenössische Brisanz die Legenden, Mythen, Märchen. Diese Verschmelzung ist das Zeichen ihrer Prosa” (Wolf 1987, p. 353). Fehervary’s analysis, on the other hand, focuses more on the role of myth in Seghers’ work than on the fairy tale. Fehervary’s description of the “mythic dimension” in *Transit* and in other works by Seghers, such as *The Seventh Cross*, remains somewhat unclear (Fehervary 2001, p. 173). By Fehervary’s use of “mythic,” I understand her to mean that Seghers draws on myths, including legends and folk tales, to create points of reference for her readers. Moreover, Seghers’ reliance on such myths adds to an exaggerated, grandiose quality evident in Seghers’ writing.³ For her part, Fehervary locates this “mythic dimension” in *Transit* specifically in the character of Marie (Fehervary 2001, p. 173).

In his essay “Der Erzähler” (1936), Walter Benjamin makes an explicit connection between the interrelation of fairy tales and myths: “‘Und wenn sie nicht gestorben sind, so leben sie heute noch,’ sagt das Märchen. Das Märchen . . . lebt insgeheim in der Erzählung fort. Der erste wahre Erzähler ist und bleibt der von Märchen. Wo guter Rat teuer war, wußte das Märchen ihn, und wo die Not am höchsten war, da war seine Hilfe am nächsten. Diese Not war die Not des Mythos” (Benjamin 1980a, pp. 457–58). By locating the fairy tale within the current realm of the story, propelled forward by myth, Benjamin’s commentary offers an additional method of reading Segher’s novel: as a fairy tale, coupled with myth, in the form of a novel. In this same essay, Benjamin further explores this formal shift from the communal activity of listening to an oral story—told by a storyteller—to the solitary activity of reading a novel (Benjamin 1980a, p. 456). Seghers’ use of interruptions in the narrative situation to disrupt the reader of her novel, as I discussed earlier, connect to the process of calling attention to the oral exchange between the narrator and his addressee. Fehervary traces the mutual exchange of ideas between Seghers and Benjamin, citing their similar bourgeoisie upbringing in secular German Jewish families. She asserts that Benjamin and Seghers were much more aware of each other’s writing than has previously been understood, citing convincing evidence to substantiate her claim (Fehervary 2001, pp. 148–53).

By relying on references to the characters, common plot devices, and setting prominent in fairy tales, Seghers engages with a much-lauded genre that appears in countries around the world, but also has a specific tradition within German language, literature, and culture. Popularized through Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm’s publication of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in 1812, which was published in seven

³ See Fehervary’s use of “mythic” in the following pages in her monograph (Fehervary 2001, pp. 4, 47, 64, 123, 124, 130).

subsequent editions from 1812 to 1857, the fairy tale within the German cultural milieu had a strong history of supporting regional identity—particularly as connected to conceptions of *Heimat*, the land, and nationhood. These fairy tales promoted an immutable idea of national, regional, and ethnic identity that tended to focus mainly on members of a nuclear family being accosted by outside forces, including individuals, such as Jews, that German society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries viewed as other.

Seghers attempts to situate her novel within this larger German cultural tradition that began as an oral one but, largely due to the influence of the Brothers Grimm, transitioned into a literary one (Zipes 2002, p. 116). As I mentioned earlier, even the narrative situation in the novel—the narrator telling an oral tale to an addressee—echoes this part of the oral tradition. Predominantly, the fairy tale references in *Transit* focus on one of three features: the archetypal characters; the role of magic, either in the acquisition of a magical object or suffering under a supposed curse; and a thematic trope such as mistaken identity. Describing the “German literary fairy tale” as an “institution,” Zipes’ analysis of the historical development of the fairy tale provides a vantage point from which we can better place Seghers and her work, particularly that of *Transit*, into this German fairy tale tradition (Zipes 2002, p. 116). Recounting the range of German writers and intellectuals who have engaged with fairy tales, Zipes omits any mention of Seghers (Zipes 2002, pp. 121–22). And yet, the appeal of the fairy tale, whose “social function” is “prophetic and messianic,” and thereby “capable of revealing the true nature of social conditions” succinctly applies also to Seghers’ use of the fairy tale.

Earlier in my analysis, I introduced archetypal characters in reference to the use of timelessness in the novel. In this section, I provide an additional example regarding the use of a figure that often appears in fairy tales, that of the fairy godmother. In one archetypal character, named Rosalie, Seghers depicts the fortuneteller figure, which is itself an adaptation of the trope of the older woman in fairy tales who provides guidance and wisdom to a young hero or heroine. The narrator describes Rosalie, a contact who he has in the foreign office as “eine[-] Wahrsagerin, die über Karten brütet,” as she pores over his file (Seghers 2018, p. 270). Later on, Rosalie comes to fulfill this description as a fortuneteller in her encounter with Marie. The narrator—masquerading as Weidel—compels Rosalie not to reveal to anyone that he has received an exit visa since he does not want anyone to know that he will be boarding the ship. Marie meets with this same woman at the foreign office and describes the care with which Rosalie attends to every file: “Sie half auch allen mit Rat und Tat, kein Dossier war ihr zu verzwickt. Man fühlte sofort, dass diese Frau allen helfen wollte, dass sie selbst besorgt war, wir möchten alle noch rechtzeitig abfahren, damit keiner den Deutschen in die Hände fiel oder nutzlos in einem Lager zugrunde ging” (Seghers 2018, p. 286). If the documents are seen to possess magical powers, the one who acts as interpreter of these documents also possesses magical powers. Rosalie’s task to read and interpret these documents changes the fates of those waiting for exit visas. In this manner, she becomes a fortuneteller. Sensing Rosalie’s empathetic countenance, Marie desperately asks Rosalie if her husband, Weidel, is still alive. Rosalie demurs, saying she is not permitted to confirm definitively one way or the other, but shares words of comfort with Marie: “Beruhigen Sie sich, meine Tochter! Sie werden vielleicht noch auf der Fahrt mit Ihrem Liebsten vereint werden” (Seghers 2018, p. 287). With these words, Rosalie assures Marie of a positive outcome, which, the reader recognizes, will remain unfulfilled. To accompany the theme of an official serving as a fortuneteller because she can grant visas, transit visas and exit visas are similarly imbued with magical properties. At the office to reapply for permission to stay in Marseille, the narrator describes his certificate as “eine neue Magie, eine neue Vorladung” (Seghers 2018, p. 122); since it grants his desire to remain in Marseille, the certificate functions as if it does indeed have magical powers. For this reason, the certificate is reminiscent of the magical object in fairy tales. Marie ascribes magical powers to the narrator after she follows his advice and, as a result, manages to procure the transit visa: “Da hast du nun wieder gezaubert ... du verstehst dich aufs Zaubern” (Seghers 2018, p. 265).

The interpretation that the characters are cursed is rather obvious given that the majority attempt to leave Marseille by any means possible. The narrator, however, despite his effort to maintain an

outsider's perspective, finds himself becoming invested in the fates of the characters that he continually encounters. During one of their long walks around Marseille, the narrator describes their continuous movement as a curse that has been set on Marie, under which he too chooses to suffer: "Wir liefen und liefen, als sei ein Fluch in uns gefahren, der uns nicht rasten ließ, doch eher war dieser Fluch in Marie gefahren, und ich ließ sie nicht allein" (Seghers 2018, pp. 179–80). Linguistically speaking, the word "Fluch" corresponds well to the concept of "Flucht"—"curse" here becomes embedded in the process of "flight" or being on the move. Seghers strengthens this comparison by emphasizing the linguistic similarity between the word "Fluch" and the word "flüchtig" in the narrator's opening description of Marie and the doctor. The narrator characterizes them as a couple that he met fleetingly ("flüchtig"), which greatly understates the narrator's investment in his relationship to Marie (Seghers 2018, p. 6). "Flüchtig" here, as an adverb, once again recalls the word "Flucht," or "flight" or the process of being "auf der Flucht," or "on the run," which all three characters are. After finishing the novel, the best characterization of the narrator's relationship to them would not be merely as "flüchtige[-] Bekanntschaften" (Seghers 2018, p. 6).

The trope of mistaken identity in fairy tales appears primarily in regards to acts of (magical) transformation (Tatar 2010, p. 60). Seghers adapts this trope by depicting the transformation the narrator undergoes in appropriating the identity of Weidel-Seidler. Mistaken identity functions as a driving force in the novel, and relates to displacement as a means of substitution. The narrator, by taking on Weidel's identity, displaces Weidel figuratively. And yet, the narrator begins to experience unintended side effects as a result of his charade. The more the narrator continues to pass as Weidel, the more he begins to take on characteristics of Weidel that he learns about from Weidel's acquaintances, Paul Strobel and Hermann Aschelroth. For example, the narrator learns that Weidel kept to himself and did not socialize much; the narrator, too, has a tendency for solitude, despite his repetitive encounters with the cast of characters stranded in Marseille. Aschelroth shares that Weidel often hid behind a newspaper, poking holes in the newspaper for slits, in order to observe passersby (Seghers 2018, p. 168). Feeling hopeless that he will ever be with Marie, the narrator begins to hide behind a newspaper in cafés as well, and also makes pinholes to watch others unobtrusively (Seghers 2018, pp. 202–3, 219). The prop of the newspaper lends itself to yet another instance of mistaken identity at the end of the novel. A minor character assures the narrator that he has recently spotted Weidel sitting behind a newspaper; the narrator, knowing this sighting is impossible, asks incredulously for more information, but ultimately cannot reveal the other character's error (Seghers 2018, p. 296).

At this point, an additional consideration should enter into this examination of the narrator as Weidel-Seidler regarding the trope of passing, which, in the German Jewish context, can be briefly defined as a Jew passing as a non-Jew. Rather than have the "implicitly Jewish" Weidel attempt to pass as non-Jewish, Seghers constructs a reverse situation in which a non-Jewish German attempts to pass as Weidel, who is certainly coded as Jewish in the novel (Fehervary 2001, p. 256). For the narrator, passing as Weidel involves adopting identity positions that would further single him out for persecution should he be captured again by the Germans: as an intellectual, a writer against the regime, and as a Jew.

Seghers sets up a parallel between herself and the figure of the writer, Weidel, in her novel. After the narrator has decided to remain in Vichy France, a minor character in the novel draws a remarkable parallel between Weidel as an author and Seghers as an author. This character tells the narrator that Weidel fought for the use of the German language, praising him for his commitment to his writing in German. He states, "Heißt das nicht auch, etwas für sein Volk tun? Auch wenn er zeitweilig, von den Seinen getrennt, in diesem Kampf unterliegt, seine Schuld ist das nicht. Er zieht sich zurück mit seinen Geschichten, die warten können wie er, zehn Jahre, hundert Jahre" (Seghers 2018, pp. 295–96). Using the character's comment about Weidel's writing in German, we have a commentary on Seghers' position as an author writing in German. Seghers' novel, written in German, becomes a means of recuperating—at least linguistically—her country, the homeland from which she has been expelled. Language, it appears, functions as a way to continue inhabiting one's home. In drawing on

the tradition of the fairy tale, Seghers purposefully places herself and her work in the German literary sphere in this period, demonstrating her engagement with the complex interconnectedness between the German and the Jewish during World War II. In the minor character's description, the writer and his work can lie dormant, and has the potential to reappear unannounced and unexpectedly. Although we know that Weidel cannot reappear, Seghers suggests that his writing might indeed once again be read, since the narrator sends Weidel's unfinished novel and paperwork to the Mexican consulate once he decides to denounce his charade. Seghers conjures this potentiality in her deployment of the fairy tale. On a metalevel, continuing the comparison between Seghers and Weidel, while her novel might not be widely read in the current contemporary moment during the war, the potential for a German Jewish writer's work to be rediscovered and better appreciated by a German readership correlates with Seghers' own position as an exiled German Jewish writer.

Furthermore, the minor character emphasizes that Weidel provides a service to his country in his dedication to continuing to write in German. The act of writing in German becomes a form of patriotism expressing solidarity with the rich history and culture of Germany and the German language that is divorced from its current manifestations in Nazi Germany. In this way, Seghers' determination to keep writing in German becomes a more utopian strategy and draws on the messianism Zipes sees in the fairy tale genre. In other words, as the writer Weidel seeks out in his writing an outlet and a means of expression—a writing against, as it were—so too does Seghers. Kathleen LaBahn's analysis of Seghers' work during her years of exile in Mexico explores this process of recuperating some vestige of her geographically estranged homeland through the German language. LaBahn declares, that with her writing in German, Seghers "sought to remind them [German-speaking exiles] of their equally valid cultural and political bonds to German and European traditions" (LaBahn 1986, p. 161). In LaBahn's view, Seghers' writing in German served to "overcome the geographical and psychological distance which separated German-speaking exiles from their homeland" (LaBahn 1986, p. 161).

Rather than make comparisons between Seghers and Weidel, other scholars, such as Fehervary, have drawn parallels between the figure of the deceased author who commits suicide in advance of the approaching German army and Walter Benjamin, who committed suicide in the Spanish town of Portbou, located near the French-Spanish border, after failing to procure a valid Spanish transit visa (Fehervary 2001, pp. 166–67). Fehervary makes a stronger case for interpreting the figure of the deceased author as a representative of Ernst Weiss, arguing that Weiss, for Seghers, was a more emblematic figure closely connected to Eastern European Jewry (Fehervary 2001, pp. 167–69). For my part, I find it to be as productive, if not more so, to examine the figure of the dead author in *Transit* as a means of Seghers exploring the potentiality of a German Jewish author's work to intervene, by means of his or her writing, against the prevailing Nazi regime.

To examine this issue in greater detail, I turn now to the pivotal scene in which the narrator reads Weidel's unfinished novel that he has found among Weidel's belongings. Out of sheer boredom, with nothing to do in Paris, the narrator begins to read Weidel's text, and quickly becomes immersed in the text, devouring the pages quickly. Initially, the narrator reacts emotionally to Weidel's use of the German language, which reminds him of the language of his childhood: "Und wie ich Zeile um Zeile las, da spürte ich auch, dass das meine Sprache war, meine Muttersprache, und sie ging mir ein wie die Milch dem Säugling. Sie knarrte und knirschte nicht wie die Sprache, die aus den Kehlen der Nazis kam . . . sie war ernst und still" (Seghers 2018, p. 27). In contradistinction to the German language he currently must endure, the grating German of the Nazis, the narrator encounters once more the soft undertones of German, even using the metaphor of a baby nursing to describe his mother tongue. As he reads further, the narrator becomes immersed in the narrative, saying that he has never read anything like Weidel's text before, but has heard something similar as a child: "Der Wald war ebenso undurchdringlich. Doch war es ein Wald für Erwachsene. Der Wolf war ebenso böse, doch es war ein Wolf, der ausgewachsene Kinder betört. Auch mich traf der alte Bann, der in den Märchen den Knaben in Bären verwandelt hat und die Mädchen in Lilien, und drohte von neuem in dieser Geschichte mit grimmigen Verwandlungen" (Seghers 2018, pp. 27–28). What he had heard as a child that so fascinated

him were fairy tales. Seghers' diction in the narrator's description here contains a reference to the Brothers Grimm: "mit grimmigen Verwandlungen." This phrase therefore refers simultaneously to the characters' magical transformations as well as the surname of the brothers. The narrator describes how a magic spell ("der alte Bann") seems to descend on him as he reads, likening it to the spells cast on characters in fairy tales.

And suddenly, the narrator reaches the end of Weidel's unfinished narrative. In despair that he will never find out how the story ends, the narrator exclaims: "Er hätte mich nicht alleinlassen dürfen. Er hätte seine Geschichte zu Ende schreiben sollen . . . Er hätte noch weiterschreiben sollen, zahllose Geschichten, die mich bewährt hätten vor dem Übel" (Seghers 2018, p. 28). Most notable is the narrator's remark that the stories would have protected him from evil ("Übel"). Here the process of writing functions as a charm that prevents him from experiencing harm. The narrator's initial reaction to reading Weidel's text functions as a proposed reading of Seghers' novel. Both Weidel's text and Seghers' novel are unresolved in their endings. Moreover, the plot the narrator describes to his addressee resembles the plot of Seghers' *Transit*: "Das Ganze war eine ziemlich vertrackte Geschichte mit ziemlich vertrackten Menschen. Ich fand auch, dass einer darunter mir selbst glich" (Seghers 2018, p. 27). The narrator reading Weidel's text undergoes an experience analogous to that of the reader immersed in Seghers' novel *Transit*: after approximately 300 pages, the narrative ends, but there is hardly any resolution. In other words, there is no happy ending, only continued upheaval, war, and displacement. The narrator, unlike the protagonists in the Grimms' fairy tales, does not move to a new realm, marry, or achieve a higher social status (Zipes 2002, p. 114). Rather, he stays behind in Vichy France. Seen in this light, Seghers' novel *Transit* displays this rich history of the German fairy tale but, simultaneously, displaces this tradition.

Reading Seghers' *Transit* in the twenty-first century highlights not only the continued relevance of her work but contributes to greater engagement with texts that portray narratives of forced migration. In a period of increasing geopolitical upheaval, including conflicts caused or exacerbated by rising seawaters, increased water scarcity, and a higher rate of natural disasters and extreme weather events, the number of refugees today unfortunately appears to be increasing rather than decreasing. Seghers' novel *Transit* will continue to illuminate refugees' experiences.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

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

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