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His Name is Not Tazio, or Death in Marseilles: Anna Seghers's *Transit*

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Abstract

Anna Seghers's novel *Transit* was widely praised by critics, especially in the former German Democratic Republic. Heinrich Böll even regards it as the most beautiful novel Anna Seghers ever wrote. A close analysis of the text, however, reveals many loose ends, one-dimensional characters, stereotypical descriptions of people, and subjects who act irrationally and strange. It is a platform for preaching her political views intermixed with Greek Mythology and Christian imagery. In addition, she borrows heavily from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, but fails to reach the sophistication Mann's novel exhibits.

I. Introduction

Anna Seghers' novel *Transit* is widely praised by critics and Heinrich Böll regards it as the most beautiful novel Anna Seghers ever wrote. He even goes so far to say there are few novels written after 1933 which are as flawless as this one.¹ Most interpretations of *Transit* start with a long introduction and discussion of Anna Seghers's life and tribulations, her persecution by the Nazis and her subsequent exile in Mexico. This difficult part of her life serves as a basis for nearly all analyses, and the general conclusion is that her experiences qualify her to write authentically about refugee life and exile. The narrator's ordeals in *Transit* are similar to her own and the novel is often seen as a telling of her personal hardships. She extends her experiences into that of her novel's narrator when she depicts him in the midst of Nazi persecution. Consequently, Seghers creates a sympathetic basis for criticism. It seems tasteless to make negative comments about one who was persecuted, exiled, starved, and uprooted from a beloved German homeland. Therefore, Seghers effectively distracts critics from openly scrutinizing the characters and especially East German critics seem to focus on Nazi persecution.

Seghers was not only a Jew but also a communist and therefore was even more endangered than others. For this reason, she considers herself, in contrast to many others, a political and not an economic refugee. A person with such experiences deserves sympathy and a forgiving attitude; consequently, many interpretations of *Transit* discuss matters that are not explicitly in the text but could be understood as Seghers's literary intentions. Critics discuss what they think she had in mind when she put pen to paper. Few raise the question if she is successful in portraying *Flüchlingsschicksale*, the "fate of refugees." If one looks at the text without considering the author's personal life story, if one takes the text divorced from the author's life, without any sympathy for her suffered hardship, one discovers a number of loose ends and unresolved problems. It seems that initially, the narrator introduces many promising ideas and interesting elements but then leads the readers into a number of cull-de-sacs.

Not far into the novel, the perceptive enthusiast of literature comes across familiar literary ideas and concepts. One hears faint echoes of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* reverberate through parts of the novel and, undoubtedly, there are a number of corresponding ideas. One such parallel for example, which points to great literature à la Mann, is the relationship between the narrator and the Binnet boy. This attraction is very reminiscent of Mann's homoerotic elements in *Death in Venice*. In *Transit*, however, the motivation for his relationship with the boy never becomes clear, and one is left wondering what the attraction was. Does the boy give the narrator a feeling of belonging by serving as his substitute family or does the narrator have intentions of a different nature, à la Aschenbach?

It also appears that Seghers uses a number of Greek mythological elements that could be straight out of *Death in Venice*. We see images, such as water the emigrants have to cross which leads them into the realm of the dead. Just as Aschenbach is marked for death, so too, are the *abfahrtssüchtigen* (those with a strong desire to leave), referred to as dead people. Intentional or not, these and other parallels are spread throughout the text and evoke memories of Achenbach and Tazio. Though the Binnet boy character is not as refined and three-dimensional as Tazio, one wonders if he is a substitute for the famous Tazio because substitutions seem a constant element throughout the

¹ Quoted from: Andreas Schrade, *Anna Seghers* (Stuttgart: Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1993) 68.

novel. Peas are a cheap and available coffee substitute, and just as this imitation coffee is a replacement for the real thing, so is the Binnet family a mere substitute for the character Seidler. He adopts a substitute son and lives his life as Weidel with a substitute wife Marie. The Pizza the characters eat is a replacement for daily bread, picking peaches is a substitute for fighting fascism, and France becomes a substitute homeland for Seidler.

Along the same lines, the character Achselroth could be seen as a stock substitution for a well developed and well-rounded Jew. Seghers seems to have a hard time dealing with the issue of Jewishness. Herself a Jew, she portrays the Jewish character, Achselroth, in an extremely negative light. Though there are a few positive Jews in this novel, the most prominent and most negative figure of all is a Jew who thinks only of himself and uses people to his own advantage. He is the only person with money, a fact that always gives him great advantages over all the other characters. Why is Achsenroth the Jew portrayed in such a negative, almost stereotypical, light? The answer could lie in the fact that all men in this novel, Jew or not, are depicted in clichés. Male behavior in general is portrayed stereotypically through Seidler, who considers a woman property and prey, and desires only the woman he cannot have.

In the following, we will discuss obvious parallels between *Transit* and *Death in Venice*, the stereotypical depiction of men in general (and especially Achselroth), and read the text as a succession of substitutions.

II. The Boy

At the end of the first chapter, the narrator² encounters a young boy who seems *verzaubert* ("enchanted") to him but whose name is incidentally never mentioned. The narrator, immediately upon meeting this boy, feels drawn to him, and the boy in turn enjoys Seidler's company. About their first meeting Seidler says: "Going down the stairs, I bumped into a slender dark-skinned lad who was rushing upstairs, a few steps at a time. He and I both turned around at the same time. I wanted to find out whether the fever my arrival had created in me had cast a spell even on him" (Seghers 45). Both turn around, their eyes meet and the boy seems enchanted. Unfortunately, the English translation does not do the German original justice here. Seghers writes: "...ob mir mein Ankunftsieber auch diesen Jungen verzauberte," (44) which more literally translated means "...if the fever of my arrival had cast a spell on or enchanted this boy, too." There is no prior reference to the word spell and it is unclear what else was enchanted, but Seidler feels a need to check if this boy, too, was enchanted. It is not apparent if the stress in this sentence is on this boy, meaning that other boys seemed to cast a spell on Seidler or if it lies on boy. The latter would indicate that the entire town seemed enchanted, including this boy. Whatever the case, the youngster made a special impression on him. This meeting of the eyes reminds one of the scene in which Aschenbach and Tadzio's gazes meet for the first time. "For some reason, he looked back before crossing the threshold, and since no one else was left in the lobby, his eyes, of peculiar twilight gray, encountered those of Achenbach, who, with his newspaper on his lap, was absorbed in watching the group" (Mann 314).

Mann skillfully describes this scene in words that make the reader feel and understand that this is an enchanting moment in Aschenbach's life. Seghers, on the other hand, uses the word "*verzaubert*" which means enchanted or had cast a spell to express Seidler's feelings. Mann, on the other hand, creates a situation where special feelings are present and evoked through the use of language without using descriptive words.

Just as Aschenbach feels drawn to a young boy, so does Seidler with one significant difference: his motivation. Aschenbach is an artist who sees Tadzio's beauty which causes him to experience homoerotic feelings and awakens a desire to be around him. In *Transit*, however, it never becomes clear why Seidler wants to be with the boy; but just as Aschenbach says, "I love you" (61), so does Seidler say, "I loved him very much" (101). Aschenbach loves Tadzio from afar, whereas Seidler has physical contact with the boy. He especially enjoys it when the child puts his head on his shoulder. "I'd carve something for the boy just so he'd lean his head against me as he watched me" (67). Seidler loves the boy's company and his enjoyment of physical contact raises the question of the boy's role in this novel and Seidler's intentions. Whereas *Death in Venice* is centered on Aschenbach and Tadzio, the relationship between Seidler and the boy is only one of many side stories in *Transit* that leaves the reader wondering.

² Seidler is not his real name, but a name used to get papers permitting him to stay in Marseilles. His real name is never revealed. I shall refer to the narrator as Seidler for simplicity's sake.

A closer look at all the passages that contain narration about the boy suggests several possible reasons for Seidler being drawn to the boy. Throughout the novel, the boy lacks any psychological or character development, and the reader is never privileged to any of his thoughts. He is very one dimensional and his actions resemble more a machine than a living being. Without any background information, the reader suddenly learns that the boy seems enchanted. "From the first, I felt strangely drawn to the boy," (Seghers 61) says Seidler. This attraction motivates him to see the boy and be with him as much as possible. The boy listens closely to the adults' conversations and Seidler spends a good part of his money³ to buy food and books for the boy. He says concerning the boy: "I'd been attached to the boy from the first day I'd seen him. . . . I'd steal frequent glances at the window where he was studying. Instinctively, I used words I knew he'd understand" (87). Seidler visits the Binnetts often, but he directs his attention to the boy and he even instinctively and unintentionally chooses language that he can understand. Seidler's conversations then are addressed to the boy and not to the adult members of the family. He goes on to say: "[T]o me, the sudden tossing of his head, the flashing of his eyes, meant no more than the playfulness of a young colt. But even as playfulness, it struck me as good" (87-88). What *Spiel*, what playfulness is he talking about here? Does Seidler feel the boy is leading him on? Is he insinuating homoerotic feelings along the lines of Aschenbach and Tadzio? And even if the boy is just playing, Seidler interprets much deeper meaning into those movements. However, the reader is left hanging and the relationship seems flat and undeveloped. In stark contrast, Aschenbach is deeply touched when Tadzio smiles at him and Thomas Mann describes this moment in beautiful language that causes the reader to experience the moment:

Aschenbach was amazed to see that the boy was absolutely beautiful. His face, pale and of a graceful reserve, surrounded by honey-colored curls, with its straight nose, lovely lips, earnest expression, sweet and godly, all recalled Greek statues of the noblest era; but despite the pure and consummate form, his features exerted such a unique personal charm that the observer felt he had never encountered such perfection in nature or in the arts" (312).

The reader is drawn into the eloquent descriptions of Tadzio's beauty and one feels the excitement Aschenbach experiences when Tadzio smiles at him: "Tadzio smiled; smiled at him . . . it was the smile of Narcissus leaning over the mirroring water, the deep, drawn-out, bewitching smile . . ." (340).

A smile is also important for Seidler, namely the surprised smile he receives when he visits the Binnet family. "In this depraved world, a quiet look out of still innocent eyes, . . . and his smile of surprise and pleasure whenever I appeared sufficed to fill me with quiet content" (88). This smile makes Seidler happy and the presence of the boy affects him even more when Seidler thinks to himself: "My sympathy for the lad made me slightly incoherent" (89). Seidler has very strong and undefined feelings for the boy, feelings that confuse him; he likes to take him on walks, boat trips and in the woods, all of which seem normal activities for a father and a son but not a child and a stranger. Since Seidler has a lot of free time it is feasible that he likes company and he prefers the friendship of the young boy. Up to this point the text is ambiguous, but when the doctor prescribes rest for the boy and admonishes the family to not excite him, Seidler feels guilty when the doctor says: ". . . but we must keep from the boy everything likely to worry or upset him. That last remark seemed to be directed at me, although he apparently paid no attention to me, and I was unaware that I was to blame in any way" (91). The doctor is not addressing his remarks to Seidler, yet Seidler feels they are directed toward him. He feels guilty for something, but he remarks that he has no reason to feel that way.

It is notable that Seidler, following the doctor's visit, becomes very jealous of this doctor, merely because the boy thinks highly of him. "I was jealous of his training and of the voice to which the boy was now listening wholeheartedly" (98). "He said he'd like to be a doctor some day. Right away I felt a stir of jealousy, although I had his confidence and the calm gaze of his eyes again" (108). Seidler very much wants to be the only special person in the boy's life. The doctor is able to help the boy, to make him healthy again, but Seidler has nothing that would impress the boy to the same extent.

When anyone talks about departing and emigrating when Seidler and the boy are present, the boy immediately turns his head away from the conversation toward the wall, and on occasion pulls the blanket over his head (93, 134). This gesture is supposed to show a silent and passive protest that the boy is upset about the possibility of Seidler leaving.

³ Seidler receives some financial assistance with which he also buys coffee, alcohol and pizza. It is hard to believe that he is an unemployed refugee, since money never seems to be a problem for him.

If this is true, then it would seem that the boy is returning Seidler's feelings, whatever they are, and that the relationship is mutual.

Up to this point, it appears Seidler has taken the place of the father of the boy since Georg⁴ is not very involved in raising him. But the narrator remarks that the doctor encourages Georg to be more of a father figure than he has been thus far in order to speed up recuperation. This admonishment disturbs Seidler very much because, after all, he has been showing great interest in the boy all along, not only when he is sick. Consequently, he quickly criticizes the fact that the doctor loses interest as the boy recuperates.

Aschenbach decides to stay in Venice because of Tazio, despite the cholera outbreak and he eventually dies as a result of it. He wants to be near Tazio and, inspired by his presence, writes "that page and a half of exquisite prose" (335). Tazio's presence and influence unleashes a wave of creativity. Seidler, on the other hand, who also contemplates departing, does not reveal any of his thoughts concerning leaving the boy behind. It is not at all clear what the relationship is and if the presence of the boy inspires Seidler to anything. Klaus Müller-Salget sees the function of the boy as "a sort of seismograph for good or bad actions. . . . He considers the departure of the doctor a betrayal; he throws himself at the narrator's chest when he decides to definitely stay" (351).

Seidler feels empty and lost in this world of refugees, he has not found or established his identity and attaches himself to someone with an even lesser developed personality: a young child. He exerts some influence over this child and is admired and appreciated by him. This gives him a feeling of importance and a sense in life. Seidler himself, though, is acting like a child; he is indecisive, changes his mind constantly about such important matters as saving his own life, and he has no clue how to spend his abundant free time. Children are guided by whim and, when not entertained, are often bored too. For that reason, he is drawn to a child who would understand him better than an adult. Yet, the possibility exists that this relationship goes even deeper.

To explore possible homoerotic overtones, one must first consider the relationship Seidler has with Nadine. He derives a feeling of self-worth from being with her, yet he quickly develops a dislike for her since she is the driving force in this relationship. He then feels drawn to the soldiers next door when he is with her. "How could I explain to her what I could hardly explain myself, that there was something that drew me toward the mob and away from the beautiful woman I was holding in my arms" (69). He had spent a night with the legionnaires and now identifies with them and longs to be in their midst. Weeks after separating from her he visits Nadine and they have a sexual encounter, but he is unable to perform. Nadine tries to console him with the words: "Don't be sad dear. It's never worthwhile, believe me" (209).⁵ In the German text she says something to the effect of, "don't be sad, my little one," which is of course a very ambiguous statement not expressed in the English translation.

In his search for an identity and unable to satisfy a women, he prefers the company of men and little boys. Yet to prove to himself that he is a man, he stalks Marie, knowing that he cannot have her. In light of these revelations, the relationship with the Binnet boy could certainly have homoerotic undertones.

III. Greek Mythology

The boy is not the only parallel to *Death in Venice* since Seghers uses a similar setting. Water and the crossing of water are predominant pictures along with references to Greek mythology. Aschenbach had to cross a body of water to get to his destination and he did so in a gondola that resembled a coffin. In *Transit* the emigrants are about to cross the ocean in ships that sink. Aschenbach did not have to pay for his transfer in the gondola and the gondolier says, "You will pay," (309) foreshadowing Aschenbach's demise. Seidler does not have to pay for his ticket either, but had he gotten on that ship, he would have paid the same price as Aschenbach. Seidler avoids the inevitable consequences by staying in France, whereas Aschenbach and also most of the characters in *Transit* who crossed the water have to pay the price of death. The author equates leaving one's homeland with death, no matter if one dies on the voyage or not. Her simple formula is "emigrating equals death." Only political refugees, as herself, are excluded from this equation. This constitutes a very simplistic view of the complex problem of emigration.

⁴ Georg is of course not the boy's natural father, but he is Claudine's boyfriend.

⁵ "Sei doch nicht traurig, Kleiner" (189)

Klaus Müller-Saget points out in his article "Totenreich und lebendiges Leben" that the situation and circumstances of the exile seekers resembles an existence between life and death.⁶ These are people preparing to cross the river of death and they are making every effort to get the necessary compensation for the ferryman in the form of tickets and the required paperwork. The body of water is the Acheron in Greek mythology and the ferryman is Charon, who has to be paid to take a person across into the realm of the dead. The narrator refers to that situation at the beginning of chapter five when he says: "Watching it made me afraid of getting into it myself. I who still felt alive and was more than willing to keep on living. I was afraid that I'd be drawn into the stream by some act of violence or a trap of some kind" (Seghers 212). Seidler is, at this point, willing to stay and calls himself alive, but he fears he could be drawn into the stream that leads to death. To him, crossing the ocean is the same as dying. He says about the people waiting in front of the Mexican embassy: "[T]heir pale and forlorn faces made one think that the hoped-for ship was the last ferry across the dark stream of death, and that even that was denied them because there was still a little life in them and they were destined for still more suffering" (81).

The references to Greek mythology are very clear in the words ferry and dark stream. This passage also shows the state in which these refugees are—between dead and alive—but when they board a ferry and embark on their journey they will cross into the realm of the dead. Referring to the rumors circulating in the harbor, Seidler says, "Always fleeing from death into death".⁷ The masses are fleeing from the advancing German troops but they are only fleeing into death. Seidler, therefore, equates leaving the country—or actually the continent—with dying. Consequently, there is no hope of a better life for emigrants in a foreign refuge.

This outlook of emigrants is personified in the *Kapellmeister*, who the narrator refers to as a living corpse. He dies as soon as he has all his papers together (135).⁸ Seghers describes this man again in terms and symbols used by Thomas Mann. Seidler refers to the Kapellmeister's eyes as "death's-head eye sockets" (73). In comparison, the foreign traveler who Aschenbach meets at the beginning of *Death in Venice* is described as "thin . . . blatantly snub-nosed . . . with colorless . . . eyes, . . . some permanent physiognomical deformity, his lips seemed too short: they curled back, completely baring even the gums, so that the long white teeth glistened between them" (289). This description reminds one of a skull, whereas Seghers does not attempt to describe the physiognomy of the Kapellmeister but only refers to him as "death's head" or "skull" (73).⁹

Seidler also calls him "the old death's head from Prague" (90)¹⁰ and goes on to say: "He should long ago have been laid in his grave" (46). This man, like all other emigrants, is marked for death since he wants to leave. By collecting the necessary papers and paying for his passage he pays Charon the required fare and is taken into the realm of the dead when his paperwork is in order.¹¹

IV. Christian Themes

Asides from Greek mythology, Christian beliefs are also incorporated in reference to the hereafter. Marie refers to the "over there" (276) and Seidler is not sure if she means Mexico or the hereafter. Marie says: "I keep wondering what it will be like over there? Will it be like it is here? Or different?" (276).¹² Whereupon Seidler asks: "Over there? Where, Marie? What do you mean?" (276). He asks her to clarify and she points up in the air and replies, "Over across the ocean" (276). The translator here acted as an interpreter and robbed the very ambiguous passage of all its ambiguity. In the original, Marie says "over there" and it is never clear if she means "across the ocean" as the translator thinks, or if she means in the hereafter. She goes on to say: "When everything is over. Will there really be peace at last, as the doctor believes? Will we all meet again over there? And if we do, will those I meet be so changed that it won't be like meeting them at all, but like the new beginning that we all wish for in vain on earth? (276)" Seidler, thinking she is talking about an afterlife replies, "I'd be entirely lost over there" (276)¹³. Marie explains that she means Mexico and Seidler concedes that he has not given it much thought. Marie does not believe Weidel will be

⁶ Klaus Müller-Saget, "Totenreich und lebendiges Leben," *Exilliteratur: 1933-1945*, ed. Wulf Koepke and Michael Winkler (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989) 333.

⁷ The translator left out his sentence "immer auf der Flucht vor dem Tod, in den Tod" (89).

⁸ see Müller-Saget p. 336

⁹ "Totenkopf" (70)

¹⁰ "Prager Totenschädel" (85)

¹¹ Like the sinking of the ship at the end of the story, here too, Seghers is not only dotting her i's but also pointing out her own conviction. The Kapellmeister, after all, is not a political refugee in her eyes.

¹² "Wie mag es dort drüben sein?" (248)? In German, *drüben* can refer to over there or the hereafter.

¹³ "Da drüben kenne ich mich gar nicht aus" (249).

there to welcome her upon her arrival in Mexico, but she does not yet realize that he will be waiting for her when she crosses into the *Totenreich*, the "realm of the dead," after her ship sinks. Seidler predicted this earlier when he said "that death would some day mutilate her features" (137). Marie is still among the living but she will soon cross over.

To stress this fact that the emigrants will die, there are several references made to hell. After telling an anecdote that hell is a state of waiting, the bald fellow-traveler says: "You've been in hell all this time. That's what it was – hell, an insane waiting for nothing. What could be more fiendish? War? It'll follow you across the ocean and catch up with you there" (231). Waiting is hell and since all émigrés are waiting for their required paperwork, they are, according to this man, in hell. He concludes that after successfully emigrating, war will only follow them and they will continue to be in hell. The hell of waiting for papers is also emphasized by the fact that the prospective emigrants are caught up in acts of constant repetition. They are continually going to the same consulates and other official places; they meet the same people and have the same daily, boring routine. They spend their time and money in coffee shops, eating pizza and drinking cheap wine and coffee.

Another Christian symbol is the use of pizza and wine. Pizza can only be obtained on ration cards for bread. Pizza, therefore, is the bread they eat; it is the bread of life. This bread, which is round as a host, is consumed with wine, and the consumption of both is reminiscent of the last supper in Christian tradition. But in a twist of the biblical account, Seidler breaks bread with his friends in preparation for their leaving, not his. They are leaving into the realm of the dead while he stays behind to carry on the work. One might think that Seidler stays behind to do good and carry on the work of a man converted to communism; but he is constantly torn between leaving and staying and is greatly motivated by his infatuation with Marie, and not by selfless acts of solidarity. His remaining behind does not do much good at all, except that he picks peaches and people enjoy them very much.

Seidler himself lives in both worlds: in the world of the living (those who are staying behind) as the character Seidler, and in the world of the soon to be dead (those preparing to leave) as Weidel. However, the real Weidel is in fact dead, but throughout the novel seems alive and well. He lives on in Marseilles through Seidler, who emulates his mannerisms¹⁴ and behavior and applies for a visa in his name. Even other people claim they have seen Weidel in Marseilles and have talked with him on the phone. The emigrants try so hard to stay alive but inevitably sail into death, whereas a dead man cannot be kept dead, since people do not realize he is dead. Others help him get a visa; Marie is searching for him and thinks she has always just missed him wherever she goes. And just as Weidel lives on, so does Marie at the end of the novel. "[B]ut every time the door opens, it gives me the old start. . . but every time I catch myself scanning the new thin shadow on the whitewashed wall. Marie – who knows? – may turn up again" (312). Weidel and his wife Marie never seem to die so they live on forever. After all, Weidel was a gifted writer and every writer's wish is to be immortalized, so he lives on in the minds of people. The author's intention is to show that Seidler was deeply influenced by the novel fragment he had found in the suitcase and critics like to point out that it changed his life. He went from a selfish man to a helping individual who cared about other people's fate. They fail to realize however, what Seidler's motivations for his actions were. Indeed, he says the unfinished novel touched him greatly because he could understand it. "I understood their actions because at last I could follow them from the beginning and see that everything happened because it had to happen that way" (26). He had read a piece of political literature, understood it, and surmised the "man who has written that was a master of his art" (25). It is hard to believe that a man, who essentially hates reading and simply did not read, suddenly had the ability to critique literature. Nevertheless, Weidel was able to touch Seidler temporarily. Strangely enough, he is unable to read it a second time. "I had intended to read it all over again, but now I was disgusted. When I first read it I had impressed everything on my mind. Now I was no more eager to read it again . . ." (27). After this experience, several weeks pass before he even gives the novel a second thought. How impressed could he have been by it and how much did it really influence his life?

V. Seidler

To answer these questions one has to look at what motivates Seidler to do good and perform selfless acts. It quickly becomes evident that he does not help Marie or the doctor selflessly, but only with ulterior motives. The only person he is truly concerned about is Heinz and he does indeed give him the doctor's ticket. There is, however, no clear connection between this act and Weidel's novel. Quite contrary, Seidler has always liked Heinz, and Heinz is a

¹⁴ He hides behind a newspaper and watches the people in the coffee shop through two holes he had punched in the paper, exactly imitating Weidel's behavior. Seidler lacks an identity and is therefore eager to take on Weidel's. But as with everything he is not consistent and keeps changing his mind.

person who has influenced him deeply. Solidarity in a Marxist sense is not the reason for such action, but a long friendship and a feeling of pity and charity.

Seidler's motivations truly deserve a closer look. He is a 27 year old man who has not yet decided who he is or for what he stands. He had a fight with an SA man, escaped from a concentration camp and a French internment camp, and now lives in a small hotel in Marseilles. Seidler feels he has arrived at his final destination and claims he has no intentions of leaving. But during the novel he often changes his mind for no apparent reason, or at least he does not give any. He needs to feel desired and important, a fact that becomes clear when he is jealous of the doctor who has an honorable profession and is much respected due to his skills and knowledge. As already pointed out, he likes to be with children, in particular the Binnet boy, because the lad looks up to him and gives him a feeling of importance and self worth. He derives this feeling from exerting power and influence over other people. He is a father figure to the boy and he actively tries to manipulate Marie because he likes her from the moment he sees her. His subsequent behavior toward the two is unethical and un-Marxist because it is of a purely selfish nature.

Seidler simply wants to have Marie. "I'd begrudge the woman who'd just passed me to anybody" (97). The initial reaction is not love at first sight but a desire to own a woman: a very basic, carnal and primitive reaction. Here we encounter another of several clichés of this novel, namely the treatment of women by men. Seidler sees a beautiful woman as a trophy that gives him special recognition in society. He has a girlfriend, the very pretty Nadine, and he remarks that when being with her the other people respect him more. "Possession of such a treasure gave me a boost in their estimation" (68). Nadine is a showpiece to give him a sense of self worth. But this relationship does not satisfy him since she is a rational and intelligent person. "I realized that never, not even when she was in my arms, did she make a single gesture that her mind was unaware of" (71). Apparently Seidler is not looking for a thinking girlfriend, so he simply leaves her.

To fill this void, he stalks Marie and tries to break up the liaison between her and the doctor. Simultaneously, he pursues the relationship with the boy. On one occasion he remarks: "I found Marie crouching in the corner of the room, as if she were booty fallen to my lot after a military victory" (197). He goes on to state: "I'd take good care that she'd never fall into the hands of a fellow like me again" (198-199). In the original text Seghers uses the term *Beute*, or "prey," and the sentence reads something like: "that she would never fall into the hands as prey of a fellow like me." The term "prey" is significant here because it is used on several occasions. *Beute* can mean "prey," or "loot" or "booty" and implies an act of hunting or pursuing to get it, or even a war-like act. Seidler is consumed by the thought to take her away from the doctor and quite openly shows it by physically getting between her and him. Since he is aware that she is indecisive, he devises a plan to get a passage for the doctor only, so he can have Marie to himself. He almost succeeds but the doctor is forced to return. During this time, he derives self-worth from being her protector and hero. "Don't forget that I am here. I am going to take good care of you from now on" (154). In her search for her dead husband, Marie is confused and therefore vulnerable and Seidler, taking advantage of this fact, moves in.

As Marie is contemplating leaving with the doctor he thinks to himself: "Why should she want to go with him? Why doesn't she let him go on alone" (164)? Once again the translator does not express the same sentiment that is present in the German original. He speaks of "im Stich lassen," (150) which means Seidler is complaining that she is abandoning or forsaking him. He is obviously not thinking about Marie and her feelings, since he is trying to break her away from the doctor, but he is only concerned with himself. His actions are self-serving, selfish, and cunning, and the help he offers is not genuine charity. He wants Marie and he does everything in his power to get rid of the doctor. As Marie finally decides to leave with the doctor, he quickly books a passage on the same ship in order to follow her. Realizing, though, that she is not over Weidel yet, and that she will be with the doctor, he changes his mind and returns the ticket. As determined as he was to pursue her, he now appears equally determined to stay. He had drifted into Marseilles and could never decide what to do: stay, leave or go to the country. So he lives from day to day, following a few of his whims, but never being really determined about anything. Seghers is trying to portray Seidler as a positive hero, a man determined not to leave his home land. IT seems, however, that she is falling short of her goal because she is portraying a negative, selfish man of many clichés who is quite Chauvinistic. Even in the 1940's to consider a woman nothing but prey, was negative.

The female character, Marie, is also portrayed in a very negative light. She, too, is selfish, a user, and not exactly a positive figure. She broke up with Weidel, had a liaison with the doctor, but continued to have feelings for her husband. When the doctor wanted to leave, when it was still possible with little paperwork, she was indecisive because of her feelings for Weidel and she remained behind. Now Weidel is her only ticket out of Marseilles and she makes every effort to find him. She uses Seidler, then the doctor to obtain her visa 'in order to find Weidel who she hopes is in Mexico. It never becomes clear whom she really loves, but she certainly makes the doctor and Seidler

believe that she has feelings for each of them. She is Seidler's counterpart when it comes to making decisions. Like Seidler, she is indecisive throughout the novel but in the end decides to leave. Seidler, in contrast, decides to stay. But his decision is more by default than by a rational process.

VI. Achselroth

Throughout the novel, characters exemplify positive and negative traits. However, there is one character who does not seem to have any redeeming qualities at all, and that is the Jewish character Achselroth. He oozes negativity by being depicted as a stereotypical bad man. He is a Jewish artist,¹⁵ who only thinks of himself. He is the only character that has plenty of money and he uses it to his advantage. On the run from the Germans, he deserts his comrades; he buys a military car for six thousand Marks and drives off without his friends. Seidler calls him an "*Imstichlasser*", which the translator expresses as "deserter," which, once again, does not exactly express the original meaning. He is a man who leaves someone high and dry, who abandons his friends. This action makes him a truly unsocial and un-communist persona. Achselroth is a famous dramatic author who is an "exceptionally fine-looking fellow" (17). He is only concerned with his own welfare and never thinks of his friends, unless it is to his advantage. After promising to take Weidel into the unoccupied sector, he leaves him behind in Paris since his own luggage takes up all the seats in his car. Achselroth could, therefore, be indirectly responsible for Weidel's death. He has no concept of this when he says: "Well, there's one more to disapprove of me. Everywhere I go I run across people who are mad at me because they consider my treatment of them un-Christian" (171). His character is criticized for not acting in a Christian manner, but these rules, conventions, and social contracts would not apply to him because he is Jewish. Christian, in this context, stands for love and charity, which are traits he certainly does not possess. His total lack of morals makes him a one-dimensional bad person with no redeeming qualities.

It is significant to remark that Achselroth's selfishness and his abundant wealth do not ultimately serve to his advantage. His Cuba visa was forged and he was forced to return to Marseilles. Despite this setback, however, he is able to buy a passage on every possible ship and he also has the means to bribe officials. He ends up getting Seidler's / Weidel's ticket, even though many deserving people are waiting in line. Every act committed is to his own advantage. Seidler wonders about Achselroth: "Did he know anything about himself? I don't think so. Having so splendidly equipped his face and brain, nature had played him a trick there. He was like an amoeba or an alga in that respect" (259). With regards to morals and ethical behavior, Achselroth is compared to the most primitive life form on earth, insinuating he truly is the scum of the earth. In the end, he gets on the same ship as Marie and the doctor because he likes Marie, a married woman, and wants to be with her. As he gets on the boat he deserts another set of friends. Like all the others who leave, he too dies as the ship sinks, and his selfish behavior and attitude are punished by death, although he himself never realizes that he is doing anything unethical.

¹⁵ The text never mentions that Achselroth is Jewish but the name itself is a clear indication of his ethnicity.

Seghers is making a strong anti-Semitic statement through this negative stereotypical portrayal of Achselroth. Such negative sentiments of a Jewish artist are surprising and insensitive. Seghers was first and foremost a communist, secondly a Jew. She strongly identified with Germany and was dismayed about leaving. Martin Jay writes about Jews and Marxism:

As has often been observed, Marxists, beginning with the founder himself, and his controversial reply to Bruno Bauer on the Jewish question in 1843, have tended to deny the uniqueness of anti-Semitic oppression. That is, they have tended to subsume it under the more general rubric of the exploitation of the working class. . . . Or worse at times, they have condoned Judeophobia, implicitly and explicitly, as an expression of anticapitalistic resentment (47).

Seghers allows for one kind of refugee only, a political one. As depicted in her novel, other refugees, economic or ethnic, are heading for death. Jay continues:

At that point in her career, Seghers appears to have viewed all those who attempted to survive by leaving their homeland as deserters who evaded the responsibility of defending the land with which they were connected by ties of 'blood and soil.' She exempted only political émigrés from this duty" (284).¹⁶

Oddly enough, the character she picked to exemplify this conviction settles in the unoccupied part of France, not in Germany. Seidler does not defend his homeland nor is he politically active, instead he picks peaches.

VII. Conclusion

The novel *Transit* can be read as a story of substitutions. Seidler takes on a substitute son and family, and since he lacks an identity, he lives as Weidel and assumes a pseudo wife, Marie. By picking a family, one could argue, he is covering strong feelings for men and possibly the boy. Having to settle for imitation goods is exemplified in the fact that the coffee is made from peas, with only a hint of real beans. Nothing is real: there are rumors about ships, counterfeit visas are being circulated, and something round and fruity looking is actually peppery pizza. This pizza, then, is *ersatz-bread*, and what Seidler considers love is nothing but infatuation or lust. Picking peaches, consequently, is a substitute for fighting fascism, and France becomes a substitute homeland for Seidler. Multi-faceted psychology of the characters is substituted by one dimensionality and undeveloped psychology. The positive figures, Heinz and Paul, are truly positive and billboards for solidarity and Marxist ideas. On the other hand, Seidler, in fact, has few redeeming qualities, and is guided by his most basic emotions. In the end he is neither in Germany nor Mexico and is, therefore, in limbo, a state between life and death as all the emigrants in the novel.

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg once wrote: "Sie hatte das Eigene, daß sie nie schlechte Bücher las, aber dafür selbst welche schrieb . . ." (she never read bad books but certainly wrote some). This statement is much too harsh for *Transit* but Anna Seghers read and knew good literature, like *Der Tod in Venedig*, but was unable to convert this knowledge into her own piece of exquisite art, albeit good art. But the boy is not Tadzio, Marseilles is not Venice, and Seghers is not Mann.

¹⁶ To even use the term "Blut und Boden" in reference to a Jew in the novel seems very insensitive and offensive.

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