

In Transit: Placelessness and the Absurd in the Writings

of Anna Seghers

**Gerry Kearns
Maynooth University**

The structure of feeling that has been called the absurd suggests a placeless and irrational world. Yet such a structure of feeling is sometimes produced in response to quite a specific context. This essay considers the way absurdity arises and is treated within Anna Seghers's *Transit*, a novel about the plight of refugees from Nazi Germany trying to leave unoccupied France after the signing of the Armistice between France and Germany in June 1940. The essay explores the treatment of space and time in the novel and suggests that there is a significant distinction between absurdity as resignation and absurdity as dissent. The essay also claims that absurdity is explicitly countered in the novel in the pursuit of a politics of responsibility and a resistance in solidarity. **Key Words: Absurd, Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukács, Placelessness, Refugees, Anna Seghers**

PLACELESSNESS, OBJECTIVITY, AND THE ABSURD

In an essay on two of Doris Lessing's novels, Seamon (1981, 85) suggests that works of imaginative literature may provide "a testing ground" for examining phenomenological insights about "at-homeness" as "an essential aspect of human existence". Seamon looks at some characters who are seemingly attached to place and others who feel dis severed from the pathways of local social reproduction and existential security. In Seamon's essay two varieties of placelessness (Relph 1976) are described. The first is that of the spatial dislocation of the foreigner yet to learn local ways sufficient to invest locality with the love that may come with familiarity. The second is the temporal dislocation of the denizens of modernity,

whirling from future shock; placelessness as loss (Arefi 1999). There are, of course, many other ways that people become uprooted and we need to understand placelessness as a structural feature of many lives. This is registered in many literary works about exiles, refugees and homeless people (Greiner 2003; Gilmartin 2016; Cooke 2016). In rejecting the apparent naturalism of earlier drawing-room pieces (Finch 2015), modernist works such as those of Samuel Beckett perhaps stage their own inquiry into the qualities of place and placelessness (Travis 2008) and invite us to imagine some of the qualities of detachment that Seamon describes. Finch (2016) reviews much of the geographical literature on place and placelessness and discusses an anti-place strategy whereby some of Beckett's characters attempt to remove themselves from the external world. For some, this gives Beckett's plays and novels an irreality, a merely allegorical hold on the world similar in important respects to Kafka (Cohn 1978).

This line of criticism, both of Beckett and of Kafka, found early and trenchant expression in the works of Georg Lukács. The lack of reference to specific places was a symptom of a purely philosophical perspective upon the human condition and thus unsuited to the sort of politically-engaged art that Lukács called for. This was the basis for a debate about German Expressionism in which Walter Benjamin was among those defending modernist artists such as Kafka against Lukács (Jameson 1977). Beckett's rooms may seem detached from an everyday world but his characters bring much of that world in with them, including its language. Morin (2017, 132) notes that Beckett referred to his period of writing after the Second World War as the "siege in the room" and notes that *état de siège* was the term for the state of exception, the police powers, under which Vichy France was governed after July 1940. Morin (2017) shows how Beckett

successively removed local detail from his stories even while he used much of the argot of the Resistance and continued his exploration of the responsibilities to be assigned for the death camps he had seen at the close of the Second World War. The less seemingly specific he became, the more extensive was the web of guilt and complicity. This erasure of place is neither solely philosophical, although it has its existential side, nor entirely realistic, although specific referents are evident. It may be tactical.

There is a certain “structure of feeling” (Williams 1961, 84) in some of these responses to trauma, that has attracted the controversial label “absurd”, taken from a remark made about Kafka by Eugène Ionesco, and used by Martin Esslin (1960, 4) to describe the works of Ionesco, Beckett, and Arthur Adamov: “Absurd is that which has no purpose, or goal, or objective.” Esslin describes the absurd as showing the world as “an incomprehensible place” (4), “the irrationality of the human condition and the illusion of what we thought was its apparent logical structure” (5). In asking us to take the absurd seriously, Phelps (2018) treats this apprehension of senselessness as a symptom of the alienation produced by daily life in the jaws of the contradictions of capitalism. In this paper I want to suggest another possibility: that one might express a sense of absurdity when faced with an oppression one does not want to dignify as legal or legitimate. Like placelessness these may be occasions for a tactical resort to the absurd.

In the works to which he gave the label “absurd,” Esslin thought we were “confronted with a grotesquely heightened picture of [our] own world: a world without faith, meaning, and genuine freedom of will” (6). In the first edition of his influential work on the theatre of the absurd, Esslin (1961) used the formulation he took from Ionesco’s essay on Kafka to characterize the absurd as

a philosophical view of a world “devoid of purpose” (xix) and as expressing “Kafka’s own sense of loss of contact with reality” (253). With the second edition, Esslin (1969) distinguished this philosophical absurd, that became part of theatre in western Europe, from a more explicitly political version of the absurd that he claimed for contemporary absurdist drama in eastern Europe, where it was “well suited to deal with the realities of life” (272) and able to offer what Derksen (2002, 212) has described as a “subversive political critique” of an oppressive state.

This ambivalence of the absurd was prefigured in early Marxist readings of Kafka himself. In an essay on the posthumous collection of stories, *The Great Wall of China*, Walter Benjamin (1931, 496) found Kafka’s work “prophetic”:

The precisely registered oddities that abound in the life it deals with must be regarded by the reader as no more than the little signs, portents, and symptoms of the displacements that the writer feels approaching in every aspect of life without being able to adjust to the new situation.

For Benjamin, Kafka described a world where the “consistency of truth has been lost” (1938a, 326), and where the “absence of law is the result of a process of development” (1931, 498), by which “officials” increasingly behave as “enormous parasites” battenning upon “the forces of reason and humanity” (1934, 796). This, then, is a world that is made absurd rather than the author taking an absurd view of an essentially coherent reality. Georg Lukács held a contrary view.

Between the world wars, Marxist debates on aesthetics were in large part a response to Lukács’s “implacable ideological denunciation” of Expressionism for its inadequate grasp of realism (Jameson 1977, 196). In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács (1923) drew both on Marx’s theory of alienation and upon

his own experience of socialist rebellions and the creation of Soviets in Hungary and Germany at the end of the First World War, to develop further the theory of proletarian revolution and of the objective conditions that would foster it. However, by the 1930s he had lost faith in autonomous socialist revolution in the various countries of Europe, and professed to accept the political and ideological leadership of the Soviet Comintern. Reaching back beyond the illusions of various political radicals and literary modernists, Lukács insisted that socialist realism should be built upon the aesthetics of classical realists such as Balzac (Feher 1979). As Lukács made clear in his *The Historical Novel* (1937), even romantic realists such as Walter Scott or Goethe, were better than the modernist experiments castigated in “Realism in the Balance” (1938, 57), where Joyce was dismissed for writing difficult literature, “devoid of reality and life, it foists on to its readers a narrow and subjectivist attitude to life.” Socialist realism should be readily accessible to a popular readership, and it should explain how everyday lives are shaped by relations of class and property. In *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Lukács insisted that realism should provide a “truthful reflection of reality” (1957, 22) and proposed that with realism, “place, time and detail are rooted firmly in a particular social and historical situation” (78). Placelessness, then, is a symptom of absurd, expressionist or transcendental fiction. In an essay that asked “Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann?”, Lukács found Kafka wanting on all these grounds.

In this essay, I take up this question of the political meaning of placelessness and the absurd, and trace the strategic uses of these in the work of a Jewish-German communist writer, Anna Seghers. She was fully cognizant of Lukács’s argument and chose quite deliberately to develop part of her own political critique of fascism through the fabulous techniques of Kafka, including

the representation of one human context as pretty much absurd. She explicitly embraced both sides of Lukács's either-or, as when she told Christa Wolf, an East-German writer of a later generation: "For me a variety of people were important. I respect, to different degrees and for quite different reasons: even Proust and Kafka—not exclusively, of course—as well as Balzac and Stendahl" (Bangerter 1980, 37). Lukács (1957, 76), too, acknowledged the significance of his debate with Seghers, commenting on his criticism of the naivety of art that dealt only with surface appearances: "I went into this concept in my published correspondence with Anna Seghers about realism."

THE GEOGRAPHICAL FORMATION OF ANNA SEGHERS

Anna Seghers was a Jewish-German socialist, abandoned by her compatriots' slide towards fascism. In a series of fictions, she engaged with the savagery of her dangerous times, seeking explanations, motivating resistance, and preparing for reconstruction. One of these novels, *Transit* (Seghers 1944a), is particularly interesting for reflecting upon themes of placelessness and the absurd. It is especially instructive because Seghers was only too well aware of the aesthetic arguments of Benjamin and Lukács over realism and the literary value of Kafka's works.

Born Netty Reiling in 1900, even her name registered the instability of place. Her parents, as assimilated Jewish citizens of the German town of Mainz, looked back to the period of French rule that, following a local Jacobin rising in 1792, had secured the emancipation of the Jewish people of Mainz. Netty was to have been called Jeanette, but by the time of her birth Mainz had been under Germanic control for 84 years and the local authority would not permit such a French-sounding name, allowing only the more Germanic Netti (Fehervary 2001).

She was part of Germany's first generation of female university students, graduating in 1924 from the University of Heidelberg with a doctorate on Jews and Judaism in the art of Rembrandt. When she had gone up to Heidelberg in 1920, it was but two years since, in a notable act of antisemitism, the University had refused Lukács his habilitation. At the university, “[s]he met student revolutionaries and political refugees from Eastern Europe, who introduced her to both the idealism and the realities of the class struggle” (Bangerter 1980, 4). One group was made up of survivors of the brief Hungarian Commune of 1919, in which Lukács himself had served as Commissar of Education. In 1925 she married László Radványi, a Hungarian Marxist of Lukács's circle and together they moved to Berlin where Radványi ran the Communist Party's Marxist Workers School, with lectures not only from an eclectic group of socialists such as Lukács, Wilhelm Reich, Erwin Piscator, Karl Korsch and John Heartfield, but including also, following Netty's solicitation, Albert Einstein on “what a worker must know about the theory of relativity” (Fehervary 2001, 93). In 1928 she joined the German Communist Party and soon thereafter the Comintern's Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller (BPRS), the German Association of Proletarian Revolutionary Writers (Janzen 2018). By this stage, she had given up academia for a life of creative writing and with her first published story had taken a surname from a Jewish artist, Hercules Seghers, a seventeenth-century Dutch painter and etcher of visionary landscapes, much admired by Rembrandt (Fehervary 2001; Broos 2003).

As a communist writer she was living in increasingly precarious circumstances. In Germany, the suspension of civil liberties with the Decree of the Reich President for the Protection of People and State (28 February 1933) was followed immediately by the detention of communists and within weeks by

their transfer to improvised concentration camps. Seghers was herself questioned but released, her neighbours having hid all her papers, and by May 1933, following the book burning at Humboldt University, she was placed on a list of proscribed authors. Her husband went into hiding and within weeks Seghers had fled to France via Prague and Switzerland, reaching Paris in 1934 (Rosenberg 1987). There she was an acquaintance and ally of Walter Benjamin, who had escaped Germany a little before her. Her mother was among the many who stayed behind and, only “a few days” before the arrival of visas secured by Anna (Bourke 1998, 157), in March 1942 her mother was removed to the Piaski work ghetto in Poland (Grenville 1998, 117), a community that was taken to Majdanek camp and murdered in March and April of 1943 (Browning 1994, 136).

When, in June 1940, the Nazis moved into France, she crossed into Vichy territory anxiously negotiating the transfer of her husband from a camp in the Nazi zone to one in Vichy. She settled in Pamiers to be near his camp at Vernet. Lobbying for an exit visa for Lázló, she moved to Marseille and it was from there that, on 24 March 1941, she finally left fascist Europe on one of the last ships before the ports of Vichy France were closed. As a communist, she was welcome in few places. The United States was certainly closed to her but Mexico gave asylum to her and many other German communists. In exile, in Mexico, she wrote *Transit*, a novel set in Marseille among political refugees. She returned to Germany in 1947 but rather than settle back in Mainz she went to Berlin, and there, consistent with her communist principles, she joined the socialist experiment in the East rather than the US-supported capitalism of the West. These multiple displacements shape her anti-fascist fictions not only in their setting, which include the Germany of *A Price on His Head*, *The Seventh Cross*, and *Only the Dead Stay Young*, the France of *Transit*, and the Mexico of “The Dead

Girls' outing", but also in the reflections upon place and displacement that run through each.

The testimonial art (LaCapra 2001; Bennett 2005) of these darkest of days is challenging (Kearns 2014; Philo 2017) and it engages with the themes of placelessness, and the supposed meaninglessness of the modern condition. Yet, I will argue that at least in this case, the pose of meaningless is a strategic refusal to take seriously the legal structures that deny the humanity of Jewish-Germans, and contesting placelessness is a way to reclaim from Nazi ideology the organic ideology of blood and soil. The structure of feeling described as the absurd is in one sense strategically deployed, and in another explicitly rejected.

SEGHERS'S ANTI-FASCIST FICTIONS

Seghers's earliest fiction, "The Dead on the Island of Djal" (Seghers 1924), is set in a graveyard where a resurrected clergyman ministers to an underground congregation. This could readily be seen, as Fehervary (2001) argues, as a picture of Lukács nurturing his group of Hungarian exiles, intellectuals barred as communists from formal university positions, and always at risk of arrest as insurgents even before the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s, and also concealing from the official Communist Party their continuing commitment to spontaneous revolution. Her husband took the name Johann Schmidt and Lukács was Hans Keller (Fehervary 2001, 92–3). Seghers, herself, in referring to her last year on the run in Europe, spoke of being rather like the living dead: "Ich hab das Gefühl, ich wär ein Jahr tot gewesen" ("I feel as if I've been dead for a year"; LaBahn 1986, 3).

Seghers was attracted by the free-wheeling early writings of Lukács, particularly *The Theory of the Novel* which had a generosity that was later disciplined

within narrower ideological limits (Maier-Katkin 2007). Lukács subsequently disavowed the seeming universalism and lack of realism he once praised in the short-story form that: “expresses the ultimate meaning of all artistic creation as mood, [...] rendered abstract for that very reason. It sees absurdity in all its undisguised and unadorned nakedness [...]; meaningless-ness as meaninglessness becomes form” (Lukács 1916, 51). Long after Lukács came to see the fairytale, the legend, and the myth as insufficiently realistic, Seghers kept faith with them. Living in Moscow in the 1930s Lukács perhaps had less latitude than Seghers but they engaged in a public exchange of letters on realism. Seghers found Lukács’s stress on objectivity constrictive. She insisted that there was an essentially subjective moment in the creation of art: “Die Künstler und seine Kunstwerk, einzigartige, eigentümliche gesellschaftliche Verknüpfung von subjectivem und objektivem Faktor” (“the artist and its unique work of art, a singular social relation of subjective and objective factors”; LaBahn 1986, 86). The emphasis on objectivity had emptied the world of its enchantment (“die Welt ganz zu entzauber”, Kane 1998, 23). It left the artist unable to respond to new realities (“die Gestaltung der neue Grunderlebnisse”, Romero 1998, 39).

Reversing Lukács’s preference she repeatedly took Dostoyevsky as her model over Tolstoy and in 1944, looking ahead to the postwar world, she thought the Dostoyevskyan account of inner life rather than Tolstoy’s emphasis on external appearances would better allow people to understand the legacy of fascism, “dem ideologischen Haftenbleiben des bereits militärisch besiegt Feindes, befasst” (“the ideological persistence among a defeated enemy”, LaBahn 1986, 131). In fact, her whole approach to fascism was to stress the significance of ideology. In an essay of 1941, “Deutschland und Wir” (“Germany and Us”), she insisted that communists needed to make allowance for the strength of national sentiment

because every people would respond bitterly to any slight upon its national character (“Jedes Volk [...] reagiert unerbittlich auf jede falsch Einschätzung des Nationalen Gefühls”, LaBahn 1986, 102) and when she turned, in an essay of 1944 on the task of art, to review the responsibilities of artists, she said that their obligation was to confront the false notions of fascism in order to liberate youth from rigid habits of power-lust and mechanical obedience (“von totenstarrerhafter Verkrampftheit in Herrschsucht und mechanischem Geborsam”, 117).

Seghers was an explicitly political writer but she claimed more aesthetic than political autonomy for her art. With a work such as “Revolt of the fishermen of Santa Barbara” (1928), she accepted the injunction of the BPRS that literature give workers stories about labour struggle, but her fishermen fail to overthrow the power of their employers and the strike leader, while inspirational, is too flawed to be an unequivocal socialist hero. She represented society as a panorama rather than as exemplified in the sort of typical individual that Lukács asked for (Anchor 1980). In this respect, as much as she learned from the social tableau presented by Balzac, she was likewise attending to the modernist experiments of John Dos Passos. Reviewing her novel *Die Rettung* (The Rescue), about a group of miners rescued after being trapped underground, Benjamin (1938b, 128) noted this innovativeness: “The wealth of figures peopling this book does not exemplify the general law of the novel, in which episodic figures appear through the medium of a main character. That medium—the character’s ‘fate’—is absent.” In a beautiful reworking of the base-superstructure metaphor, Benjamin described the importance of the subjective factor: “The book treats the political circumstances with the utmost caution. They can be compared to a root structure. Wherever the author lifts them from the ground, we find adhering to them the humus of private relationships—neighborly, erotic, familial” (127). With precious

little heroism, Seghers's is a world shaped by defeat, by the repression of the communist revolutions of 1919 and by the victory of fascism in Germany which each imposed an obligation to understand the obstacles to socialism. As Benjamin remarked: "The narrator dares to look squarely at the defeat suffered by the revolution in Germany—a courageous stance which is more necessary than widespread" (130). In this respect, Benjamin found common cause with Seghers and praised her for avoiding the developmental time of socialist progress in favour of the chronicle time of a fallen world that awaits the unlikely, but necessary, messianic event of the revolution. Seghers was, in Benjamin's (1936) terms, closer to the storyteller than to the novelist, and thus quite removed from the discipline of Lukács.

There is great variety in Seghers's anti-fascist fictions. *A Price on His Head* is in one sense an adventure story. Johann, a socialist on the run after stabbing a policeman during a hunger march, seeks anonymous sanctuary in a rural village. The Brownshirts are recruiting in the village and Seghers shows the economic interests involved but also tries to explicate the complex context of such choices. For some, the violence of the movement gives its own fillip to their self-esteem, as when Zillich reflects upon pummeling Johann: "The stranger's blood on his hand gave him a feeling of immense relief [...]. All his unhappiness had disappeared, at least for the present" (Seghers 1939a, 290). There is not only psychological complexity in these characters but they also implicitly challenge stereotypes. It is widely believed that Georg Lukács was the model for the character, Naphta, in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. This is how Mann (1924, 372) introduced Naphta: "He was small and thin, clean-shaven, and of such piercing, one might almost say corrosive ugliness as fairly to astonish the cousins. Everything about him was sharp: the hooked nose dominating his face,

the narrow, pursed mouth, the thick, bevelled lenses of his glasses in their light frame, behind which were a pair of pale-grey eyes.” In *A Price on His Head*, the central Jewish character has the similar name of Naphtel, but although we learn that he is old and ill, he is not given many physical characteristics and certainly none of the traits of the antisemitic stereotype so readily adopted by Mann. We do learn that he is terrified by the Nazi thugs: “The strong and weak attacks of their constant *Verrecke!* Had made his head ache, and his old heart had grown tired” (Seghers 1939a, 231). The vulgar imprecations to go away and die leave their mark and when he has the chance to claim the reward for turning in Johann, he does not: “Why should I of all people help to have him locked up? Who has ever helped me? [...] Did He meet me half-way? [...] Naphtel did not know whom he meant by He, whether [...] the landlord, [...] the state, or God” (260).

Her best-known work, *The Seventh Cross*, is somewhat similar, being another story of a man on the run. Seven men escape from a concentration camp, but of the crosses erected for the humiliation of the recaptured men, one remains unoccupied. Living in Pamiers, Seghers was reading Balzac at this time (Rosenberg 1987). She sought a similarly panoramic vision and takes the multiple encounters of George Heisler to reveal not only the social structure of Germany in 1936 but also the extent to which people had been made into fascist subjects, either superficially or to their very depths. Zillich, from *A Price on His Head*, continues his sadistic journey which will later come to *The End* (1946a) in the very place, Piaski, to which Seghers’s mother was sent. In a letter of 1947, Seghers explained that in *The Seventh Cross*, the central character survived, against all odds, because he met a few people “who only at the decisive moment, faced with the either-or, choose the right path. If we had observed them without George Heisler, perhaps only a week earlier, they would have appeared to be hopelessly

entangled in fascism” (Rosenberg 1987, 374). Although Seghers was not allowed into the United States her book was, and, translated by November 1941, was Book of the Month in October 1942, was serialized in newspapers as a comic strip, was dramatized as a Hollywood film with Spencer Tracy (dir. F. Zinnemann, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1944), and by the end of 1943 had sold 450,000 copies (Rosenberg 1987). She was looking for the roots of decency that might resist fascism and rebuild Germany after its defeat. One of these was a love of landscape and in the novel one of the characters who is concerned about George, reflects upon his own rootedness: “belonging to that piece of soil[,] to those people, and [...] above all to the living” (Seghers 1942, 11).

Seghers was a chief organizer of the anti-fascist International Writers’ Congress in the Defence of Culture (Paris, June 1935) and she gave there a talk on love of country. This was also a theme of her essay of 1942 “People and writers” where, following Goethe, she spoke of the landscapes of childhood as those which made the greatest impression and provided the template against which all others would later be measured (LaBahn 1986). Recovering from concussion after a hit-and-run in Mexico, Seghers wrote one of her most innovative short stories, “The Dead Girls’ Outing”. Delirious, she daydreams about her schooldays. She recalls a school trip out to an island in the Rhine under the care of her Jewish schoolteacher and in the fellowship of her school friends. Through the eyes of her childhood she sees again the landscape of her youth: “The more I glanced about me, the more freely I felt I could breathe, and the more I felt happiness flood my heart. [...] The mere sight of this gently undulating countryside was enough to ripen in my veins, instead of melancholy, a feeling of joy and delight in living, as wheat ripens in familiar earth and air” (Seghers 1944b, 59–60). The story is written in hindsight: several of these children

later rejected and humiliated their beloved teacher, and one of them also betrayed a close friend at the insistence of her fascist husband. The tone is very much that of Nicholas Poussin's "Et in Arcadia ego", where the idyll is already sown with the seeds of its dissolution. The schoolteacher and one friend later went to the death camps. At school she had been taught the love of homeland but, despite their childhood experiences of solidarity, they were not told that this friendship was an "integral part of that same country" (77). This is the lesson that Seghers now wants to impart in fulfilling her teacher's instruction that she write about the school outing.

The question of rootedness was also integral to her story "Letters to the Promised Land", in which a son who decides to stay as an assimilated Jewish person in Paris writes to his father who has moved as a Zionist to Palestine (Seghers 1946b). The condition of those denied residence is also explored. In "Travels in the Eleventh Reich", refugees are trying to find a place to take them in when they learn of a land which only accepts those who have no passport or papers. In this topsy-turvy land, among other things, the indoctrination of Nazi Germany is directly reversed, for the children must find fault with their textbooks and will go to the top of the class for correcting the most errors (Seghers 1939b). A critical perspective is a vital defence against the feelings of supremacy that she finds at the base of fascism. In her retrospective novel on the rise of fascism, *The Dead Stay Young*, one young woman is described as beginning "to feel like an individual, a separate identity in the world," and, in abjuring the pride of grown-ups and rejecting the claims of the Hitler Youth finds herself thinking about what she hears at church: "What if it were true that in the eyes of God [...] all men and women were equal?" (Seghers 1949, 318). The book has a cyclical structure and, while most of the book shows the consequences for the perpetrators of their

murder of a socialist during the brief German Socialist Republic of 1918, their individual and collective fate is brought together at the end in the murder of the son of the original victim and the clear suggestion that history will only too easily repeat itself. Towards the end of the book, another woman hears her fascist husband and his friends talk of the ugliness of the Jewish women they see walking naked to their deaths in a camp, and when she asks about this savage treatment she is told by her husband that it is a matter of saving German lives by starving Jewish ones. She replies: “There is no such choice and there should not be any” (451). And she reflects: “Because the German people were more important than everything else, every thing was permitted. But if such things were permitted, they could no longer be the most important” (451–2).

In her anti-fascist fictions, then, Seghers used a variety of forms, including the adventure tale of *A Price on His Head* and *The Seventh Cross*, the fantasy of “Travels in the Eleventh Reich”, the doomed idyll of “The Dead Girls’ Outing”, the epistolary structure of “Letters to the Promised Land”, and the chronicle of *The Dead Stay Young*. *Transit* is different again. It adopts many of the themes of Kafka’s fiction that were later claimed as characteristic of the absurd. However, I want to suggest that as part of her anti-fascist work, Seghers is offering this structure of feeling neither as a general description of the human condition (the philosophical absurd), nor as a straightforward description of life under a severe bureaucracy (the political absurd). Furthermore, Seghers explicitly follows Kafka and rejects Lukács’s strictures on subjectivity in fiction. I develop this argument by first setting out some of the ways that *Transit* shares the structure of feeling of absurdist drama, and I examine the seeming irrationality of bureaucracy, and the apparent stasis of repetition and waiting. Then, I set out the ways the narrator seems to cultivate an absurd perspective but see this not as imposed by

circumstances, but rather as chosen. In sum, this is a framework for dissent rather than resignation. Finally, I return explicitly to the treatment of time and space in the novel identifying the significantly geographical frameworks within which oppression and resistance are apprehended. Oppression is conceptualized through force and law, and the treatment of these themes in *Transit*, equals a calculation of different actors' responsibility for the refugee dilemma, an accounting that includes both the primary perpetrators and their complicit collaborators. Resistance features both in a conception of mythical time and space, but also in the ideology and practice of an alternative rootedness.

AN ABSURD PERSPECTIVE

Anna Seghers's (1944a) novel, *Transit*, is remarkable. The book draws upon Seghers's own experiences in escaping from Vichy France and it was composed in German in 1942 during her exile in Mexico. It was first published in French, Spanish and English in 1944, and not in German until 1948 (Wagner, Emmerich and Radványi 1994, 255). It is set among refugees in Marseille in 1940. These are people fleeing the Nazi occupation of Europe. They are held, it would seem, within the administrative net, Max Weber's "iron cage" of bureaucracy (Baehr 1998), of Vichy France; their days a procession of forms, interviews, and waiting. Their lives are replete with paradox. To be in Marseille, the narrator needs a residence visa. He can only get this if he shows proof of his plans to leave. After unwisely sharing his ambition of residence with his landlady, he is later visited again by the police: "I should understand, he said, that French cities aren't there for me to live in, but for me to leave from" (195). Wishing to remain in Marseille, the narrator becomes a rather unusual refugee, but all refugees share this humiliating contradiction of being unwanted yet retained.

Paul Strobel, a friend of the narrator is himself, a resourceful refugee with many contacts in the consulates, but even Paul is ensnared. He is a political refugee with an order expelling him from Marseille. He is also a writer. For these reasons, some foreign countries are willing to take him. Therefore, he is able to raise, from committees of concerned persons, the price of a ticket. Yet, to get to the ship he must have permission to enter the harbour area: "But unfortunately they won't give him the harbor office stamp because they don't give that to anyone who's ever been expelled from Marseille" (248). There was a vindictive inventiveness to this bureaucracy. The narrator remarks upon the creativity of officials: "I was amazed to see the authorities, in the midst of this chaos, inventing ever more intricate drawn-out procedures for sorting, classifying, registering, and stamping these people" (31).

One person, newly arrived in Marseille, and all set to leave for Brazil along with his wife, is picked up in a raid on a boarding house. After his arrest, his wife explains:

My husband just came from the Var. We were going to Brazil tomorrow. He came with a safe conduct. He had no residence permit for Marseille. After all, why would he need one since we were leaving tomorrow. And what if we had applied for a resident permit? We would have been crossing the ocean long before we got an answer from them! Now we'll forfeit our tickets, and our visa is going to expire. (54)

So, the husband is required to return to the Var and request a new exit visa. In the meantime, his wife, in turn, is picked up by the police and despatched to a women's camp. The narrator's indifferent landlady is happy to explain:

[S]ince her husband was arrested, she was now living in the city without a

man's protection. And all women discovered living in Marseille without their own husbands or without adequate identification papers are to be interned in the new women's camp, the Bompard. (65)

Meanwhile, back in the Var, the husband becomes entrapped by:

[A] new decree that applied only in his department, namely that all foreigners able to bear arms would be forcibly deported. The decree was eventually rescinded, but before that happened he had tried to escape, and hence his renewed arrest [...]. In the meantime, of course, all his papers had expired. (103)

Back in Marseille, and in police custody, he asks for permission to book new tickets, so that he could get new visas, and then collect his wife from the Camp.

At the Travel Bureau in Marseille:

The Corsican, yawning and poking around in his ear, listened to the man's story: then with another yawn he said it was impossible. Through all this, the police officer had been listening attentively. The handcuffs clinked again, and he pushed the man back out the door. (103)

In unoccupied France, this person's only crime is to be a refugee without the proper papers.

After a similar disappointment, one individual, given only as the narrator's "bald-headed friend," (184) speaks with resignation of his efforts to leave and of rejections based on seemingly incorrect or incomplete documentation. But the unfortunate Jewish man had been demoralised by the unequal struggle, his resolution collapses and he decides to return to German-controlled Lithuania. The narrator is horrified: "You know, don't you, what's waiting for you there" (186). The reply contains a parable of despair:

And here? What can I expect here? You know the fairy tale about the man who died, don't you? He was waiting in Eternity to find out what the Lord had decided to do with him. He waited and waited, for one year, ten years, a hundred years. He begged and pleaded for a decision. Finally he couldn't bear the waiting any longer. Then they said to him: "What do you think you're waiting for? You've been in Hell for a long time already." That's what it's been like for me here, a stupid waiting for nothing. What could be more hellish? (186)

This is a world of fatal suspension, of people facing an "invisible, almost mysterious evil of [...] rumours, bribery and lies" (32). Refugees shared stories and advice. They sought help from people who may know more than they themselves knew, or who might help with access to officials or even to boats. In the book there is a lot of waiting, hanging around for a possible meeting that might bring the whiff of assistance. It is a world where people read the capricious refusals of bureaucracy for evidence of a system.

The "structure of feeling" (Williams 1961, 84) in this world respectively recalls and anticipates some aspects of the works of Frank Kafka and Samuel Beckett. The representation in *Transit* of the contradictions of bureaucracy, the repeated frustration of the individual quest to leave, and the seemingly interminable and pointless waiting for deliverance might suggest parallels with the Theatre of the Absurd, and Waite (2005, 415), at least, reads in this "an existentialist undertone of unalterability." There are certainly traces of the absurd dilemma in the book but these resist being generalised as an overview of the human condition.

Throughout much of the novel, the narrator affects a sort of distance from

the common fate of all fellow refugees. For the narrator, the fall of humanity registers as the loss of intentionality. The narrator implies that human beings deserve to make their own decisions. As he explains to one refugee, people's actions reveal their preferences and testify to their dignity:

“Unless nothing matters to [them]. Then [they]’ll be like that piece of paper over there that looks like a bird.”

He looked with great concentration at [...] a scrap of white paper blowing in a gust of wind. I added, “Or like me.” (93)

Implicitly, then, for the narrator, a last line of defence against the relentless attack on his humanity is to pretend that he has nothing invested in a right that he is not allowed to exercise, embracing, instead, the lack of choice as a choice in itself.

This might separate him from the fate of the other refugees.

In conversation with one veteran of the Spanish Civil War, who had been with him in a French labour camp, he asserts: “You’re lucky, you’re not like me; you have a goal, a purpose. [...] Sure, I can arrange [...] transit visas, exit visas [...]. But what good is all that when it doesn’t matter to me where I go, that almost nothing matters to me” (132). The boast is questionable but the narrator seems to claim for himself a sort of absurd persona, the choice of a meaningless life. He declares himself bored by his entanglements with officialdom: “I waited, half amused, half bored. Then they called my name and, half amused, half bored, I entered the room of the consular official” (46). He explains that the French have a name for the sort of melancholic boredom he suffers, which is really a sort of temporary disenchantment with life:

[E]ven though the sun shone brightly that morning I was overcome by the kind of misery that the French call a “*cafard*.” The French lived so well in

their beautiful country; everything went so smoothly for them—all the joys of existence—but sometimes even they lose their joy in life and there is nothing but boredom, a Godless emptiness: a *cafard*. (20)

This affective disengagement is actually a form of individual resistance, somewhat in the fashion of Giorgio Agamben's (1995, 33) discussion of Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, the character who resists orders with simple aversion: "I would prefer not to" (Melville 1853, 25). It is a stance that Seghers may herself have learned from her studies of Taoist philosophy, the bravery of non-action (Li 2011).

This detachment may be a response to an intolerable world and a different world would certainly be preferred. The refugee narrator considers his friend George, a French resident of Marseille: "I envied him [...] for being so uninvolved, for being at home" (157). Each and every day the refugees must accept a game of chance, with high risk and loaded die. The future was insecure and more than likely brief. Having confidence in any plans was foolish given the "confusion of coincidences" (170), yet there is a cruel logic in the game and it is revealed by its repetitions. The narrator meets again and again the same people and all they can report is yet another frustrated plan. It was a matter of odds: "All these casual chance encounters, these senseless, repeated meetings depressed me with their stubborn unavoidability" (200).

By deliberately disengaging, the narrator refuses to legitimate the system: "Whatever seriousness I had before—and it wasn't much—had almost vanished in the face of all the sleight of hand and the countless tricks you had to use in this world just to say alive, to retain your freedom" (129–30). Refusing to take seriously the formulae that deny your humanity is a privatised form of resistance. Swaffar and Wilkinson (1995, 463) have identified something similar in the female

characters of many of Seghers's short stories which "thematiz[e] female options for women who explore what to do with their lives given their external restrictions." If in *Transit* there is an absurdist structure of feeling in the treatment of bureaucracy and a world without effective rights, then, we might perhaps see this as one form of resistance, a way of withholding assent from, not taking seriously, a fundamentally unjust regime administering what Agamben (1995, 10) would call "bare life."

Shortly after she had passed into Vichy, and after she had heard of Benjamin's suicide following his failure to cross from France into Spain, she wrote to another refugee, Franz Carl Weiskopf, who had recently escaped Europe to New York: "I can't describe our life to you. Dante, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, those were bagatelles! [...] This is serious" (Fehervary 2001, 167). While she was writing *Transit*, she was reading Kafka (Rosenberg 1987). Kafka was on her mind. She had passed through Prague during her escape from Germany. In Paris, one of her friends was Ernst Weiss, a friend of Kafka's and whose first novel had been edited by Kafka. Weiss had been in Paris from 1934 and committed suicide in June 1940 as the Germans entered the city. Seghers found this out when she went to his hotel to look for him, a likely inspiration for the narrator in *Transit* visiting the hotel of Weidel in Paris only to find that he too had killed himself (Bangerter 1980). At this point, the narrator of the novel, Seidler, takes as an identity the papers and exit visa of the writer, Weidel. In one respect, Seghers herself needed multiple identities to get her own exit papers for, in November 1940, she "wrote to Emil Oprecht, a publisher in Zurich, asking him to confirm for the authorities that Anna Seghers was a pseudonym for Netty Radványi" (Bangerter 1980, 97). In one of her later stories, "A Travel Encounter", Seghers staged a conversation between three of her favourite writers, Gogol, Hoffmann and Kafka. In having

Kafka describe the fate of the central character in his own novel, *The Castle*, she focused upon the very theme of *Transit*: “Er sehnt sich nach etwas, was die Beamten Aufenthaltserlaubnis nennen und wir gewöhnlichen Menschen sesshaft werden, ein Bleibe” (“He wants a residence permit, permission to join the community of ordinary sedentary people, a place to stay”) (Seghers 1973, 181). And, again, Kafka is made to describe the central theme of *The Castle* as reconciliation, the right of residence after so much deprivation (206). But, while this certainly contributes to the absurd structure of feeling in *Transit*, the cultivated disengagement of the narrator goes beyond this. Her son, Pierre, said that the tone of the narrator in *Transit* was, for Seghers, a deliberately ironic distancing from awful experiences: the death of her mother, the suicide of her friends, the danger to herself, her husband, and her children: “Das Hauptanliegen von *Transit* was diese ironische Distanzierung von den fürchterlichen Ereignissen” (“The main theme of *Transit* was this ironic distancing from terrible events”; Lyons 1998, 113). I think it is also a refusal to accept the murderousness of the regime as having any possible legitimacy. It is presented as meaningless because it has no purpose that can be accepted as human; if such things are permitted there are no grounds for any choices.

There is one further way that the novel refuses the general structure of feeling of absurdist drama and that is because it insistently, and for ethical reasons, avoids generalizing from these local circumstances to any general existential crisis of humanity or modernity.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF TRANSIT

Towards the end of the story, the narrator is resigned to meaninglessness at the very moment when he seems most keen to elucidate the purpose of life:

For the first time [...], I thought about everything seriously. The past and the future, both equally unknowable, and also this ongoing situation that the consulates call “transitory” but that we know in everyday language as “the present.” (245)

But we are never allowed to over-generalise the “we” in this passage. *Transit* is no allegory of a general existential crisis of humanity, for even within the novel we are directed to recognise the refugees’ circumstances as exceptional. In terms akin to Zygmunt Bauman’s (1998) discussion of the distinction between the tourist and the vagabond, the narrator in *Transit* reflects upon the changing times indicated to him by an advertisement: “It was a tourist poster and dated back to the days when sluggish homebodies were enticed to travel by brightly colored pictures of foreign countries” (46). Times have changed, and for those on the move the pull of desire has been replaced by the propulsion of fear. The narrator’s fantasy makes this clear:

I could leave if I wanted to. I could do it all. And my departure would also be different in that it would not be driven by fear. It would be an honest, old-fashioned departure befitting a human being traveling toward that distant, fine line. (96)

“[O]ld-fashioned” travel befits the human condition by being based on choice.

In *Transit*, this new inhumane dispensation of mobility is directly produced by the imperialism of National Socialist Germany. Fascism’s oppression, and the resistance to it, produce some of the most explicitly geographical themes in the novel. This geography of expulsion and refuge has at least four related elements; on the side of oppression, force and law, and as resistance, myth and ideology. These reflect in different ways the urgency of the current dilemma and suggest

complementary readings of the significance of the absurdist undertones of the book.

Force

The narrator understands the fear of the political refugees, recalling “Heinz who had been beaten half to the death by the Nazis in 1935” (13). The narrator presents himself as belonging to no political party but as simply appalled by the Nazi régime and as one who “wouldn’t put up with their dirty tricks” (15), and “out of a stubborn need to take action” (188), he had placed “just one punch in the face of some SA boor” (188). For this he had been arrested and sent to a concentration camp from which, not wanting to “kick the bucket [...] behind barbed wire” (15), he had “escaped [...] in 1937” (6), and “swam across the Rhine” (226). Interned by the French as a German refugee, he is in a labour camp near Rouen when news arrives that the Germans have entered France: “Some of the men wept, others prayed, several tried to commit suicide, some succeeded. A few of us resolved to clear out before the Last Judgment” (5). The movement of the Nazis across Europe seemed relentless, reducing the world to “some shadowy, moldering, swastika-marked necropolis” (117).

Once again, he flees from a camp and, along with so many others who had “left behind their real lives, their lost countries” (99), he gravitates towards the Mediterranean. On a street in Marseille, he gets his first view of that sea:

The last few months I’d been wondering where all this was going to end up—the trickles, the streams of people from the camps, the dispersed soldiers, the army mercenaries, the defilers of all races, the deserters from all nations. This, then, was where the detritus was flowing, along this channel, this gutter, the Canebière, and via this gutter into the sea, where

there would at last be room for all, and peace. (35)

“Defilers of all races” is, of course, an ironic reference to Nazi persecution of Jewish people, and “peace” also seems ironic, for walking towards the sea sounds suspiciously like suicide and, indeed, at one point, the narrator, in reflecting upon the refugees’ justified fear of the Nazis recalls “a terror so great they were ready to walk into the sea” (212). There, at the edge of Europe, the refugees gathered with their backs to a continent clawed by Nazi violence, a “ruined and defiled land” and, for the narrator at least, the sea stretched as the “consolation [of ...] inhuman emptiness and solitude, trackless and unspoiled” (36).

The movement of the refugees is a rational search for safety: “We made what we thought was a very sensible decision. We checked a map to see just where we were” (32). The centripetal geography of the refugee movement was certainly explicable, for the refugees were “streaming towards the country’s only port over which a French flag still waved” (220). But Nazi force reached even into here, their “last refuge on this continent” (219). After arrival in Marseille, the narrator is advised by one refugee: “The Germans are now the real masters here” (39). With the first sight of a swastika-bedecked car in town, other refugees start “acting as if the devil himself had come rattling down the avenue bent on corralling his lost flock inside a barbed-wire enclosure” (137). In other words, the Nazis were turning France into a camp.

The narrator describes how Nazi force reshaped the geography of France:

You know of course what unoccupied France was like in the fall of 1940.

The cities’ train stations, their shelters, and even the public squares and churches were full of refugees. They came from the north, the occupied territory and the “forbidden zone,” from the Départements of Alsace,

Lorraine, and the Moselle. (30)

The specificity of the geography is significant: an unoccupied zone and an occupied zone, and within the latter a forbidden zone, the “*zone interdite*” to which displaced persons of all kinds were prevented from returning (Shennan 2000, 49). In this respect, the novel also registers the broader political geography of Europe, within which France had been subjugated and, by the Armistice of 1940, was partly occupied and wholly directed by Germany. By ideological affinity and military cooperation, Spain also was an ally of Germany willing to exclude, or to return to German control in France, political and other Jewish refugees. It was just such a closing of the Spanish border that precipitated the final despair in which Walter Benjamin took his own life. The geographical detail in *Transit*, then, recalls the many and specific steps towards mass murder, laying bare the multiple forms of complicity and intention so that the distribution of responsibility can begin (Postone and Santner 2003).

Law

In philosophical terms, one might suggest that the significance of detail is that it allows a realist explanation, one that is committed to describing the causal steps, or mechanism, whereby things happen (Keat and Urry 1975). By the Armistice of June 1940, the French surrender was not unconditional (Shirer 1960). As a concession, the French kept a small army, and, although disarmed, their entire navy. In return, Hitler avoided the possibility of the French refusing his terms and continuing the war from their North African colonies. Giving up their navy was not acceptable to the French, but by implication, surrendering all political refugees was. The narrator is aghast at “the magnitude of the betrayal” (6). *Transit* understands international relations as precisely about such bargains and

abandonment. The narrator observes an international meeting in Marseille and describes with disgust the deal being struck:

Here the Germans had gotten out to negotiate with the lesser masters of the world. And once the negotiations were done—at a price set by the masters—a few thousand additional people would die behind barbed wire, a couple of thousand more people would be lying in the streets of cities with shot-up bodies. (212)

Citizenship is fragile protection given the geographical reach of German force and the craven complicity of its formal allies and intimidated neighbours. The tempestuous political geography of Europe made citizenship a particularly insecure anchoring. By virtue of one of his two assumed identities, Seidler, the narrator claims birth in the Saarland in 1914. This area had been incorporated into the French Republic in 1792, into the nascent German Empire in 1871, retaken from Germany during the First World War and administered by France until 1920 when it was made a protectorate of the League of Nations before a referendum in 1935 saw it return to Germany. Seidler, we are told, “had emigrated from the Saar to Alsace at the time of the Referendum” (33), that is, had not sided with the majority of the population of the area in seeking to rejoin Germany. This was jumping from one bucking raft to another, for Alsace had an equivalent geographical insecurity. It had been taken by France in 1639, had been claimed by the German Empire in 1871, returned to France after the First World War, and then occupied by the Nazis in 1940, with the intention of re-integrating it back into Germany. During the novel, this complicated geography is made pertinent at the Mexican Consulate in Marseille where an official looks through the narrator’s papers seeking an exit visa from the relevant government. The

narrator remarks that “[i]n Europe very few people have the citizenship of the country they were born in,” to which the official replies that the narrator is “almost French” (90). In this case, the narrator had exit visas from both Saarland and Alsace and determining the precise nationality of Seidler should have been moot. It is not, because there is an element of evident harassment in the bureaucratic insistence on precision, particularly as the pertinent relation between place and identity is being translated from a matter of origin (“Where are you from?”) to a matter of permission (“For where do you have a visa?”) (Abel 1999, 162).

Another refugee, the “bald-headed friend,” is frustrated by his own complicated geography. Born on a large estate with too few denizens to have separate jurisdictional status, he gives as his place of origin Pjarnitze, the village nearby from which his own area was administered. At his birth, this village was part of Russia but after the First World War it was ceded to Poland and hence this person has exit papers as a Polish citizen. At the American Consulate, forensic cartography now blocked his way:

[T]he consul was even more precise, the map he had was more exact. It turned out that my home village, which I’ve never gone back to, increased in population so that now, twenty years later, it’s become a town in the country of Lithuania. So my Polish identity papers are of no use to me anymore. I need to be recognized by the Lithuanians. And on top of that, the Germans have been there for quite a while already. The entire territory is under German occupation. So I also now need a new certificate of citizenship, and for that I need a birth certificate from a town that no longer exists. All this takes time. (185)

The detail of this legal geography is important not only because it testifies to the turbulent geopolitics of Europe undercutting the easy association of natality with citizenship, but, more significantly, because it can be used by interested parties to strip people of the protections of citizenship. This use of the evidence of the legal geography performs the reduction of politically-qualified life to what Agamben (1995, 10) terms “bare life.” It was not the turbulence of Europe, as such, but the attention it received from bureaucrats that stripped these people of rights, effectively placing them under a “ban” (Agamben 1995, 63), converting Europe into a “camp” (Agamben 1995, 95).

The official at the American Consulate had not needed to be so diligent in the case of the bald-headed friend, poring over large-scale maps of the border between Poland and Lithuania. On another occasion, a four-generation family applying for entry visas for the United States are rejected because the great-grandmother has a terminal illness, with “two months to live” (180), and although likely to die even before the family reach the United States, the Consul will not issue an entry visa for one so sick. The narrator is appalled by these judgments and the thought that those who had survived thus far might be refused safe passage away from such a place of danger: “[W]hat harm could it do to a giant nation if a few of these saved souls, worthy, half-worthy, or unworthy, were to join them in their country—how could it possibly harm such a big country?” (178)

Seghers thus asserted the complicity of neutral countries like the United States in administering a system that stripped the human dignity and the protections of citizenship from those fleeing the violence of Nazi Germany. To make the point even more emphatically, Seghers constructs a case where American dogs have more protection than European refugees. One refugee, told

that she needs “statements by two American citizens saying I was completely spotless morally,” is in despair. She meets a couple from Boston who, anxious to leave on the very first ship out of Marseille, find that the ship will not accept their two dogs as passengers. In return for her promising to take the dogs with her to the United States on a slower and less luxurious vessel, the couple from Boston are very ready to provide the necessary affidavits and, bringing the dogs with her to the American Consulate, the woman has no further difficulty in securing all she needs to leave.

The seeming contradictions and irrationality of bureaucracy, then, had a purpose. The appeal to the law was a sort of rationing that denied the vast majority of refugees the possibility of leaving from the one free port in unoccupied France. It legitimated the system of refusal by claiming a legal basis, the papers held by the refugee. The new order of Nazi force denied these people a place on earth, consigning them to the bare life of the undocumented, *sans papiers*. This Nazi ideology produced a particular material geography: “[A]ll this discipline, all these commands, all these orders had produced the most terrible disorder—bloodshed, mothers screaming, the dissolution of our world order” (9). In place of the old world order, there was now one based on distinctions between a master race, its serfs, and the expelled. At the heart of this was the Nazis’ claim to their territory.

Myth

In *Transit*, the agency of the refugees is limited, but various forms of resistance are described. In the form of myth and ideology these include geographies counter to those of force and law. I use the term “myth” in Eliade’s (1963) sense to draw a contrast between linear time and a more cyclical time that serves almost

like a permanent recurrence, an eternal return. This is what Benjamin called the time of the chronicle and it is characteristic of Seghers's storytelling (Maier-Katkin 2006; Milfull 1998). As has been widely discussed, Benjamin imagined an angel poised with trumpet to alert the living to present danger, but being flung forward into the future by the force of a destruction that reduces the present time to one of rubble. Thinking about how the angel might reflect upon past, present, and future gave Benjamin (1940) an allegory for the perspective of his final theses on history, composed as he was stalled at the frontier of France with Spain, vainly hoping to cross. One of the ways the angel proves a suggestive imaginary vehicle is that it invites the perspective of the *futur antérieur*, the time when we might look back on the present as what once had been (Thompson 2015).

Something similar is explicit in *Transit*. Passing a defeated and sobbing French soldier, the narrator “patted him on the back, saying, ‘It will all pass’” (10). This is close in spirit to the Jewish adage, “this too will pass,” and it gives the narrator a moment of calm withdrawal:

Suddenly I felt quite calm. I thought, I'm sitting here, and the Germans are moving past me and occupying France. But France has often been occupied—and the occupiers all had to withdraw again. [...] I saw the masters of the world rise up and come crashing down. I alone had immeasurably long to live. (9)

The presumed immortality of having “immeasurably long to live” allows the narrator to imagine the present from a distant future, rather like Benjamin's angel. Contemplating a sort of deep history, akin to Braudel's (1949, 13) *histoire immobile*, in the sun, sky, old church, and the activities of the local fishermen, the narrator finds the “chitchat” of the refugees about visas and their prospects of leaving

“disgusting”, but when he shifts perspective, and views the refugees as repeating older forms and former ways: “[I]t seemed fascinating now. It was the age-old harbor gossip, as ancient as the Old Port itself and even older” (78). That sea was the end of Europe:

[T]he rim of our piece of earth, the edge of our world, which, if you wanted to see it that way, extended from the Pacific Ocean, from Vladivostock and from China, all the way here. There are reasons why it’s called the “Old World.” But here is where it ended. (55)

The movement towards this place was an ancient geography:

Ships must always have been anchored here, at this very place, because this is where Europe ends and the sea begins. [...] I felt ancient, thousands of years old. I had experienced all this before. (78)

Because the condition of the European refugee was a recurring one, the hope of a better Europe had never been extinguished, it was there in the certain knowledge that even this current Nazi empire would fall, in the certain knowledge that ports of embarkation, like Marseille, always served at least some refugees: “For a thousand years it had been a last home for people like us, a last refuge on this continent” (219). The diaspora of refugees rested upon the promise of the port and the long-lived geography it served. Not even the latest European force to have cast out its undesirables could annihilate everything discordant with its vision.

On the occasion of Seghers’s death in 1983, Hans Mayer wrote of his contemporaries’ reluctance to engage with Seghers’s long-term perspective:

[A] disparaging society of consumers, disinterested in where it came from and incapable of believing in any kind of future, can scarcely bear the

tragic reality that is found in Anna Seghers's works. (Fehervary 1998, 132)

This tragic view is rather like Gramsci's (1920, 172) "Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will" or even Beckett's (1983, 89) "Fail again. Fail better." For Seghers, art might preserve elements of hope from the crushed progressive dreams of the present: "[T]his is the function and purpose of art as Seghers defines it, a kind of 'post to the promised land' we never reach" (Milfull 1998, 74). This is another similarity between Benjamin and Seghers: both acknowledge current and past defeats while yet collecting from the rubble resources of hope for the future; the modest approach of the chronicle rather than the ambition of the epic (Maier-Katkin 2006, 102). The defeat is neither final nor complete and there are insights and possibilities worth saving, like the memory the narrator has of the two elderly refugees who "behaved like children. They had been tossed about with all their bags and packages in an uncomprehending world, but it had not managed to separate their wrinkled hands" (216). By refocusing from the geography of force to a mythic geography of repetition, the narrator withdraws from investing exclusively in the despair of the present and, confident of a time of future possibilities, burnishes the talisman of hope for those hereafter. Future generations will need inspiration.

Ideology

If law was the alibi of those who displaced refugees, then, it might be challenged by the ideology and practice of rootedness. Hell (1993) has noted that in the 1930s Seghers joined with some other left-wing writers, such as Ernst Bloch, in insisting that resistance to the Nazis had to include contesting the fascist appropriation of terms like "fatherland" as well as the organic metaphors that went with them.

People who find a way to cultivate rootedness in the face of chaos seem somehow to escape the maelstrom. Or perhaps there are ways of establishing roots that leave one less vulnerable. One evening, the narrator contemplates:

[T]wo tramps [...] sleeping unaffected by what was happening in their country—feeling as little shame as trees do [...]. They had as little thought of leaving their homeland as trees might. (74–5).

“[U]naffected” suggests a form of disengagement, but the reference to trees suggests an alternative form of rootedness. Organic metaphors were central to Nazi ideology, but Seghers uses them positively to describe a certain opposition to fascism.

The Jewish “bald-headed friend” who had so astonished the narrator by suggesting that, sick and tired of transit, he would rather return home to German-controlled Lithuania than continue waiting for an exit visa in Marseille, later tells the narrator of his interview at the German Commission in Aix. The Germans had laughed at him but the Jewish man had insisted: “It’s a matter of Blood and Soil. You do understand that, don’t you?” (235). Of course, in terms of their own ideology, they would understand it all too well, but in terms of their racial stereotypes they would not expect a Jewish person to have any such attachment. To “understand” would be to acknowledge their common humanity with the Jewish man in front of them.

The narrator himself reflects that: “If you bleed to death on familiar soil, something of you will continue to grow like the sprouts that come up after bushes and trees have been cut down” (251). As the narrator thinks about extending his residence permit for Marseille, he becomes “certain that I could really grow some roots [...] and] might even lose my desire to leave” (66). He also

thinks about the permanent residents of the towns, who seem rather like the tramps for “the thought of leaving this place was as unlikely to occur to them as to a tree or a clump of grass,” and, indeed, “[w]ars, conflagrations, and the fury of the powerful [pass] over them” (242). He goes on to reflect upon the comfort many give to the passing refugees: “They were father and mother to me, the orphan” (243).

The narrator shares with Claudine, the immigrant lover of his friend George Binnet, the seeming impossibility of returning home: “A leaf blowing in the wind would have an easier time finding its old twig again” (136). Yet it is Claudine who tells the narrator: “To us, you’re no stranger” (136). The narrator had taken an interest in her son, had helped with his medical treatment and had bought him books and taken him for walks. It is out of these solidarities that the narrator returns to an earlier ambition: “[I]f this cobbled-together life we were living was too wretched, then I wanted to be the inventor of another life” (96). After the narrator announces that he will no longer be seeking to leave, George tells him: “You belong here with us. What happens to us, will happen to you” (249). He uses the papers of Seidler to get safe passage to the rural commune where George’s uncle, Marcel, has a farm and, accepted into the family, he is resolved:

I intend to share the good and the bad with my new friends here, be it sanctuary or persecution. As soon as there’s a resistance movement Marcel and I intend to take up arms. (250)

The narrator has cultivated a rootedness and is accepted into a settled “community of fate” (Heimer 1985)—“What happens to us, will happen to you” (249). It is precisely this distinction between “us” and “you” that was the great

betrayal of 1940 when, with the Armistice, the French surrendered the refugees but insisted on retaining the pomp of their navy, however ineffective. For Seghers, it would seem, accepting people into a rooted community is very much the most effective resistance to the persecution of refugees and this supersedes the individual revolt of disengagement. In her own case, Anna Seghers was not able to remain within such a rooted community and it was only solidarity of another kind, through a socialist kinship with revolutionary Mexico (Michaels 2012, 19–20), that she escaped the Nazi Behemoth.

BARE LIFE AND THE ABSURD

I have suggested that the structure of feeling that is sometimes referred to as the absurd is both strategically deployed, but also decisively rejected in Seghers's *Transit*. Tracing these relations with the absurd raises some important issues about how the novel treats time and space, but also about how it develops its own ethical and political arguments, for *Transit* engages explicitly with the trauma of its time. In *Transit*, the urgency of the present is the complicity of so many in accepting the Nazi dispensation as something with which to make an accommodation. This sets the political task that Benjamin (1940, 257) bequeathed to his contemporaries:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism.

Attending to Seghers's strategic use of a notion of absurdity, and her resistance to placelessness in a solidarity of remaining behind, is one way of apprehending

what Philo (2017, 36) refers to as “geographies of the senseless”.

In *Transit*, something rather like a notion of the absurd is strategically deployed in the manner that Robinson (2009) writes of Wittgenstein walking away from the language game of politics. There are at least two reasons this might be important. The first is so that we could find space to think differently about the relations claimed as politics, and the second is that it allows us to register a breakdown in trust. In recounting the enervating snare of officialdom, Seghers appears to give her characters reason enough to apprehend their lives as little more than mess, yet, at least in the case of the narrator, there is something more active than resignation, something more like dissent, in his refusing to accept as ‘serious’ a bureaucratic game so dishonest and cruel. Robinson discusses this second walking away from the language game of politics in terms of the realities of what Agamben has called “bare life,” and here Robinson draws explicitly, and brilliantly, upon *Catastrophe*, a late work of Beckett (1984), and upon Kafka’s (1919) *In the Penal Colony*, to show the deformation of the language game in the absence of trust. This was the “magnitude of the betrayal” (6) when the Armistice had surrendered political refugees to Nazi mercy.

There is, however, a more radical response to the absurd in *Transit*. The narrator moves from a very individualized dissent to a more collective resistance. In part, this involves contesting the Nazi right to the terms of its own ideology. This is the recuperation of organic metaphors of rootedness and of blood-and-soil. This is also what is at stake in the narrator grafting himself onto a local community and for them to accept him and promise to share his fate. We might question how realistic this scenario was but some Jewish people and other refugees were shielded in this way and, for example, the State of Israel has

explicitly acknowledged some of these people as the righteous among the nations. This bravery brings us to the only ethics adequate to Benjamin's "real state of emergency": "What happens to us, will happen to you" (249).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful for the advice and encouragement of Chris Philo, Karen Till, and David Nally. I also appreciate the careful attention of the referees and editors. I thank folk at the Conference of Irish Geographers, Galway 2019, for discussion of this paper.

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Williams, R. [1961] 2001. *The long revolution*. Letchworth, UK: Broadview Press.

GERRY KEARNS is Professor of Human Geography at Maynooth University, Kildare W23 HW31, Ireland. E-mail: gerry.kearns@mu.ie. He works on topics at the intersection of medical, historical and political geography. He is a member of the Royal Irish Academy.