ANGLICA

An International Journal of English Studies

Special Issue: Enemy Aliens or Captive Allies? **30/3 2021**

UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Anglica 30/3 2021
ISSN: 0860-5734
DOI: 10.7311/0860-5734.30.3.04

Martin Löschnigg
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1330-7880
University of Graz

Who Was He? Internment, Exile and Ambiguity in Norbert Gstrein's Novel *Die englischen Jahre* (*The English Years*) (1999)

Abstract: Winner of the Alfred Döblin Preis in 1999, the novel *Die englischen Jahre* by the Austrian novelist Norbert Gstrein deals with internment and exile in Britain during and after the Second World War. It centres on the (fictitious) character of Gabriel Hirschfelder, a writer and refugee from Nazi-occupied Austria who is detained, with other 'enemy aliens,' in a camp on the Isle of Man. There, Nazi sympathisers are interned together with Jewish and political refugees, and the central chapters in the novel depict the conditions and resulting conflicts in the internment camp. Hirschfelder dies in exile at Southend-on-Sea, having confessed shortly before his death that he killed a fellow inmate. This confession as well as reports of a transport of internees sunk off the coast of Scotland in 1940 incite a young Austrian woman to try to solve the mystery surrounding Hirschfelder and his allegedly lost autobiography *The English Years*. The paper discusses how Gstrein combines different genres like the historical novel/historiographic metafiction and the whodunit as well as using multiple narrative perspectives and refractions to pinpoint questions of shifting identities and allegiances, and of belonging and alienation in the wake of internment and exile.

Keywords: Austrian literature, World War II, 'enemy alien' internment Britain, Jewishness, fictional biography

1. Introduction

At the beginning of World War II, some 75,000 refugees from Nazi Germany were living in Britain, mostly Jews, but also political opponents of the regime. In 1940/41, after the Nazi occupation of France and with fears of sabotage, espionage and invasion haunting the British, about 27,000 'enemy aliens' (Germans, Austrians, Italians) were interned upon Winston Churchill's decision to "Collar

the lot!" (Gillman/Gillman) These were mostly refugees, of whom two thirds were Jewish, yet the "lot" also included Austrian, German and Italian nationals who were resident in Britain. This is a part of the history of World War II that is still relatively little known, yet which anticipates social circumstances in Germany and Austria after the war: those of the interned who supported the Nazi regime often declared themselves as refugees, resistance fighters, or veterans of the Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War. In the British internment camps, exiled Jews and the politically persecuted lost out a second time, as they had to arrange themselves with those who were justly interned. By the end of 1940, 10,000 internees had been freed again, yet a further 6,000 had been deported to Canada and Australia. On 2 July 1940, the *Arandora Star*, one such transport bound for St. John's, Newfoundland, was sunk by a German U-boat northwest of the Outer Hebrides. Of the 1,200 people on board (mostly Italian internees) some 800, including a hundred of the crew, were killed.

These events form the historical background to the novel *Die englischen Jahre* (*The English Years*) by the Austrian novelist Norbert Gstrein, which received the pre-publication Alfred Döblin prize for one of its chapters and has since been translated into twelve other languages. *Die englischen Jahre* deals with internment and exile in Britain during and after the Second World War. It centres on the (fictitious) character of Gabriel Hirschfelder, a writer and refugee from Nazi-occupied Austria, who is detained, with other 'enemy aliens,' in a camp on the Isle of Man. There, Nazi sympathisers are interned together with Jewish and political refugees, and the central, prize-winning chapter in the novel depicts the conditions and resulting conflicts in the internment camp. Hirschfelder dies in exile at Southend-on-Sea, having confessed shortly before his death that he killed a fellow inmate. This confession as well as reports of a transport of internees sunk off the coast of Ireland in 1940 incite a young Austrian woman to try to solve the mystery surrounding Hirschfelder and his allegedly lost autobiography, *The English Years*.

Gstrein blends genres like the historical novel (or, to be precise, the kind of historiographic metafiction that reflects on the relationship between fiction and historical facts as well as on its own ambivalent status), (meta-)fictional biography and the whodunit, using multiple narrative perspectives to pinpoint questions of shifting identities and allegiances, and of belonging and alienation in the wake of internment and exile. In this essay, I shall analyse how Gstrein's novel employs the themes of internment and exile in order to deal with the memory of the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany (including Austria) on the one hand, and with the "biographical illusion" that a life represents a unified and structured whole ("le fait que 'la vie' constitue un tout, un ensemble cohérent et orienté"; Bourdieu 69) that underlies the attempt at defining individual identity on the other. As I will show, the novel's complex narrative technique becomes functional with regard to both these aspects. It creates a discourse in which 'internment' and 'exile'

acquire an emblematic function, signifying a nexus of containment and fluidity that embeds the narrator-biographer's subject and object, enabling and undermining her attempts at grasping hold of that object's identity at the same time.

2. The Isle of Man Camp

According to J.M. Ritchie, Gstrein's depiction of life in the camp where Hirschfelder is interned from June 1940 to August 1941, after a short spell in a transition camp on the outskirts of Liverpool, "is very selective and perhaps not quite accurate" (199). The camp is modelled on Hutchinson camp in Douglas on the Isle of Man, where the British government had requisitioned hotels and B&Bs along the seaside.[1]

The author had been to London and the Isle of Man to do research, but had avoided meeting former internees for fear of becoming too documentary or didactic (Nüchtern). Indeed, the details about the camp which the novel provides are mainly inserted to recreate the atmosphere of this enclosed world, a world which is remote from the war but also vulnerable to its imponderability. Its events, like the occupation of Paris, must appear "unreal" to that world's inhabitants, as the narrator surmises with regard to Hirschfelder: "es kam dir unwirklich vor, als könnte es außerhalb der Lagergrenzen nichts mehr geben, was für dich Bedeutung hatte, nicht einmal die Tatsache, daß Krieg war" (195) ["it seemed so unreal, as if nothing of any importance could still exist for you outside the camp, not even the fact that there was a war on"; trans. Anthea Bell, 148].[2] At times, however, the feeling of seclusion and safety from persecution and also from the air raids hitting London and other urban centres is superseded by the uncertainty and anxiety about the future that result from lack of information, and by the fear of a German invasion. There are rumours about deportations and there is mutual suspicion fanned by interrogations and the division of internees into categories according to the danger they may represent (see also Francis). The relative safety of the 'enemy aliens' as compared to much of the English population creates antagonistic feelings whipped up by the popular press. Above all, however, there are conflicts between the mostly Jewish refugees and those internees who express their anti-Semitic attitudes more or less openly. In the Douglas camp, Nazi sympathisers are concentrated in a 'Braunes Haus.' The episode quoted below crystallises the tensions between the different groups of internees, as well as the (tacit) anti-Semitism that is also frequent among the guards:

> Als wenig später in einem der Fenster ein Pappschild mit der Aufschrift Zutritt für Juden verboten erschien, genügte es, daß ein paar von den Capos hineingingen und sie aufforderten, es augenblicklich verschwinden zu lassen, und was dich aufbrachte, war das unentschiedene Verhalten der Wachen, die dastanden und zuschauten und sie aus einer zynisch kalten Sportlichkeit, die für dich so englisch war, daß du nichts davon verstehen wolltest, oder aus bloßer Dummheit auch noch bevorzugten. (190)

> When a little later a cardboard notice appeared in one of their windows saying no jews here, a couple of NCOs only had to go in and tell them to take it down at once, but what did annoy you was the irresolute attitude of the guards who stood by and watched, giving them preferential treatment out of either sheer stupidity or a cold and cynical sense of sportsmanship, something you considered so English as to be incomprehensible. (Trans. Anthea Bell, 144–145)

The fact that among the internees there are also some that managed to escape from a German concentration camp sharpens the conflicts between Nazi sympathisers and others. As the narrator/researcher learns from her landlord during a trip to Douglas: "Es sind von Anfang an Leute aller Schattierungen gewesen […]. Verhaftet werden konnte jeder, der eine Verbindung zu Deutschland hatte, und in London ist man in der Aufregung, als fast tagtäglich die Invasion erwartet wurde, nicht gerade zimperlich verfahren, wer dann mit wem das Vergnügen hatte" (263) ["Right from the start there were people of various shades of opinion there […]. Anyone who had German connections at all could be arrested and, what with the panic in London when the invasion was expected daily, they weren't taking too much trouble about who shared quarters with whom"; trans. Anthea Bell, 201]. With some cynicism, however, the same landlord also points to what may indeed have been a major problem in the camps, namely boredom: "Die größte Schwierigkeit für die Gefangenen bestand darin, ihre Zeit totzuschlagen" (281) ["The prisoners' main problem was killing time"; trans. Anthea Bell, 214]. Gstrein's novel assembles the fragments of information obtained by the narrator into a memorable portrayal of the camps. The focus in this portrayal, however, is clearly not on detailed and accurate descriptions, but on the evocation of a place which is ruled by contradictions and indeterminacy, and where the boundaries between friend and enemy as well as individual identities are blurred. As the narrator comes to realise on her research trip, it is impossible for those who did not share the experience to comprehend what life in the camps was really like: "ich hatte tatsächlich immer noch nur eine vage Vorstellung vom Alltag in den Lagern, wusste nicht, was sich hinter den unveränderlichen Eckdaten wirklich verbarg" (282) ["I still had only a vague idea of everyday life in the camps, I didn't know what really lay behind the basic timetable"; trans. Anthea Bell, 215].

It is the evening of 29 June 1940, and the scene is a room in the camp. Four young men from among the internees are engaged in a card game. The four are "der Blasse" ["the pale man"], "der mit der Narbe" ["the man with the scar"], "der Neue" ["the newcomer"], and Gabriel Hirschfelder, a young Jew from Vienna. Their game is not an ordinary one: in the morning, as they lined up for roll call, internees were counted off for transportation to camps overseas. There had been hardly any volunteers, since the prospect of leaving the safety of the Isle of Man, where there was no danger of air raids, only to be exposed to submarine attacks at sea was daunting. The "newcomer" is one of those who are to leave the camp on the

next day and is looking for a way to stay on. The four agree that whoever loses in the game will assume the identity of the 'newcomer,' should it be one of the three others, and step forward to be transported in his stead. Marked cards decide against Hirschfelder, who will be among the drowned in the sinking of the *Arandora Star*.

The other man lives on under Hirschfelder's name,[3] a fact that emerges only decades later. The real Hirschfelder was eighteen when he went into exile. He had lived in Vienna with his Jewish mother and stepfather, who committed suicide together soon after the Nazi takeover. His biological father, a shady person and party member from the beginning, effected his son's escape to England, where Gabriel lived with the family of a judge in London and fell in love with their maidservant Clara, also a Jewish refugee. On 17 May 1940, he was rounded up as an undesired alien.

The new Hirschfelder, whose real name is Harrasser, comes from the Salzkammergut, an Austrian provincial area, where his parents kept an inn. There, a Jewish professor and his daughter, regular guests during better times, were seeking shelter while the father tried to obtain emigration papers. One may imagine what happened when he does not return one day. In the internment camp, Harrasser, who was enamoured of the daughter, claims that she was then arrested, showing her picture. However, it emerges that she had fallen seriously ill and their hosts had not dared to fetch a doctor. Upon her death, they had dragged her body secretly down to the lakeside and then urged their son to leave for England and forget.

After his release, the new Hirschfelder comes to live in Southend-on-Sea, where he works as a librarian and spends several hours every day in a room in the run-down Palace Hotel, writing, it seems. He is made famous by a book of stories of Jewish exile, with the rather trite title *Die Lebenden leben und die Toten sind tot* (*The Living Live, and the Dead are Dead*). The manuscript of his autobiography *The English Years*, if it has ever existed, is not among his literary remains. The search by the anonymous first-person narrator, a young Viennese doctor, is incited by her ex-partner Max, a writer and admirer of Hirschfelder's, and a chance meeting, at an exhibition in the London Austrian Institute, with Hirschfelder's third wife, Margaret.

3. Imagining a Life

The novel is divided into eight chapters, four of which bear the names of the women connected with Hirschfelder, his three wives and Clara; in these chapters, the first-person narrator meets and interviews these women. Clara has fallen victim to dementia and can thus not contribute to revealing the true story, which is known only to Hirschfelder's second wife, Madeleine, whose chapter is therefore strategically placed at the end of the book. The other four chapters render in detail Hirschfelder's pre-internment days in London, his life in the internment camp

and his death in the wreckage of the transport ship. They do so in the form of second-person narratives, the narrator addressing Hirschfelder in her imagination.[4] There is thus a sequence of chapters in which the female first-person narrator researches a story, and chapters in which she imagines it. In the 'you'-chapters, the reader becomes so familiar with Hirschfelder's situation that the question of who can actually know all this is relegated to the background. It is the narrator's imagination which projects close-ups of the story of an internee that she only knows vaguely, and the conflict between the empathic intimacy of these chapters and their 'improbability' is only resolved when one considers that here a life is reconstructed from the bare fragments yielded by the narrator's interviews and research. In the end, and with the knowledge of Hirschfelder/Harrasser's true nominal identity, the contents of the interview/research chapters and the imaginative 'you'-chapters, however, will prove fundamentally incongruent in that the two versions are in fact about different persons. Finally, there is a further twist in that the narrator hands the story to her former partner Max. Max, so we must assume, writes the novel *Die englischen Jahre*, which we are reading; he thus becomes the superordinate implied author who installs his ex-partner as the narrator.

Gstrein's novel unfolds a gripping narrative of war, persecution, love, internment, betrayal, and death, bringing to life the historical and personal entanglements of its characters. In the last resort, however, the effect of the novel relies on narrative technique, as the act of narration rather than the events as such comes to stand in the centre. In the reader, the intricate structure and complex narrative framing employed by Gstrein (implied author – first-person narration – you-narration) create distance rather than emotional engagement with the fate of the characters. The first-person narrator is dependent on the report of others and is confronted with a haze of memories. Can we thus be sure that the trading of identities was really done like this – the only witnesses, after all, are the Kafkaesque figures of Lomnitz ("the pale man") and Ossovsky ("the man with the scar")? *Die englischen Jahre* is a complex, multiply refracted novel that moves between different layers of time, probing the oscillating boundaries between fact and fiction, guilt and innocence, integrity and living a lie. Apparently about a life (and a missing autobiography), its narrative technique is in fact designed to avoid the pitfalls of the (auto-)biographical, undermining accepted notions of 'telling from one's own subjective point of view' as well as 'trying to imagine the other.'[5]

The author's rejection of conventional (auto-)biographical narration is most memorably illustrated by the novel's 'you'-chapters. On a first level, these chapters – as already mentioned – render the narrator's imaginative reconstruction of Hirschfelder's life in the camp and death by seeming to address him, thus making the 'you' appear as a substitute for the third person. However, the implications of this technique are rather more complex, since the characteristics of second person narration always "include ambiguity over the identity and status of the 'you'" (Richardson 2), being also expressive of an identification of the narrator with the

character thus addressed. In addition, the second person "threatens the ontological stability of the fictional world insofar as it seems it could be addressing the reader as well as the central character" (Richardson 2). Second-person narration of the kind used by Gstrein establishes a triangle, as it were, with the narrator engaging in a dialogue with the character and the reader at the same time. The narrative thus enables the reader to share, on an implied level, the many uncertainties that are explicitly emphasised in the 'research' chapters:

> Augenblicklich setzten sich mir dann aus dem wenigen, das sie von ihm erzählt hatte, die konkretesten Szenen zusammen, und es erstaunt mich nach wie vor, wie leicht ich in meiner Phantasie die Leerstellen überbrückte, die trotz allem, was ich später über ihn erfuhr, bestehen geblieben sind. Meine Gewissheit, daß es so und nicht anders gewesen sein mußte, wie ich es mir ausmalte, wurde umso stärker erschüttert, je weiter ich meine Nachforschungen trieb, bis ich mir nicht mehr sicher sein konnte, daß es wirklich so war, aber immer noch sicher, daß es zumindest so hätte sein können. (50)

> Instantly, from the little she had told me of him, the most concrete scenes appeared before me, and I'm still surprised to find how easily my imagination bridged the gaps that remain in the story, in spite of all I discovered about him later. My certainty that it must have happened as I saw it, in that way and no other, was shaken again and again the further I pursued my researches, until I could no longer be sure that it had really been like that, but I was still certain that at least it might have been so. (Trans. Anthea Bell, 33)

As the 'research' and 'internment' chapters intersect, the necessity of separating fact from fiction is maintained ("der Punkt ist einmal mehr, wo genau die Trennungslinie zwischen Fiktion und Wirklichkeit verläuft," 120; ["yet again the difficulty lies in discovering exactly where the line runs separating fact from fiction"; trans. Anthea Bell, 91]), yet the boundaries between the two become blurred, the more so as the accounts of Hirschfelder/Harrasser's three wives relativise one another, too.

In the last resort, what remains are fragments and a "multiple disappearance" ("ein mehrfaches Verschwinden") of the central subject:

> Es war gleich ein mehrfaches Verschwinden, sein Verschwinden vor der irischen Küste, sein Verschwinden in Claras Erinnerung und sein Verschwinden in der mutmaßlichen Autobiographie, sofern sie überhaupt einmal existiert hatte, und darum rankten sich Geschichten, die umso mehr Eigenleben bekamen, je bekannter Hirschfelder wurde. (371)

> It was like a multiple disappearance – his death off the Irish coast, his extinction from Clara's memory, and the loss of the supposed autobiography if it had ever existed – with stories proliferating around it and acquiring a more independent life of their own the better known Hirschfelder became. (Trans. Anthea Bell, 283)

As is indicated by the last sentence here, the more 'Hirschfelder' became a public figure, the more he became a site of projections ("Jeder hat sich das über ihn zusammengereimt, was ihm am besten in den Kram paßt," 377; ["[e]veryone picked and chose from the material available to make him into whatever suited them"; trans. Anthea Bell, 287]); in consequence, his true identity receded into the background:

> […] die Berichte, die dann in rascher Folge über ihn erschienen, die Porträts, deckten das Zentrum nur immer mehr zu, schmierten ihre Druckerschwärze darüber, ihren Hochglanzlack, über den Mittelpunkt, der ein Loch war, eine Leerstelle, die Biographie eines verschwundenen Mannes. (372)

> […] the articles and interviews which then followed each other in rapid succession only covered up the nub of the matter even further, smearing printer's ink and high-gloss lacquer over the gap in the centre where there was a hole, an empty space, the story of a man who disappeared. (Trans. Anthea Bell, 283)

4. Appropriating Jewishness

Besides raising questions about (auto-)biographical 'truth,' Gstrein's narrative aims at preventing an aestheticising of the story of Jewish persecution. In post-war England, Harrasser, the fake Hirschfelder, shamelessly styles himself as an exiled Jewish writer, and the novel thus obliquely comments on the way the memory of Jewish persecution can be falsified. The switched identity, of course, has a real (and ironic) background in the fact that after the war, ever so many war criminals were living under false identities. However, Harrasser's assumption of a Jewish identity and his investing himself with a history of persecution recall in particular the case of 'Binjamin Wilkomirski' (Bruno Grosjean/Dössekker), whose purported memoir of a childhood in the death-camps (*Bruchstücke. Aus einer Kindheit 1939–1948*, 1995; Engl. *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, 1996) was finally and decisively revealed as a fraud in 1999. Whether 'Wilkomirski' had acted from the intention of drawing for profit on a collective readiness to mourn, or from a strong identification with the tribulations of the Jewish people that really made him believe in the fictionalising of his own life, has not been entirely clarified until this day, yet Gstrein was greatly 'dismayed' by the debate (Helbig 17). Also, there had been the case of GDR writer Stefan Hermlin, convicted by Karl Corino in 1996 of having mythologised his own and his family history in his memoir *Abendlicht* (1979), giving it out that he himself had been in Sachsenhausen, and that his father had died in a death camp. And there was another important context and possible motif for Gstrein's raising questions on the policies of collective memory, namely Martin Walser's much-criticised speech upon his receiving the Friedenspreis des

Deutschen Buchhandels, one of the most prestigious literary awards in Germany, on 11 October 1998. Walser warned of the ritualising and commodifying of the memory of the Holocaust, going so far as to suggest that one should therefore refrain from public commemoration altogether. In the ensuing debate with Ignatz Bubis, Chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, he and others were severely criticised for trying to play down the danger that lies in not keeping the memory alive.

Much less controversially, Gstrein's novel deals with the perception of (Jewish) exiles by later-born Austrians and Germans, speaking out against simplifications and the all-too-easy, dutifully correct expression of compassion and horror. It is in this respect that he expressed a mistrust in any unreflected narrative that does not question its own conditions ("kein Vertrauen in ein unreflektiertes Erzählen, das nicht seine eigenen Bedingungen hinterfragt," Gstrein; qtd. in Blaha 25). *Die englischen Jahre* consistently rejects an aestheticising rendering and possible exploitation of the horror, as the author expressed his conviction that often, fictional narratives by the later born are too smoothly executed and may be consumed without any consequences: "Es muß aber mehr geben als das Erzählen von noch und noch einer solchen Geschichte, das die Schreckensgeschichte dahinter immer konsumierbarer macht" ["However, there must be more than the telling of yet another such story, which makes the horror story behind it more and more consumable," Gstrein; qtd. in Helbig 15; trans. M.L.]. With topics like the Holocaust, the aesthetic problem automatically also entails an ethical one (Gstrein; qtd. in Helbig, 17). Turning against a mimetic understanding of literature, Gstrein is intent on emphasising the rifts between reality and fiction ("die Risse zwischen Fiktion und Wirklichkeit sichtbar zu machen," Gstrein 2003, 11; see also Gstrein 2004), marking his way of writing as that of a later born who is critically aware of the implications of writing about vicarious experience. By creating distance in dealing with the memory of the Nazi era, the experience of internment and exile, and the stealing of an identity, he avoids what he regards as a glib literary philo-Semitism that may in fact be nothing else than anti-Semitism under different auspices ("ein […] Philosemitimus, der letztlich nichts anderes ist als ein Antisemitismus mit anderen Vorzeichen," Gstrein; qtd. in Nüchtern).

Thematically, this avoidance is based on the question "warum Hirschfelder mitgespielt hatte, warum er nicht einfühlsamer gewesen ist, das Unappetitliche daran zu erkennen, zu einer Symbolfigur stilisiert zu werden, die er nicht war" (372) ["why Hirschfelder went along with this, why he was not sensitive enough to recognise the unacceptable aspect of being made into the symbol of something he was not"; trans. Anthea Bell, 283]. After all, he himself spoke of his newly won attention derogatively, possibly from his very own feelings of survivor's guilt. To the journalists who visit him, 'Hirschfelder' has become a representative figure, almost symbolic of the exiled Jew. Their sympathetic response can hardly deflect from the fact

> dass sie Judenschauen gingen, dass sie alles wieder auf die gleiche Frage reduzierten, auf die es schon ihre Väter und Großväter reduziert hatten, nur dass sie jetzt nicht mehr direkt gestellt wurde, im Kasernenhofton, und dass auf die falsche Antwort zumindest nicht mehr der Tod stand, sondern ihre schwülstige Wärme, ihr Gesäusel und ihr Rotz und ihr Wasser, das sie nichts kostete. (373)

> [that they were] going to "view the Jewish raree-show" as it seems he put it, coming to his house and reducing everything to the same question as their fathers and grandfathers did, except that they no longer asked it straight, not in the tones of a sergeant-major, and at least now the wrong answer did not mean death but their fulsome enthusiasm, their awe-stricken murmurs, the snot and urine that cost them nothing. (Trans. Anthea Bell, 284)

Indicating the role of present concerns and prejudices in recollections of the past, *Die englischen Jahre* emphasises the dynamics of individual and collective memory. Memory emerges not as a spontaneous act or reconstruction based on documents, but as a process directed by many factors, producing unreliable, blurred, and unstable images. This, as well as the fluidity of identities, is of course a frequent theme in contemporary literature, yet rarely can it have been executed with such mathematical precision as in this novel by an author who, after all, did study mathematics before fully concentrating on his literary career. Gstrein's foregrounding of epistemological uncertainty hinges on an austere structural symmetry, the four days in May and June 1940 functioning as nodal points in a web of lives that in themselves become inroads into a reality full of historical momentum.

5. Constructing (Auto-)Biographical 'Truth'

If historical and (auto-)biographical truth is a construct, then we need to know the rules of construction. There is thus no alternative, it seems, to the self-reflexive, multi-perspectival scepticism of Gstrein's narrative, nor to narrative perspective becoming an instrument in the search for truth. This is highlighted when the narrator comes to talk to a historian of the camps, whose academic self-assurance is not affected by the fact that he has never been to the Isle of Man himself, a stark contrast to her own autoptic research and her self-conscious attempts at capturing the spirit of the place. The episode, incidentally, sheds oblique light on Gstrein's refraining from meeting former internees in order not to be swayed by the documentary and thus to lose sight of his method of making visible the gaps between fact and fiction. As it is, these gaps remain, and with them the underlying assumption that in theory, at least, the boundaries between fact and fiction must be upheld – the latter being illustrated by the fact that the cleft between the narrator's re-imagining of Hirschfelder's story and the facts she is confronted with remains.

Re-constructing a life-story from witness' reports, she always remains conscious of the imaginative process involved:

> Das Bild, das ich von Hirschfelder hatte, schien umso unschärfer zu werden, je mehr Catherine mir von ihm erzählte, verschwommen wie das Photo, das sie wie zufällig aus ihrer Mappe hervorgeholt hatte, eine Aufnahme, die ihn in einer Drillichuniform vor einem nicht erkennbaren Hintergrund zeigt, und ich erinnere mich, wie ich es angeschaut habe, ohne Ähnlichkeiten mit meinem Photo zu entdecken, dem Photo, das jetzt über meinem Schreibtisch hängt. (140)

> The picture I had of Hirschfelder seemed to be getting less and less clear the more Catherine told me about him, as blurred as the photograph she had taken casually out of her file, which showed him in a uniform made of cotton drill in front of some unrecognisable background, and I remember looking at it and seeing no similarity with my own picture of him, the one which now hangs over my desk. (Trans. Anthea Bell, 105–106)

The novel features a complex correlation (and partial contradiction) of detective story elements (a true nominal identity revealed), and a biographical project that is for a long time undermined by mistaken identities. Even when the riddle has been solved, however, the nature of narrated memories and the imaginative element in biography prevent the kind of closure that the mystery genre suggests and which, in his own way, the fake Hirschfelder vainly desired: "Ich entsann mich, daß sie es eine versiegelte Erinnerung genannt hatte," is what the narrator remembers about Catherine, the first wife's account, "eine eingefrorene Version, die er ihr von seiner Vergangenheit darbot" (346) ["I remembered that she had spoken of his sealing up his memory, saying he had offered her a frozen version of his past"; trans. Anthea Bell, 265].

The novel's theme of the search for a man whose identity blurs and dissolves the closer one approaches it links it to other such novels, like for instance Conrad's *Lord Jim* or, more immediately relevant in the context of contemporary German-language literature, Uwe Johnson's *Mutmassungen über Jakob* (1959). In both novels, Johnson's and Gstrein's, the situational and political context (that of Stasi surveillance in the former GDR in the case of Johnson) is conducive to mistrust and uncertainty, yet in contrast to Johnson, the mystery of Hirschfelder/Harrasser's nominal identity is solved. There are further parallels to W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), the fictional biography of a Jewish-German refugee in Britain as assembled by the narrator from conversations with the protagonist and other fragmentary information.[6] Evoking Johnson and Sebald, Gstrein referred to his form of narrative as "mutmaßend" ("conjectural") (Helbig 12); biography, this implies, is inevitably also a "fiction of the other" (Helbig 13), yet this fictional dimension may well be instrumental in arriving at a 'deeper' truth.

Generically, *Die englischen Jahre* represents an "implicit biographical metafiction" ["implizite biographische Metafiktion"] as defined by Ansgar Nünning (29), a type of narrative which highlights problems of biography not through argumentative discourse, but through the "staging of metafictional themes" ["Inszenierung metafiktionaler Themen," 29], no matter whether the biographee is a real or fictitious person. The emphasis on the 'quest' of the biographer (Schabert) rather than on the life of his/her subject is typical of postmodern biographical fiction:

> Mich hat beim Schreiben des Romans der Erkenntnisgewinn interessiert, wenn ich den Spalt zwischen Realität und Fiktion größer mache, weil ein Zukleistern dieses immer existierenden Spalts zwischen dem, was tatsächlich geschehen ist, und dem, was man erzählt, in der Regel eine Verharmlosung bedeutet. (Gstrein; qtd. in Helbig 17)

> Writing the novel, I was interested in the knowledge gained by widening the rift between reality and fiction, because patching up the ever existing rift between that which really happened and that which one narrates usually amounts to a belittling of matters. (Trans. M.L.)

Gstrein's sceptical attitude towards the potential of narratives to gloss over the rift between reality and fiction is expressed by the way his novel unsparingly reveals the constructedness of biographical narratives. The problem of identity is played out on two levels, that of the 'detective story' (the swapped identities and partly contradictory versions of the three wives), and the level of narration, where attempts at reconstructing a coherent image fail. Trying to apprehend a person biographically is like sounding a range of possibilities, where distance as conveyed by the narrator's frustrating efforts to get at the truth in the 'research' chapters alternates with imaginative closeness. The protagonists' (failed) attempts at reconstructing their own or others' life stories, and to create meaning from fragments of information, is a theme that runs through Gstrein's work, most conspicuously so in *Die englischen Jahre*, but also for instance in *Das Handwerk des Tötens* (2005), a novel whose narrative unfolds before the background of the war in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, and the NATO intervention in Kosovo.

Liminality and fluidity, defining elements in the experience of internment and exile, are also characteristic of the novel's doubly refracted narrative discourse. In the 'you'-chapters, the first-person narrator of the other chapters becomes an internal focaliser, as her imaginative exploration of Hirschfelder's experience is rendered in the form of a stream of consciousness. Addressing Gabriel as 'you,' however, makes him such a focaliser, too, allowing the reader to identify with him while the narrator as the originator of the discourse recedes to the background. Her imaginative recreation of the camps and transport ship is still based on research,

including a diary by 'Hirschfelder' which she receives from Catherine, yet the interpretation of the diary entries depends on the consciousness of the narrator, which in turn participates in a collective consciousness related to the historical facts. In this sense, the imagined figure of the fiction can be 'known' more fully than the real person, whose contours will inevitably remain blurred. Thus, for example, a diary entry on the passage from Liverpool to the Isle of Man sets in motion an imaginative act of reconstruction:

> […] als ich es las, genügte es, dass ich am selben Ort war wie er damals, ich stand an Deck, schaute auf die stillgelegten Docks und versuchte, mir vorzustellen, wie anders wohl der Blick gewesen war, den Hirschfelder gehabt hatte […] wenn ich mich bemühte, sah ich ihn […] an der Reling lehnen […]. (159–160)

> […] when I read those words it was enough to know that I was just where he had been at the time, standing on deck looking at the disused docks and trying to imagine how different they had probably appeared to Hirschfelder […] if I tried, I could see Hirschfelder himself leaning on the rail […]. (Trans. Anthea Bell, 119–120)

However, this image is later relativised as the attempt at capturing the 'reality' of Hirschfelder's figure causes the picture to blur: "und wenn ich mir vorzustellen versuche, wie er dastand […] verschwimmt mir sein Bild einmal mehr vor Augen" (266–267) ["when I try to imagine him standing there […] his picture blurs before my eyes yet again"; trans. Anthea Bell, 204]. Moreover, during her stay on the Isle of Man the narrator had come to reflect on the impossibility of really understanding the situation of the interned: "ich war mir fehl am Platz vorgekommen, allein weil ich jederzeit abreisen konnte, weil es schon deswegen eine Anbiederung sein musste, wenn ich glaubte, ich könnte mir auch nur annähernd ausmalen, was er empfunden hatte" (254) ["it seemed wrong for me to be here, if only because I could leave at any time, which made it presumptuous of me to believe I could even begin to imagine what it was like for him"; trans. Anthea Bell, 194–195).

6. Conclusion

Internment involves acts of definition (in the case of World War II Britain, of 'undesired' or 'enemy aliens') and containment. By way of analogy, this also applies to the biographical act and the biographer's desire to define and confer fixity upon the image of the other. In its most rigidly compartmentalised form, identity is reduced to numbers ("die Nummer […] zu der deine Identität von einem Augenblick auf den anderen zusammengeschrumpft war," 108; ["the number […] to which your identity had suddenly shrunk"; trans. Anthea Bell, 80]), or to the bare names of internees on their gravestones. However, the camps are a liminal

space of transition and transformation, where identities change, although of course not normally in the nominal manner and with the dramatic results described in the novel. Regarding the Douglas camp, the notion of liminality and the impossibility of firmly delineating the contours of an identity is further enhanced by the island setting: "Die Isle of Man selbst wird der Ort, der durch seine Brüchigkeit die Unmöglichkeit der biographischen Erfassung einer Person versinnbildlicht" (Leiner 118). The island and its camps become an in-between space in a topographical, temporal and figurative sense, where the fluidity of identities gives rise to the myth of the Jewish exile, in itself the epitome of a state of not belonging. Indeed, such a sense of not belonging pervades Gstrein's work even before *The English Years*, as his characters may be defined, if at all, by their not belonging ("weil auch die Figuren meiner früheren Bücher sich am ehesten durch ihre Nichtzugehörigkeit definieren ließen"). In its extreme form, Gstrein adds, not belonging is nothing else but exile ("Nichtzugehörigkeit, ins äußerste Extrem getrieben, sei nichts anderes als Exil"; Gstrein 2003, 9; see also Bobinac; Wallas).

In Gstrein's novel, the figure of the interned and exiled author becomes the absent centre which dominates and structures the book. The narrator's desire to fill this void by reconstructing Hirschfelder's experience and revealing his true identity was initially instigated by the myths that surrounded his person: "Am Anfang stand für mich der Mythos, Hirschfelder, die Schriftsteller-Ikone, der große Einsame […], der seit dem Krieg in England ausharrte und an seinem Meisterwerk schrieb" (9) ["At first he was a myth to me: Hirschfelder, the literary icon, the great loner […], who stayed on in England after the war, working on his masterpiece"; trans. Anthea Bell, 3]. Myths, in the sense of Roland Barthes, are simplified projections of historical realities that appeal to the imagination, and the transformation of historical complexity into the "evident" of uncontested narratives (Barthes 143). In contrast, Gstrein's novel remains profoundly anti-mythical, as the progression of its narrative does not contribute to clarity, but instead creates obscurity and doubt. In this context, internment and exile also appear as parts of a dialectic of (precarious) certainties on the one hand, and the inevitability of multiplicity and flux on the other.

Notes

1. On the Isle of Man camps see Chappell.
2. Page references are to the original German and the English edition of the novel (trans. Anthea Bell) respectively, as listed under Gstrein 1999 in "References." The English edition was reviewed in *The Independent*, 30 Dec. 2002 (Schüler).
3. One is reminded of the veteran soldier living under the identity of his fallen comrade in *Le retour de Martin Guerre*, the 1984 French film based on a true occurrence in 16th-century France, and its remake, *Sommersby* (1993), set in the American Civil War.

4. The narrator is not speaking to herself, as Hinck (267) claims. See also Pichler (81), who considers what is surely the case here (the narrator imagining Hirschfelder's experience) as just one possibility among others.
5. On the epistemological and ideological parameters of a "Lagerliteratur" (a literature of the internment camps) see the profound study of testimonies from the Gulags by Lachmann; on questions of the autobiographical in this context see esp. chapter V: "Zwischen Autobiographie und Autofiktion" [Between Autobiography and Autofiction], 309–434.
6. Winkels points out that 'Max,' the name of the narrator's ex-partner and the novel's implied author, was also a nickname of Sebald's. The depiction of Southend-on-Sea and the hotel may well have been inspired by Sebald's description of Lowestoft and its Victoria Hotel in *Die Ringe des Saturn. Eine englische Wallfahrt* (1997). For further points of connection with Sebald see Long.

References

Barthes, Roland. 1972. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang.

Blaha, Peter. 2001. "Auf der Suche nach Heimat. Interview mit Norbert Gstrein." *Bühne*. Heft 2:25.

Bobinac, Marijan. 2012. "Zwielichtige Exilanten. Erinnerung und Exil bei Norbert Gstrein." *Vielheit und Einheit der Germanistik weltweit*. Ed. Franciszek Grucza. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang. 193–198.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "L'Illusion biographique." *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 62.63: 69–72.

Chappell, Connery. 1986. *Island of Barbed Wire*. London: Corgi Books.

Francis, Paul (n.d.). "Internment Camps on the Isle of Man." https://web.archive.org/web/20170201163727/https://www.airfieldresearchgroup.org.uk/forum/isle-of-man-non-airfield-sites/3860-wwii-internment-camps-in-the-isle-of-man#111229

Gillman, Leni and Peter. 1980. *"Collar the lot": How Britain Interned and Expelled Its Wartime Refugees*. London: Quartet Books.

Gstrein, Norbert. 1999. *Die englischen Jahre. Roman*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Gstrein, Norbert. 2003 [2002]. *The English Years*. Trans. Anthea Bell. London: Vintage.

Gstrein, Norbert. 2003. *Fakten, Fiktionen und Kitsch beim Schreiben über ein historisches Thema.* Wiener Rede. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Gstrein, Norbert. 2004. *Wem gehört eine Geschichte? Fakten, Fiktionen und Beweismittel gegen alle Wahrscheinlichkeit des wirklichen Lebens*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Helbig, Axel. 2006. “Der obszöne Blick: Gespräch mit Norbert Gstrein.” *Norbert Gstrein*. Ed. Kurt Bartsch and Gerhard Fuchs. Graz, Vienna: Literaturverlag Droschl. 9–32.

Hinck, Walter. 2006. “Falschmünzer in der Emigration. Der Erzähler im Labyrinth der Finten: Norbert Gstrein: *Die englischen Jahre* (1999).” *Romanchronik des 20. Jahrhunderts. Eine bewegte Zeit im Spiegel der Literatur*. Cologne: DuMont. 261–268.

Lachmann, Renate. 2019. *Lager und Literatur: Zeugnisse des Gulag*. Konstanz: Konstanz University Press.

Leiner, Veronika. 2006. “Fakten und Fiktionen bei der ‘Herstellung’ von Lebensgeschichten.” *Norbert Gstrein*. Ed. Kurt Bartsch and Gerhard Fuchs. Graz, Vienna: Literaturverlag Droschl. 108–133.

Long, J.J. 2004. “Intercultural Identities in W.G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants* and Norbert Gstrein’s *Die englischen Jahre*.” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 25.5–6: 512–528.

Nünning, Ansgar. 2000. “Von der fiktionalen Biographie zur biographischen Metafiktion – Prolegomena zu einer Theorie, Typologie und Funktionsgeschichte eines hybriden Genres.” *Fakten und Fiktionen. Strategien fiktional biographischer Dichterdarstellungen in Roman, Drama und Film seit 1970*. Ed. Christian von Zimmermann. Tübingen: Narr. 15–36.

Nüchtern, Klaus. 1999. “Norbert Gstrein: *Die englischen Jahre.*” *Der Falter* (9 November).
http://www.literaturhaus.at/index.php?id=1228

Pichler, Martin. 2002. “Norbert Gstrein: *Die englischen Jahre*.” *Erinnerung, Gedächtnis, Geschichtsbewältigung: österreichische Literatur der neunziger Jahre. Ein literarischer Workshop*. Ed. Bożena Bekas, Joanna Jabłkowska, and Joanna Michalak. Fernwald: litblockín. 79–84.

Richardson, Brian. 2006. *Unnatural Voices. Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Ritchie, J.M. 2005. “Exile, Internment and Deportation in Norbert Gstrein’s *Die englischen Jahre*.” *“Totally Un-English”? Britain’s Internment of Enemy Aliens in Two World Wars*. Ed. Richard Dove. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi. 193–203.

Schabert, Ina. 1990. *In Quest of the Other Person. Fiction as Biography*. Tübingen: Francke.

Schüler, C.J. 2002. “Review of *The English Years*, by Norbert Gstrein.” *The Independent* (30 December).
https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-english-years-by-norbert-gstrein-trans-by-anthea-bell-137771.html

Wallas, Armin A. 2001. “Das Verschwinden im Exil. Zu Norbert Gstreins Erzähltexten *Die englischen Jahre* und *Selbstportrait mit einer Toten*.” *Mnemosyne. Zeit-Schrift für Geisteswissenschaften* 27: 215–224.

Winkels, Hubert. 1999. "Review of *Die englischen Jahre*." *Deutschlandfunk* (3 October).
https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/die-englischen jahre.700.de.html?dram:article_id=79556

MARTIN LÖSCHNIGG is Professor of English and Chair of the Section on Postcolonial Literatures in the University of Graz, Austria. He is vice director of the Graz Centre for Canadian Studies, a Corresponding Member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and a member of its commission on European and North American Cultural Relations. He was a visiting scholar at the Freie Universität Berlin and at Harvard University in 1995/1996, and a Visiting Associate Professor of English at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis in 2005. His research interests include narratology, autobiography, the literature of war and Canadian literature, and he has published widely on these subjects. Recent book publications include: *North America, Europe and the Cultural Memory of the First World War* (co-edited with Karin Kraus, 2015), *The First World War Then and Now* (co-ed. with Sherrill Grace and Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, 2018), *The Great War in Post-Memory Literature and Film* and *The Enemy in Contemporary Film* (both co-edited with Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż, 2014 and 2018), and *The Anglo-Canadian Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Interpretations* (co-edited with Maria Löschnigg (2019).