

Ironic inversions: Geographical and political islands in F.C. Delius' *Stroll from Rostock to Syracuse*¹ (1995)

Ironische Verkehungen: Geographische und politische Inseln in F.C. Delius' Der Spaziergang von Rostock nach Syrakus (1995)

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses Friedrich Christian Delius' story Der Spaziergang von Rostock nach Syrakus (1995) in the context of island discourses and the discursive construction of insular spaces. It argues that, in a satirical adaptation of Seume's Stroll to Syracuse (1803), Delius reconceptualises the Mediterranean island of Sicily as the traditional place of longing in German travel literature since the 18th century by contrasting it to the political 'island' of the GDR. He constructs the socialist state as a place of yearning and develops a counter-discourse to the established European island imaginary.²

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Beitrag untersucht Friedrich Christian Delius' Erzählung Der Spaziergang von Rostock nach Syrakus (1995) im Kontext von Inseldiskursen und der diskursiven Konstruktion insularer Räume. Dabei wird argumentiert, dass Delius in einer ironischen Spiegelung

¹ Following the English translation of J.G. Seume's *Spaziergang nach Syrakus* (1803) with the title *A Stroll to Syracuse* (1964, translated by Alexander and Elizabeth Henderson), for the context of this article F.C. Delius' story *Spaziergang von Rostock nach Syrakus* (1995) shall also be translated into *Stroll from Rostock to Syracuse*, with the word 'stroll' already hinting at Delius' ironic inversion of Seume's walk on foot by choosing the train as a means of transport for his journey. To date there is no official English translation of Delius' text.

² This article is based on a talk presented at the 3rd Mediterranean Islands Conference (MIC) on the Island of Vis, Croatia, from 16th to 19th September 2020.

von Seumes Spaziergang nach Syrakus (1803) die Mittelmeerinsel Sizilien als traditionellen Sehnsuchtsort in der deutschen Reiseliteratur seit dem 18. Jahrhundert neu konzipiert, indem er ihr die politische 'Insel' der DDR gegenüberstellt. Er kodiert den sozialistischen Staat als Sehnsuchtsort und entwickelt zugleich einen Gegendiskurs zum etablierten europäischen Imaginären der Insel.

PREAMBLE

The recent Covid-19 pandemic has provoked a feeling of isolation in many, whether they are on an island or on a continent. Due to the travel restrictions or, in some cases, even the complete closure of a country, not only geographical islands have been associated with features of insularity, but also continental places. One might suspect, therefore, that what ultimately makes a place insular is not, or at least not only, a result of its geographical features, but rather political decisions as well as discursive practices. The literary depiction of geographical versus political insularity analysed here in relation to a text written before the turn of the millennium has, ironically, become even more topical in the current circumstances.

INTRODUCTION: FROM J.G. SEUME TO F.C. DELIUS

In his story *Stroll from Rostock to Syracuse*, published in German in 1995, German writer F.C. Delius depicts a rather benevolent satirical image of the German Democratic Republic. At the time of publication, five years after German unification, the discussion on the former socialist country had already lost some of its political urgency. Delius' narrative is inspired by the story of a GDR citizen, Klaus Müller, who in 1988, after seven years of preparation, illegally fled the country by crossing the Baltic Sea with a sailing dinghy. After a short stay in Western Germany and Italy, however, unlike most GDR refugees, he happily returned to the GDR again. Klaus Müller – as well as Delius' protagonist in the story – followed the footsteps of classical German author and compatriot Saxon Johann Gottfried Seume (Costagli 2015: 357), who, in 1802, undertook a journey from Leipzig to the Sicilian city of Syracuse and back, outlining his experiences in the famous travel diary *Stroll to Syracuse* (1803). Having learned about Müller's adventure in the *Ostsee-Zeitung* (Cleven 1992), Delius fictionalises the story in a “narrative play with literary tradition in the spirit of postmodern literature”³ (Costagli 2015: 358), intertextually engaging with Seume's travel log in an ironic way.

Delius centres his narrative around the protagonist Paul Gompitz, an in-

³ All quotations from original texts in German were translated into English by the author. Original in German: “narratives Spiel mit der literarischen Tradition im Sinne der postmodernen Literatur”.

tellectual who loves philosophy and especially the philosopher Ernst Bloch. He is, however, not allowed access to university due to his refusal to serve in the military and works as a waiter in various restaurants across the GDR. Despite the influence of the regime on his personal biography, Gompitz, as a convinced socialist, also remains a loyal citizen of the GDR. Yet, he plans what could be seen as a temporary form of dissidence by following in the footsteps of Johann Gottfried Seume, venturing on a trip to Sicily. In the tradition of the German ‘Italienreise’, the tour of Italy as an educational journey by middle-class intellectuals of the 18th and 19th century, the protagonist of Delius’ narrative intends to embark on a similar journey, thus to leave East-Germany and travel to Italy, hoping to be allowed access to the GDR again upon his return.

As is known, however, leaving and returning to the GDR was only allowed with special permission by the regime; trips for touristic purposes to Western countries were denied. Almost the only way to leave the socialist state was by illegally fleeing across the GDR’s heavily monitored borders, sadly often ending with being killed or being locked up in one of the prisons controlled by the Stasi. Therefore, as the protagonist unhappily states, GDR citizens were “experts in travelling with the finger on the map”⁴ (Delius 2004: 36). They could only acquire knowledge about the Western world by reading – for example, travel literature by German classical writers. Identifying with the ideals of freedom held by his predecessor Seume, a representative of the late Enlightenment, the protagonist’s ultimate place of longing becomes the Mediterranean, in particular Syracuse on the Italian island of Sicily.

In the beginning of the 19th century, Seume’s walk and its published story were intended as an expression of political autonomy and humanitarian thought. In the prologue to his travel diary, the author optimistically states: “As soon as the kings are brave enough to rise to universal justice, they will found their own safety and necessitate the happiness of their people through liberty”⁵ (Seume 2021: VIII). In contrast to previous travellers whose access to Italy was mainly an intellectual one, Seume sought to engage with the political reality of the Italian people, focussing on provincial areas rather than the cultural centres such as Rome and Venice. In fact, for Gompitz’s predecessor Seume, walking

⁴ Original in German: “Experten [...] für Reisen mit dem Finger auf der Landkarte”.

⁵ Original in German: “Sobald die Könige den Mut haben werden, sich zur allgemeinen Gerechtigkeit zu erheben, werden sie ihre eigene Sicherheit gründen und das Glück ihrer Völker durch Freiheit notwendig machen.”

through Italy on foot had a decisively political meaning. Through his choice of narrating through the pedestrian's perspective, Seume intended to protest against feudal society and contrast his way of travelling to the one of more privileged, previous intellectual German travellers to Italy. (Geier 2013: 224)⁶ Furthermore, extending his trip to Sicily and touring the island constituted another deviation from the classical route. (Meier 2021: 302) Similarly, Gompitz's planned trip is a political act, claiming his right to liberty within the socialist regime. He decides: "I will brave an educational journey and pilgrimage to Italy on the traces of my compatriot Seume, I will try all legal ways, but if they don't let me, then I will look for my way over the sea!"⁷ (Delius 2004: 18). As Geier argues, however, the reference to Seume as historical personality seems to be of more importance than the reference to the actual travel experience in Italy; hence, the form of "interauctoriality"⁸ (Geier 2013: 226) dominates over the form of intertextuality. Seume's ideals of freedom, as well as his "assertion of individualism, not the specifics of Seume's Italian travel account"⁹ (ibid.), are in the foreground of Gompitz's interest. This is related to the protagonist's own claim for individual liberty which he hopes to achieve with his departure over the sea border to Western Europe (225) – a rather bold endeavour in an authoritarian socialist state.

As will be argued in the following sections from a topographical viewpoint, in his fictionalised account of an unusual travel story from the GDR and back, Delius adapts the motif of the Italian journey in German-language literature as well as the paradigm of the island as a place of yearning. Significantly, Delius evokes a number of insular places: the Mediterranean islands of Sicily and Ustica, the small East-German island Hiddensee in the Baltic Sea, and finally the German Democratic Republic as a politically created insular space. Instead of construing Sicily as the longed-for destination, the author ironically constructs the GDR as the paradisiac place of longing from the perspective of the protagonist, while depicting the Mediterranean island as a mere facilitator of Gompitz's aspiration for freedom of travel. Sicily,

⁶ Geier here also refers to Ursula Breymayer, 1990: "Mit den Augen eines Außenseiters. Johann Gottfried Seume und die Entdeckung der italienischen Wirklichkeit." In: Gunter E. Grimm/Ursula Breymayer/Walter Erhart (eds.): "Ein Gefühl von freierem Leben." *Deutsche Dichter in Italien*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 102-112.

⁷ Original in German: "Ich ertrotze mir eine Bildungs- und Pilgerreise nach Italien auf den Spuren meines Landsmanns Seume, ich versuche alle legalen Wege, aber wenn man mich nicht läßt, dann such ich meinen Weg über das Meer!"

⁸ Original in German: "Interauktorialität".

⁹ Original in German: "Behauptung von Individualismus, nicht um die Spezifik von Seumes Italien-Reisebeschreibungen".

the paradigmatic site of the Italian journey in German-language literature, therefore, has to be seen in close connection to its counterpart in the text: the GDR. It will be shown that in Delius' story, the enclosed state is associated with established topoi of the European island imaginary, such as remoteness and isolation, whilst his depiction of geographical isles, inversely, counters these traditional island discourses.

THE GDR AS PLACE OF YEARNING IN GOMPITZ'S ITALIAN JOURNEY

For centuries, Italy has been a travel destination for German intellectuals who construed the journey as an experience with an 'other', exotic culture in travel diaries and literary representations. The yearning for Italy had thus been a motif in German-language literature since the 18th century. This has only changed in fairly recent times, mainly due to different perspectives on Italy as a result of increasing mass tourism and Italian guest workers in Germany since the 1960s. The island of Sicily, in particular, still plays a central role in the representation of Italy in German-language literature, chiefly due to its central position in the Mediterranean and its eventful history at the intersection between Europe and Africa.¹⁰ In his study of depictions of Sicily in German-language literature, Mario Rubino (2014) refers to three basic trends identified by Ernst Osterkamp (1986): Greek nostalgia, 'Stauferkult' and Orientalist exoticism. He adds, however, two more strands in the representation of Sicily by Northern European writers: a reformatory-progressive approach and an aestheticising one.

Seume's *Stroll to Syracuse* (1803), Gompitz's reference, is mentioned as a classic example of the latter first strand of depicting Sicily, thus typically adopting a more socio-critical take. Examples of more recent works taking this approach are Marie Luise Kaschnitz's poem *Selinunt* (1954) or Christine Wolter's *Juni in Sizilien* (1977), in which she draws attention to continuous mismanagement and exploitation in Sicily (Rubino 2014: 82-84): "Eternally identical is the land,

¹⁰ For a recent study on the role of Sicily in German-language literature as a place of 'in between', see Burggrabe 2016. In his analysis, the author summarises the literary representation of Sicily as that of a place at the interface of reality, literature and mythology, as well as a transitional space which paradoxically holds clear borders to the sea on the one hand, but represents a threshold between different cultures and continents on the other; this has become especially poignant during the past decades of increasing migration between Africa and Europe.

eternally identical the drought, the toil of the farmers. It is the same whether the Anjou are ruling, who followed the Norman kings, whether it is the Spanish, the Bourbons, whether it is the Sicilian nobility or the tenants who got rich, the misery of the farmers remains, their hunger for a piece of land"¹¹ (Wolter 1991: 43). Goethe's famous *Italienische Reise* (1816/1817), the most seminal text in the genre of the 'Italienreise' in German-language literature, instead clearly takes an aestheticising approach by simultaneously acknowledging social as well as political injustices, however exoticising them as part of an Italian flair and lifestyle. 20th century examples taking a similar stance are works by Ernst and Friedrich Georg Jünger (*Aus der goldenen Muschel* (1944) and *Briefe aus Mondello* (1943)) or Joachim Fest's *Im Gegenlicht. Eine Italienische Reise* (1988). (Rubino 2014: 79-82) In *Briefe aus Mondello*, Friedrich Georg Jünger writes: "From Theocritus I gather that the pastures and meadows were richer in his time since a certain abundance breathes in his depiction; it doesn't lack water, shade and fresh, moist air [...] Today I read some of his idylls in our garden, and I couldn't have read them in a better place"¹² (Jünger 1943: 13). In this example, the author romanticises the place despite its obvious decline, referring to its status in Greek antiquity and hinting at a medially moderated perception of the place through Theocritus' literary treatment, thus adding another layer of construction.

In more recent literary representations, these two general categories of depicting the Mediterranean island, specifically the socio-critical and the aestheticising one, can still be observed with an increase in more realistic and critical ways of perceiving Sicily in contemporary literature and film. Additionally, Rubino identifies a tendency towards the depiction of Sicily in connection with death since the turn of the last century, drawing a rather pessimistic literary image of the Mediterranean island.¹³ He associates this development with the decline of former ideals and Sicily's decreasing exotic appeal due to changed travel conditions and an increasing assimilation of living standards (Rubino 2014: 93).

¹¹ Original in German: "Ewig gleich ist das Land, ewig gleich die Dürre, die Mühe der Bauern. Es ist dasselbe Leben, ob die Anjou regieren, die auf die Normannenkönige folgen, ob es die Spanier sind, die Bourbonen, ob es die sizilianischen Adligen sind oder die reich gewordenen Pächter, immer bleibt das Elend der Bauern, ihr Hunger nach einem Stückchen Land."

¹² Original in German: "Ich entnehme dem Theokrit, dass die Weiden und Triften zu seiner Zeit fetter waren, denn in seiner Darstellung atmet eine gewisse Üppigkeit; es fehlt ihr nicht an Wassern, Schatten und frischer, feuchter Luft. [...] Ich las heute in unserem Garten einige seiner Idyllen, und ich hätte sie an keinem günstigeren Orte lesen können."

¹³ An early example of this is Thomas Mann's famous *Zauberberg* (1924), a more recent one Erich Arendt's poem *Selinunt* (1940) whilst even more recent works include that of Joseph Zoderer's *Schmerz der Gewöhnung* (2002) and Wim Wenders' film *Palermo Shooting* (2008). (Rubino 2014: 86-93)

Delius' satirical narrative, however, represents an exception to this rather grim tendency in the literary depiction of Sicily of the past decades (90). The island is assigned an instrumental role in the text as Gompitz successfully fulfils his dream of travelling there, and hence claims his right to freedom of movement. However, he hardly engages with Sicily, neither on a socio-political, nor an intellectual-historical level. After meticulously preparing his flight from the GDR over a period of eight years from 1981 to 1988, Gompitz eventually succeeds in fleeing the country via the Baltic Sea and then travels to Italy. His stay in Sicily is rather brief; the actual experience of the island seems of less importance than the journey. The reference to contemporary Germany and the GDR plays a more prominent role in Delius' story than the Italian journey, as nine of the fifteen chapters are dedicated to Gompitz's preparation of his trip and his life in the GDR over a span of eight years. The rather superficial depiction of his stay in Italy, including the trip to the final destination Syracuse, is only covered in two chapters towards the end of the text and leads to a "noticeable marginalization of the Italian journey and travel experiences"¹⁴ (Geier 2013: 226). His short stay can therefore be defined as a hiatus from his life in the GDR, which in turn re-confirms his attachment to his home country and strengthens his sense of belonging. During his entire tour through Italy, his mind is mainly directed towards the GDR, which he profoundly starts missing. He becomes aware that "he risks falling sick out of sheer nostalgia"¹⁵ (Delius 2004: 120) and finds himself overwhelmed by the feeling of missing his wife and his life in Rostock:

"For one single problem you were not prepared: For not having a problem anymore. How does it look in your mind when you have made it? When you have been away from home for months? When you are rushing from one Italian city to the next and you see the Italians with all their eye fuck? And the further you get away from Rostock, the heavier the steps become, the more uncomfortable is the feeling in your heart's crust to be further and further away from yourself, all this wasn't planned!"¹⁶ (120).

¹⁴ Original in German: "auffällige Marginalisierung der Italien-Reise und -Erfahrungen im Text".

¹⁵ Original in German: "vor lauter Sehnsucht krank zu werden drohe".

¹⁶ Original in German: "Nur auf ein Problem warst du nicht vorbereitet: Wenn du kein Problem mehr hast. Wie sieht es in deiner Psyche aus, wenn du es gepackt hast? Wenn du monatelang weg bist von zu Hause? Wenn du hier in Italien von Stadt zu Stadt rauschst und die Italiener siehst mit ihrem ständigen Augengeficke? Und je weiter es weggeht von Rostock, desto schwerer werden dir die Schritte, desto unangenehmer das Gefühl in der Herzkruete, dich immer weiter von dir selbst zu entfernen, das alles war nicht geplant."

When Gompitz stereotypically describes “the Italians with all their eye fuck”, for example, he seems to continue a certain disregard for a differentiated encounter with contemporary Italy in the German tradition of the Italian journey, which, through the aestheticising approach, has been focused on the construction of an imaginary ‘Italy’, mainly based on aesthetics and antiquity, rather than socio-political realities at the time of travelling. In this matter, Gompitz clearly differs from the way Seume approaches Italian culture who critically engages with the socio-political reality of the people, expressing his indignation about the exploitation by the nobility and clergy. (Meier 2020: 306f.)

Once in Syracuse, the final destination of his journey, Gompitz writes to his wife, emphasising a positive perception of the cultural history of the city after a brief remark about its current social conditions: “Dear Helga! I have been in Syracuse, at the destination of my journey, for two days now. Syracuse and the island Sicily are not only the poorhouse in the wealthy EU-state Italy, but for me they are also a Hellas which has been transmitted over centuries, Greece in its cultural heyday. After all Syracuse is the city of Archimedes, one century before Christ, a Doric high culture was prospering in Sicily, which still characterizes the face of the island today”¹⁷ (Delius 2004: 122). Gompitz’s predecessor Seume instead hints at the political dimension of the increasing decay of Syracuse, not its glorious history, blaming the government for neglecting the preservation of the city: “Syracuse is falling more and more into decay; the government doesn’t seem to care at all. Only occasionally it sends its tax revisors to collect its dues with vigour. It was a very melancholic quarter of an hour, when I sat with Landolina high up on the crag of Euryalus, the worthy patriotically zealous man, overlooking the big sad field of his hometown, which was barely ruins anymore [...]”¹⁸ (Seume 2020: 158). Gompitz’s contrasting lack of engagement with his longed-for travel destination implies the secondary role of the place itself and empha-

¹⁷ Original in German: “Liebe Helga! Seit zwei Tagen bin ich am Ziel meiner Reise, in Syrakus. Syrakus und die Insel Sizilien sind nicht nur das Armenhaus im wohlhabenden EG-Staat Italien, sie sind für mich auch über Jahrtausende überkommenes Hellas, Griechenland in seiner kulturellen Blüte. Syrakus ist immerhin die Stadt des Archimedes, auf Sizilien blühte, ein Jahrhundert vor Christus, eine dorische Hochkultur, die noch heute das Antlitz der Insel prägt.”

¹⁸ Original in German: “Syrakus kommt immer mehr und mehr in Verfall; die Regierung scheint sich durchaus um nichts zu bekümmern. Nur zuweilen schickt sie ihre Steuerrevisoren, um die Abgaben mit Strenge einzutreiben. Es war mir eine sehr melancholische Viertelstunde, als ich mit Landolina oben auf der Felsenspitze von Euryalus saß, der würdige patriotisch eifernde Mann über das große traurige Feld seiner Vaterstadt hinblickte, das kaum noch Trümmer war [...]”.

sises the importance of Syracuse as a mere symbol of his claim for freedom of travel.

Similarly, the small island of Ustica in the Tyrrhenian Sea located North of Sicily is merely mentioned with reference to its mythological significance. Yet, even so, the island of Homer's *Odyssey* remains at a constant distance to Gompitz's itinerary; he only manages to see it through binoculars from the ferry taking him back to mainland Italy: "After some time a subtle recurring fire can be seen, at a distance of around sixteen nautical miles, thirty kilometres. The deck officer can confirm it: 'Yes, that's the Island Ustica.' Happy to have seen the island of the Cyclops after all, Paul falls asleep"¹⁹ (Delius 2004: 128). Gompitz here immediately translates the geographical information about the island into its mythological interpretation. The mere sighting of the isle, the confirmation of its existence – and in Gompitz's interpretation, of its mythical sense – seems to have a soothing effect. In this context, it is significant that the protagonist completely ignores the island's historical role in the context of Italian fascism. Until the 1950s the small island served as a place of banishment for political opponents to the Mussolini regime – many of them communists – where they were often kept in desolate conditions. Despite this apparent connection to the GDR as its counter-island, so to speak, Gompitz does not engage further with its past, focussing solely on his return. Ustica remains a distant mythological island in contrast to the 'real', lived island of the German Democratic Republic, whose own negative qualities become apparent in the narrative despite the protagonist's construction of it as a positive insular space.

As Costagli argues, during Gompitz's travel preparations, "Italy only remains the utopian vanishing point in the spirit of Ernst Bloch, who was also admired by Gompitz"²⁰ (2015: 358). Ultimately, Sicily's (and Italy's) significance in the text can be reduced to the status of a means of re-confirmation of the GDR as Gompitz's place of (be)longing: constituting the starting point and longed-for final destination of his venture at the same time. As Rolf Parr states, however, Delius has always been resistant towards utopias and denies

¹⁹ Original in German: "Nach einiger Zeit ist ein schwaches wiederkehrendes Feuer zu sehen, Entfernung etwa sechzehn Seemeilen, dreißig Kilometer. Der Decksoffizier kann es bestätigen: 'Yes, that's the Island Ustica.' Glücklich, doch noch die Insel der Zyklopen gesehen zu haben, schläft Paul ein."

²⁰ Original in German: "Italien bleibt nur der utopische Fluchtpunkt im Sinne des ebenfalls von Gompitz verehrten Ernst Blochs".

any utopian quality in his work (2020: 133)²¹. Nevertheless, Parr argues that there are “latent utopian themes and ways of writing”²² (135) in Delius’ work, which through his characteristic ironic pitch undermine traditional readings of utopian perspectives. Moreover, Delius does not develop a critical stance on the present by “assembling documents in a way that [...] they result in contradictions between a ‘utopian ideal’ and ‘societal reality’, but by documenting contradictions within reality and connecting them to questions about normality”²³ (137). He thus breaks away from a prospective dimension and focuses on the immediate present. This combination of irony and contradiction, creating a critical stance on current conditions is also staged in *Stroll from Rostock to Syracuse*. Delius depicts the GDR as a place of longing, but at the same time hints at its enclosure through political surveillance and clear limitations which incite Gompitz’s attempt at transgressing the border. The author construes the socialist state as a place-to-be which, however, constantly undermines its ideal status by limiting its inhabitants’ living space. In summary, one can say, therefore, that in Delius’ text, Italy becomes a non-place in the literal meaning of the word *u-topia*, whilst the GDR is depicted as its antipode, as a more concrete, insular place whose utopian connotations are ambivalent.

PARADISIAC SOCIALIST ISLANDS: THE GDR AND HIDDENSEE

With his *Stroll from Rostock to Syracuse*, Delius joins the ranks of a number of authors evoking the island metaphor for the depiction of the GDR, another topos in German-language narratives, both in literature of the GDR and in texts dealing with the unification after 1990. This is not least due to associations of the country with concepts of insular utopias due to its ambitious political project of establishing a socialist state, eventually perceived as

²¹ In his article Rolf Parr refers to the following interview with F.C. Delius in the *Tagesspiegel*: Austilat, Andreas/Thomma, Norbert: “Schriftsteller F.C. Delius im Interview. ‘Ich war stets resistent gegen Utopien.’” In: *Der Tagesspiegel*, 5th February 2016. URL: <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/schriftsteller-f-c-delius-im-interview-ich-war-stets-resistent-gegen-utopien/12897518-all.html> (Last access: 13th August 2021).

²² Original in German: “latent utopischen Themen und Schreibweisen”.

²³ Original in German: “nicht dadurch, dass er Dokumente so montiert, dass sich [...] Widersprüche zwischen einem ‘utopischen Ideal’ und der ‘gesellschaftlichen Wirklichkeit’ ergeben, sondern dadurch, dass er Widersprüche innerhalb der ‘Wirklichkeit’ dokumentiert und sie zugleich mit Fragen nach der Normalität verknüpft.”

turning the inhabitants into victims of a failed societal experiment. In Uwe Tellkamp's acclaimed social novel *Der Turm* (2008), focussing on the last decade and failure of the GDR, for example, the GDR is referred to as "Gelehrteninsel" (*island of scholars*) or "ATLANTIS" (Tellkamp 2008: 9). Recent studies about the literary representation of the GDR have also shown that islands are used as metonymies, metaphors or even parables to critically assess its political reality, using the island as a model for the bigger context. "[T]he size and the geographical position of an island are [...] ideal prerequisites for an experimental undertaking" (Zubarik 2016a: 149) within a detached, confined and controllable space. German unification in 1990 turned the GDR into yet another type of island; what was once harsh reality for many became an island enclosed in time, banned to German history books and the memory of those who had experienced it.²⁴

In Delius' story, the East-German island of Hiddensee, located in the Baltic Sea and part of the GDR, is assigned a crucial role as Gompitz prepares and eventually embarks on his journey from there. It is depicted as an ideal site. In fact, Hiddensee has often been employed in GDR, as well as post-GDR literature, to critically assess and negotiate socialist reality, both in depictions of idyllic settings as well as dystopian sceneries. (Ostheimer 2016) In an interview about his acclaimed novel *Kruso* (2014), set on Hiddensee, contemporary German author Lutz Seiler describes the island as the "absolute place of longing in East Germany. It was the only island, the peak of exotism, unspoiled landscape, at the outermost edge of the Republic. And then this experience of liberty, which one can have only on an island. Already the steamboat trip there: As if one would cross over to a different world. For everybody this island had [...] a special magic of liberty, a radiation of liberty"²⁵ (Seiler in Krekeler 2014: 22). Located at the Northern border of the GDR, and due to its detachment from the continent, it represented not only a

²⁴ This is for example mentioned by renowned contemporary writer Jenny Erpenbeck who in the Bamberger *Poetikvorlesungen* writes about her home country as a sunken island: "[...] Welt war plötzlich dort, wo die Wirtschaft besser funktionierte. Plötzlich. Plötzlich war auch unser Sprechen, das im Weltmaßstab angeschaut wurde, etwa so wie eine alte orientalische Sprache, deren Schriftzeichen entweder entziffert werden können, nur ist die Welt, von der sie erzählt, für immer versunken. Denn unser Alltag war plötzlich kein Alltag mehr, sondern ein Museum, oder ein Abenteuer, das man erzählt, unsere Sitten eine Attraktion. Das Selbstverständliche hörte innerhalb weniger Wochen auf, das Selbstverständliche zu sein." (Erpenbeck 2018: 158)

²⁵ Original in German: "Die Insel war der Sehnsuchtsort überhaupt im Osten. Für die allermeisten. Es war die einzige Insel, der Gipfel an Exotik, unbeschädigte Landschaft, am äußersten Rand der Republik. Und dann diese Freiheitserfahrung, die man nur auf einer Insel haben kann. Allein die Dampferfahrt dahin: Als würde man übersetzen in eine andere Welt. Diese Insel hatte für alle [...] eine besondere Freiheitsmagie, eine Freiheitsstrahlung."

popular holiday destination to GDR citizens, but also a promise of openness in contrast to the hermetically closed socialist state on the continent (ibid.).

However, the rather long and narrow island – vertically running parallel to the continental part of the GDR – also contributed to the insularisation of the socialist state (Ostheimer 2016: 183). A merely symbolic, non-material border, dividing the sea waters of the GDR into an inner and an outer section, ran from the Northern point as well as from the most Southern tip of the island over to the continental part of the GDR. This created an enclosed inner sea area between the island and the mainland which could only be trespassed with special permission. According to Ostheimer, the creation of this border extended the “arbitrary act of a border regime of the GDR isolated from the West to the sea borders”²⁶ (2016: 183). This “double coding” of “rigidity and porosity” (ibid.) of the dashed line on the map represents the paradoxical state of the island of Hiddensee, representing both openness and closure. Interestingly, this ambivalence of the island is also referred to in the travel diary by Klaus Müller, Gompitz’s real life model, who attempted the flight over to Western Europe from Hiddensee (ibid.).

As for Müller, this island close to the Danish border plays a central role for the attempt at leaving the country in Delius’ narrative. Hiddensee, here also employed as metonymy for the whole ‘island state’ of the GDR, is turned into a paradisiac site – since the 19th century, a characteristic often associated with Caribbean isles in western discourse (Gillis 2005: 31). The transposition of such notions also connected to lush, exotic nature and sunny climates, to an island in the Baltic sea has ironic undertones. Its insular features and enclosure become even more defined once Gompitz leaves the GDR and nostalgically thinks back to his home country. Even whilst preparing for his trip, when controlled by policemen on the beach, Gompitz sketches Hiddensee as the perfect place, idealising it to the status of a mythological Greek island, knowing that this is what the statesmen would like to hear: “Beautiful, you say? No, Sir, it is more than beautiful, it is paradise! The men of Ulysses didn’t think differently at the time than I do here when they were on the island of the Lotus-eaters: there is no place more beautiful than this one. This unique view on the thornbush! The open sea, the radiant sun, the splendid beach, the proud birds in the air, I would like to stay here forever,

²⁶ Original in German: “deren Setzung den Willkürakt eines nach Westen abgeschotteten Grenzregimes der DDR auf die Wassergrenzen ausweitet”.

in this pearl of nature! Here men find themselves! No car, no noise, no rush! In this wonderful, lovely landscape I discover and enjoy the whole world”²⁷ (Delius 2004: 64).

Shortly after his “eulogy” (ibid.) to the policemen, still ironically connecting Hiddensee to the rest of the world, he thinks more realistically: “In the West he will never be as fine as here. Never. The speech to the naked officer was not hypocritical. Why lie here and wait until opportune winds allow the flight from paradise? Why risk my life if there is nothing more beautiful? He isn’t missing anything except the rest of the world. Nothing but a destination, Italy. Nothing, apart from the second destination, that is to return from Italy to Hiddensee and Rostock and Dresden and to be able to tell his friends: ‘Hey, buddy, here I am again, back from Syracuse!’”²⁸ (65). Acknowledging the GDR’s political insularity, in this passage he defines his eventual travel destination, that is the socialist state itself, his ‘paradise’ island, which becomes the ultimate place of longing – however, on the precondition of being able to leave, of being able to transcend the political island.

Finally, Gompitz ventures on his flight from the GDR from Hiddensee, sailing over the blue border to the Danish town Gedser – also located on an island – at the southernmost point of Denmark. In the context of the narrative, crossing over from the GDR to Denmark not only means trespassing the frontier from Eastern to Western Europe, but also crossing over from a highly authoritarian state to a country which has been assigned the symbolic position of a role model of democracy.²⁹ On a spatial level, therefore, Delius contrasts two opposing forms of states, connected (or divided) by the sea, interlinked by the act of transgression, triggering a negotiation process of Gompitz’s identification with his home country. Once in West Germany, he

²⁷ Original in German: “Schön, sagen Sie? Nein, mein Herr, das ist mehr als schön, das ist das Paradies! Die Männer des Odysseus werden damals, als sie auf der Insel der Lotophagen waren, nicht anders gedacht haben als ich hier: es gibt keinen schöneren Ort als diesen. Dieser einmalige Blick hier auf dem Dornbusch! Das weite Meer, die strahlende Sonne, der herrliche Strand, die stolzen Vögel in der Luft, ich möchte ewig hierbleiben in dieser Perle der Natur! Hier findet der Mensch zu sich selbst! Kein Auto, kein Lärm, keine Hektik! In dieser wunderbaren, reizvollen Landschaft entdeckte und genieße ich die ganze Welt.”

²⁸ Original in German: “Im Westen wird er es nie so gut haben wie hier. Nie. Die Rede an den nackten Offizier ist nicht geheuchelt gewesen. Warum hier liegen und lauern, bis ein passender Wind die Flucht aus dem Paradies erlaubt? Warum das Leben aufs Spiel setzen, wenn es nichts Schöneres gibt? Ihm fehlt nichts, außer der übrigen Welt. Nichts, außer einem Ziel, Italien. Nichts, außer dem zweiten Ziel, von Italien wieder zurückzukehren nach Hiddensee und Rostock und Dresden und den Kumpels sagen zu können: ‚Nu, Alter, da bin ich wieder, zurück aus Syrakus!’”

²⁹ In *The Origins of Political Order*, Francis Fukuyama, for example, makes recourse to this discourse when he writes of “a mythical place that is known to have good political and economic institutions: it is stable, democratic, peaceful, prosperous, inclusive, and has extremely low levels of political corruption. Everyone would like to figure out how to transform Somalia, Haiti, Nigeria, Iraq or Afghanistan into ‘Denmark’” (2011: 14).

is tortured by his homesickness and disappointed by the capitalist system, which he sees as forcing people to lie and be pretentious, where no one seems to be satisfied with the wealth acquired. An ironically acknowledged sense of completeness and perfection makes him feel socially excluded: “[...] nobody needs me, nobody wants me, here everything is complete, everything perfect, from the houses, the front gardens, the intercity-trains it screams: Everything is ok! Nobody is needed anymore! Certainly not an East German who comes along! We have everything! Humanity has arrived at its destiny! You are too late, Paul!”³⁰ (108). Being reminded of his friends and the interesting people he met in the GDR, he nostalgically thinks back on his home country with the “paradise Hiddensee” (ibid.), which re-confirms his plan to return after having been to Sicily. Negatively describing capitalist society in West Germany – a critical attitude ultimately similar to the author’s critique towards his home country – the text ironically overdraws the socialist state as a paradisiac island state, playing with the cliché of insular places often associated with close social ties and informal connections. The depiction of Gompitz’s strong feeling of loneliness and homesickness in West Germany ironically converts the GDR into an ideal social space. It depoliticises and stages it as a safe place, conveying the feeling of protection due to its insular seclusion and enclosure.

INSULAR AND NON-INSULAR ISLES: ISLAND CHARACTERISTICS INVERTED

In his insightful article on the perception of Atlantic islands until the 19th century, John R. Gillis states that the notion of the island is a “construction, variable by time as well as by culture” (Gillis 2003: 19). Due to their particular spatiality, islands have been associated with varying features, subject to geographies, political interests and ideologies at different times in history, being allotted different positions at the centre or periphery of the world’s attention. After a period of increased visibility during the 18th and 19th century due to the islands’ central role in world trade and evolutionary science,

³⁰ Original in German: “[...] keiner braucht mich, keiner will mich, hier ist alles fertig, alles perfekt, aus den Häusern, aus den Vorgärten, aus den Intercity-Zügen, aus den Fußgängerzonen schreit es: Es ist alles in Ordnung! Es wird niemand mehr gebraucht! Schon gar nicht ein hergelaufener Ostmensch! Wir haben alles! Die Menschheit ist an ihrem Ziel angekommen! Du bist zu spät dran, Paul!”

“insularity was beginning to attain its modern association with narrowness and backwardness” (30). Subsequently, in the course of the 19th century, Atlantic islands were re-marginalised by scientists and politicians, and became “remote in time as well as in space; available yet again to mainland fantasies” (31). The features of insularity assigned to islands from the continent “made life increasingly difficult for those born there. The identification of islands with insularity did not serve them well” (ibid.).

According to Christian Moser’s seminal analysis of western island discourse, the predominant type of island in the European imaginary is based on two basic oppositions. Firstly, there is the opposition between the continental mainland and the marginalised island space, constructing the continent as the centre and therefore creating the idea of the island as a secondary place, isolated by the sea, subject to backwardness as well as a different perception of time. The second opposition is the one of land and sea, between the solid and the liquid; due to its seemingly clear borders with the sea, the island space is assigned a high level of tangibility and finiteness in the midst of water, evoking the impression of a fixed point of orientation. (Moser 2005: 408-409) The island as an “epitome of a clearly marked place” seems like a “natural colon[y], just waiting to be owned”³¹ (409). Its “attributes of limitation and stasis, which are ascribed to the island in Western thinking, not only facilitate colonial, but also intellectual access”³² (410).

One paradigmatic act which goes back to classic Robinsonades and can be found in island narratives throughout literary history, for example, is climbing a hill or a mountain upon arrival on an island – be it due to shipwreck or a planned visit – overlooking the island from above and acknowledging its finiteness and borders. Connected to space as a site of power structures, this act contributes to a colonialist island discourse; the bird’s-eye-perspective can be seen as a spatial appropriation in the form of visually mapping the island, measuring and imposing a fictional grid onto the space below.³³ In relation to city space, the “urban island” (Certeau 1984: 91), in his *Practice of everyday life* Michel de Certeau outlines how this distant view also implies an estrangement from the everyday life practices of the inhabitants below, who

³¹ Original in German: “natürliche Kolonie[...], die nur darauf warte[t], in Besitz genommen zu werden.”

³² Original in German: “Die Attribute der Begrenztheit und der Statik, die der Insel im westlichen Denken zugeschrieben werden, erleichtern nicht nur den kolonialen, sondern auch den intellektuellen Zugriff.”

³³ For a more detailed analysis of the visual vs. practical appropriation of insular spaces in comparative island literature see also Dautel 2021.

continuously create new spaces by walking, therefore establishing a counter discourse to the panoptic view from above. (91–93) Hence, the perspective from the mountain can be interpreted as an assertion of power which creates a kind of ‘fiction’ of the island space below, conveying the impression that it is easy to grasp and to conquer.

As has been argued, the place assigned with such established features of insularity in *Stroll from Rostock to Syracuse* is the German Democratic Republic rather than the geographical islands also present in the story. The state is both characterised by its clear limitation as well as a specific sense of time, a certain “stasis” to use Moser’s wording. With Delius’ depiction of the state’s heavily policed political borders – some of them in the sea – the state seems to feature an increased spatial definition, easy to capture and to survey. Intertextually engaging with canonical island texts, the motif of viewing the insular space from above is also adopted in Delius’ text. In his adaptation, however, it is not an outsider’s but an insider’s view from inhabitants of the political ‘island’ itself, thus implying a different take on the limitations of the island space. In a memory from Gompitz’s childhood, he climbs a mountain with his parents where his father shows him the country from above: “What is there behind the mountains, Daddy? This is Bohemia, but we aren’t allowed to go there, it is forbidden! And behind it? Behind the Bohemian country are the Giant Mountains, we are not allowed to go there! Further south of the Alps, behind the Alps there is Italy. Behind the mountains always new mountains, the forbidden distant lands, the world doesn’t end”³⁴ (Delius 2004: 12). The protagonist’s father refers to the finiteness of the political island, which, in this case, is not limited by the sea, but the heavily monitored GDR borders. Acknowledging the “world” beyond, including the ‘promised’ land Italy, however, instead of presenting a colonizing approach from above, the way of referring to the territorial limitations rather acknowledges the politically imposed limitations. Having spent his life with the awareness of being spatially enclosed, many years later Gompitz thinks: “Long enough tried to forget the wall, to accept it and to make myself at home with it, the flat with Helga, the old furniture, the car, the art books, you hung wallpaper and pottered around, accumulated a couple of things around

³⁴ Original in German: “Was ist hinter den Bergen da, Papa? Das ist Böhmen, aber da dürfen wir nicht hin, das ist verboten! Und dahinter? Hinter dem Böhmerland das Riesengebirge, da dürfen wir nicht hin! Weiter südlich die Alpen, hinter den Alpen Italien. Hinter den Bergen immer neue Berge, die verbotene Ferne, die Welt hört nicht auf”

you. [...] but what use is it for you if you remain walled in!”³⁵ (13). Here, the political border replaces the natural limitations of a geographical island, and seems even more insurmountable than the boundaries of the sea; a fact which ultimately leads Gompitz to his attempt at trespassing them, indeed, making use of the more permeable sea border.

In contrast to the traditional features of insularity assigned to the GDR, the literary representation of the islands of Sicily and Hiddensee re-negotiates the established European island discourse. In Delius’ depiction, the geographical islands represent transitory and open spaces without clear borders and bear a high connectivity to the mainland. Whilst the moment of traversing the political border between Germany and Italy is explicitly mentioned, the act of crossing the sea over to Sicily is completely omitted. Once in Syracuse, Gompitz notes the non-existing borders or inspections at the shore: “Everywhere on the sea are small boats, you just drive out to angle and to fish. There are no customs facilities, no border areas, one immediately faces the incoming ships”³⁶ (125f.). Instead of constituting a clear-cut border with the island space, the sea rather opens up the island spaces, giving way to new opportunities and aspirations. The island Hiddensee with its status between openness and closure, as well as the surrounding Baltic Sea, facilitate the flight from the GDR, also becoming a threshold between politically open and closed spaces. These geographical as well as political spaces of possible transgression allow Gompitz the opportunity to experience the world outside the socialist state. The fluid, open space between the German Democratic Republic and Western Europe becomes the paradigmatic site for the re-negotiation of Gompitz’s longing for freedom of travel, but also for the re-consideration of his sense of belonging to the socialist state. This is reinforced by the isolated-ness and sheer impossibility of crossing the strictly upheld borders, the question whether he will be allowed back into the country again after his return from Sicily.

As mentioned above, another aspect of insularity traditionally assigned to remote islands, is a specific experience of time, also related to the GDR in Delius’ narrative. Ostheimer and Zubarik state that visitors of islands stereo-

³⁵ Original in German: “Lange genug versucht, die Mauer zu vergessen, dich abzufinden und einzurichten, die Wohnung mit Helga, die alten Möbel, das Auto, die Kunstbücher, hast tapeziert und gewerkelt und ein paar Sachen um dich herum aufgehäuft. [...] aber was nützt es dir, wenn du eingemauert bleibst!”

³⁶ Original in German: “Auf dem Meer sind überall kleine Boote, man fährt einfach nur zum Angeln und zum Fischen hinaus. Es gibt keine Zollstation, keine Grenzgebiete, man steht unmittelbar vor den einlaufenden Schiffen.”

typically look for a different reckoning of time in order to flee their lifestyles on the continent; they search for “a temporal downtime and are interested in everything which opposes the tendencies of acceleration”³⁷ (Ostheimer/Zubarik 2016: 8). Insular places, such as the enclosed authoritarian state, bear specific features of time and space. Due to their particular temporality, as well as spatiality, “it is especially islands and insular spaces that suggest an interrelationship of temporalizing perception of space and spatializing depiction”³⁸ (Ostheimer/Zubarik 2016: 12). In an analysis of Matthias Wegehaupt’s novel *Die Insel* (2005), where the island also metaphorically stands in for the GDR, Zubarik suggests that the characters offer resistance to the totalitarian state by counterposing their own reckoning of time, their “Eigenzeit” (Zubarik 2016b: 122). In the form of inertia and stagnation they oppose the political temporality with its acceleration and expropriation of time (ibid.).

Similarly, a specific, slower reckoning of time is also depicted in *Stroll from Rostock to Syracuse*. In the GDR, while preparing his trip, Gompitz seems to have an abundance of time which, metaphorically speaking, he spends strolling, observing people and society. The ‘stroll’ in the story’s title may thus refer more appropriately to the time spent in the GDR rather than the journey itself. As a reaction to the political situation in the GDR, Gompitz develops a new – ‘insular’ – perception of time, training patience and mindfulness: “Being able to wait, not becoming impatient, your day will come”³⁹ (Delius 2004: 63). The protagonist spends eight full years preparing his flight over the Baltic sea, while his trip to Italy is rather hasty. This is, for instance, expressed in the means of transport he is using for his Italian journey. As he is in a hurry to return to the GDR, he takes the train from West Germany to Italy, being aware that this is not what Seume intended: “For the route from Vienna via the Eastern Alps to Trieste in January 1802 it took him 24 days. He [Gompitz] is nearly ashamed of the fact that he is reaching his first destination, sitting comfortably, within eight and a half hours. You know, Seume, he mumbles to himself [...], I would have liked to walk like you, two years of

³⁷ Original in German: “zeitlichem Ausstieg und interessiert sich für alles, was sich der Beschleunigungstendenz widersetzt”.

³⁸ Original in German: “sind es doch insbesondere Inseln und insulare Räume, die Wechselverhältnisse von verzeitlichender Raumwahrnehmung und verräumlichender Darstellung nahelegen”.

³⁹ Original in German: “Warten können, nicht ungeduldig werden, dein Tag kommt.”

time and the money for it, but..."⁴⁰ (111). According to Hartmut Steinecke, this is a crucial part of Delius' intertextual reference to Seume: "The irony of the depiction of Italy lies in the fact that it seemingly follows Seume's footsteps; it fundamentally differs, however, in the type of movement and with it in the type of perception. Italy in a hurry, by train [...]. Whereas Gompitz abundantly has the prerequisites of the virtues of the "flaneur" Seume, that is time and tranquillity, elsewhere: in the GDR"⁴¹ (Steinecke 1999: 137). Gompitz's 'temporal downtime', therefore, is rather practiced on the political island GDR. He is forced to slow down his lifestyle due to the spatial limitations, clearly hinting at a close connection of (political) spatial conditions and temporal perception.

Whilst his time there is marked by serenity, his Italian journey and stay in Sicily is characterized by hastiness and restlessness. In fact, once in Rome, Gompitz decides to "get over and done with the Italian journey as quickly as possible"⁴² (Delius 2004: 121). As much as Seume's walk was a political decision, Gompitz's way of travelling is a statement regarding his attitude towards Italy and, first and foremost, his home country GDR. With all the haste trying to return to the GDR, he turns the Mediterranean country into a non-place mainly perceived from the distance of a train, whilst the place experienced intensely with deep interest and observation is not the geographical island of Sicily, but the GDR.

CONCLUSION: IRONIC INVERSION OF THE ISLAND MYTH

Through his recontextualisation of several insular spaces, Delius revises and adapts the motif of the Italian journey in German-language literature, as well as the topos of the far-away, remote island as a place of longing. The Mediterranean island of Sicily as the classic destination for travellers to Italy is turned into a catalyzer for the GDR citizen's claim for freedom of movement

⁴⁰ Original in German: "Für die Strecke von Wien durch die Ostalpen nach Triest im Januar 1802 hat der ganze 24 Tage gebraucht. Er schämt sich fast dafür, das erste Ziel, bequem sitzend, in achteinhalb Stunden zu erreichen. Du weißt, Seume, murmelt er vor sich hin [...], ich wäre auch gern so gelaufen wie du, zwei Jahre Zeit und das Geld dazu, aber..."

⁴¹ Original in German: "Die Ironie der Italien-Schilderung liegt darin, daß sie zwar äußerlich Seumes Spuren folgt, aber sich durch die Fortbewegungs- und damit die Wahrnehmungsart grundsätzlich unterscheidet. Italien in Eile, im Zug [...]. Die Voraussetzungen der Tugenden des 'Spaziergängers' Seume, Zeit und Gelassenheit, hat Gompitz im Überfluss anderswo: in der DDR."

⁴² Original in German: "die Italienreise so schnell wie möglich hinter sich zu bringen".

– and his eventual return to the ‘island’ GDR. Delius assigns characteristics of the European island discourse to a continental place which, in reverse, demonstrates that the topos of the remote, exotic isle is a mere discursive construction, deeply rooted in a colonialist imaginary; geographical islands can be places of connectivity and openness whilst discursive practices and political decisions turn continental places into insular ones. Finally, in his ironic inversion of the island myth, Delius paradoxically turns the totalitarian state into a place of longing, depicting a paradisiac image of the German Democratic Republic. Eventually and surprisingly, on his return, Gompitz is granted access to his home country again without being imprisoned. He returns to his hometown Rostock and to his wife after being meticulously questioned by the Stasi. For Gompitz, the latter turns out to be a rather enjoyable act. He proudly reveals the details of his thorough preparations for the journey, successfully leading to a re-affirmation of his identification with the GDR, finally having experienced the possibility of leaving the political island. Thus, with gentle irony, Delius depicts a rather naïve character who – literally and metaphorically – explores the boundaries of the GDR, but opts for a life in the socialist state and turns his home country into an island of longing. Through his journey, however, Gompitz succeeds in demonstrating that the political island, just like the geographical islands in the narrative, is a space with porous boundaries. His ‘walk’ can be seen as a practical insistence on the possibility of personal freedom in a socialist state and on the openness of the political ‘island’, that is his ‘paradise’.

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