



'Everything is autobiographical': Hans-Ulrich Treichel's idiolect in *Lost* (1999)

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Joachim Dicks writes in his review on Hans-Ulrich Treichel's latest novel, *Frühe Störung*, that the author shows continuity by having developed in all of his books a unique and unmistakable style that he calls 'the so-called Treichel sound'. Treichel's style, tone and mixture of thematic concerns in all of his eleven works of prose from *Von Leib und Seele: Berichte* up to *Frühe Störung* are indeed recognisable as distinctively Treichel, but has remained an unexplored terrain. The question therefore arises: What is the nature of the so-called 'Treichel sound' or his idiolect? *Lost* is a case in point with regard to Treichel's idiolect: the narration includes factual historical and autobiographic information that represents both an 'official life' and a 'carnival', i.e. his representations of lives are determined by two aspects of the world: the aspect of the piety of seriousness and by the aspect of laughter. This article firstly focuses on the theoretical possibility of using 'serious' factual autobiographic and historical information in combination with humour. The most prominent idiolectic traits of Treichel's oeuvre are then introduced, also in order to provide a context for the following discussion of *Lost*. Here it becomes apparent that Treichel's humour has a tragicomical and derisive effect with regard to the narrator's depiction of his childhood, family experiences and his cultural context. The microcosmic family context and the macrocosmic national and international contexts as they were formed because of the Second World War has lead to a loss of the narrator's identity. The result of Treichel's manner of dealing with serious contents that includes humour is the creation of a self-concept that can be described as self-exploratory, honest or confessional, self-centred, humorous and critical of German society - and these are also key features of Treichel's idiolect. This article thus argues that the combination of fictionalised serious historical and autobiographic factuality and humour characterises the 'Treichel sound'.

'Alles is outobiografies': Hans- Ulrich Treichel se idiolek in *Lost* (1999). Joachim Dicks skryf in sy resensie oor Hans-Ulrich Treichel se nuutste roman, *Frühe Störung*, dat die outeur kontinuïteit vertoon deurdat hy in al sy boeke 'n unieke en onmiskenbare styl ontwikkel het wat hy die 'Treichel-klank' noem. Treichel se styl, toon en mengsel van tematiese belangstellings in al elf sy prosawerke van *Von Leib und Seele: Berichte* tot *Frühe Störung* is inderdaad herkenbaar as 'kenmerkend Treichel'. Tot dusver is dit nog 'n onontdekte terrein. Die vraag kom dus na vore: Wat is die aard van die sogenaamde 'Treichel-klank' of sy idiolek? *Lost* is 'n tipiese voorbeeld ten opsigte van Treichel se idiolek: Die narratief sluit feitlike historiese en outobiografiese gegewens in wat sowel 'n 'amptelike lewe' én 'n 'karnaval' insluit, dit wil sê sy representasies van lewens word deur twee aspekte van die wêreld bepaal: die aspek van vroomheid en erns en die aspek van 'n gelag. Hierdie artikel fokus eerstens op die teoretiese moontlikheid daarvan om 'ernstige' feitlike outobiografiese en historiese inligting in kombinasie met humor te gebruik. Die kernaspekte van Treichel se oeuvre word daarna bekend gestel, ook met die doel om 'n vergelykbare konteks vir die bespreking van *Lost* te bied. Hier word dit duidelik dat Treichel se humor 'n tragikomiese en minagtende effek het ten opsigte van die verteller se uitbeelding van sy kindertyd, sy ervarings binne sy gesin en sy kulturele konteks. Die mikrokosmiese gesinskonteks en die makrokosmiese nasionale en internasionale kontekste soos wat hulle as gevolg van die Tweede Wêreldoorlog gevorm is, het gelei tot die verlies aan die verteller se identiteit. Die gevolg van Treichel se manier van omgaan met ernstige inhoud wat ook humor insluit, is die skepping van 'n self-konsep wat as self-ondersoekend, eerlik of biegtend, selfgesentreerd, humoristies en krities teenoor die Duitse gemeenskap beskryf kan word. Hierdie eienskappe is ook kernaspekte van Treichel se idiolek. Die artikel argumenteer dus dat die kombinasie van gefiksionaliseerde ernstige historiese en outobiografiese feitlikheid en humor die 'Treichel-klank' kenmerk.

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Treichel's frivolous and serious fictional autobiography

In an interview in 1984, Milan Kundera (1984:122) states that the '... combination of a frivolous form and a serious subject ... immediately unmasks the truth about our dramas'. This would also be an apt description of Hans-Ulrich Treichel's 'idiolect', that is, the unique tone and atmosphere of his 'confessional prose' that is reminiscent of Woody Allen's portrayal of candid and seemingly casual yet serious relations (cf. Krause 2014). Sturm (2012) describes the tone in *Mein Sardinien* (2012) as 'typically Treichel': humorously ironic, mostly cheerful and sometimes melancholic. Treichel's accounts are often at least partly based on his personal, autobiographic history set in the historical context of post-Second World War Germany. Reinhardt (2004:30) confirms that the content of *Lost*, originally published as *Der Verlorene* (1999b), has autobiographic origins. Similar to the narrator in *Lost*, the author was born in Westphalia in 1952. The main character in *Lost* had a brother Arnold who was lost during his parents' flight from East Prussia (Brandt 2004). This approximates the history of Treichel's brother, Günter. When asked how much of another of his works, *Der Papst, den ich gekannt habe* (2007a), is autobiographical, Treichel responded by saying: 'Everything. 100%. I have resolved now to answer this question always with "everything" in order to irritate the interviewer a little bit' (Hille 2007). This humorously trivialising response does not bring one closer to the question: How does the 'autobiographic' or 'factual' nature of Treichel's fiction interact with his fictional 'idiolect'?

This article argues that the narration in *Lost* is a case in point with regard to Treichel's idiolect by using factual historical and autobiographic information in order to represent both an 'official life' and a 'carnival', that is, his representations of lives are determined by two aspects of the world: the aspect of the piety of seriousness and by the aspect of laughter (Bachtin 1985:41). Central to this stylistic feature is the exploration and contextualisation of a loss of identity and the concomitant experiences on account of the Second World War. One does certainly see the boy in *Lost* as a young counterpart of Hans-Ulrich Treichel who has been awarded seven literary prizes, excluding the Georg Büchner Prize, between 1985 and 2007. The most recent prizes were the Preis der Frankfurter Anthologie (2007) and the Eichendorff-Literaturpreis and the Deutscher-Kritikerpreis (both in 2006). He is a well-respected artist and academic and a successful novelist, writer of shorter prose, poet, librettist, essay writer and a Professor of Literary Studies at the University of Leipzig. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* as well as other prominent newspapers and magazines like *Der Spiegel* often publish positive reviews on Treichel's books (cf. Schneider 2010). However, the reviews are certainly not always favourable. The review on his latest novel, *Frühe Störung* (2014), begins with a sentence that anticipates a 'but': 'This novel is not badly written ...' (Hieber 2014). The reviewer refers to the relationship between the mother and the son that appears in *Menschenflug* as well and criticises Treichel for always using the same tools to

create similar material. Reinacher (2008) similarly criticises Treichel's lack of variation in reintroducing the theme of the lost brother in *Anatolin* (Treichel 2009). The mother-and-son motif actually also appears in many other works of fiction, notably in *Lost* and *Der Papst, den ich gekannt habe*.

However, Larkin (2003:141) introduces the idea that the characters in *Lost* could be viewed not only as fictional persons but also as representative of '... historical periods and their accompanying mentalities'. Larkin (2003) continues:

If the narrator-son, born after the war, represents the identity of the young, insecure, emotionally-challenged early Federal Republic, then the preceding generation, and particularly the narrator's father, stand for an aggressive, authoritarian Germany of the Nazi years. (p. 141)

This insight enables one to read other works of fiction by Treichel, notably *Frühe Störung* (2014), *Menschenflug* (2007b) and *Der Papst, den ich gekannt habe* (2007a), as allegories in which the parents appear as formative forces in the main characters' lives. In *Lost*, one could then interpret the mother as a weakened 'Germania', that is, not as robust as represented by the statue near Rüdesheim or in Philipp Veit's paintings but as a despairing mother whose children are the lost pre-Second World War Germany – as represented by Arnold – and the strange new post-Second World War Germany – as represented by the narrator.

Treichel is also in the company of less humorous voices that process trauma by means of fiction, for example, Uwe Timm who also portrays a 'proxy victim' in *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2003) (translated as *In my brother's shadow: A life and death in the SS*). Like *Lost*, this book represents the effects of the historical events on private fates (Bellmann 2011:9). The interest in processing the past and dealing with its effects in the present is also reminiscent of Günther Grass's fiction like *Im Krebsgang* (2002) (translated as *Crabwalk*) and Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* (1995) (translated as *The Reader*). Larkin (2003:141) says that Treichel illuminates many of the concerns of the early post-war years: reconstruction, nationalism, nostalgia, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past), authoritarianism, renazification, racism and guilt. Treichel is therefore an exponent of the *Väterliteratur*, that is, literature that deals with processing the past to be able to come to terms with the fact that 'fathers' were Nazis and with the fact of belonging to a nation of aggressors. Treichel is in this sense also part of authors like Siegfried Lenz, Heinrich Böll and the writers mentioned above, but he stands out as a post-war child of refugees who has become a literary figure.

Writers follow, each in their own way, an instinctively self-preserving way to deal with the often sombre realities and the direct effects that the Second World War had on people. This also holds for the indirect effects on the children of people who suffered because of the War. These indirect effects were visible not only during the War but also later in life. Treichel's idiolect often has an amusing effect because of its overtly self-centred or narcissistic as well as critical nature.



History and personal life are thematically linked in Treichel's fiction from *Von Leib und Seele* (1992), his first work of prose, up to his latest novel *Frühe Störung* (2014). In *Menschenflug*, the main character, Stephan, searches for his brother who was lost when their parents fled from East Prussia, and although he sees his brother, Hermann Stäub, he does not reveal their relationship. Stephan has also written a roman à clef that corresponds with *Lost*. Treichel (2005) says of this novel that it is:

... actually the story of a man who is more or less as old as I am, who is a little bit related to me and who of course tries to gain an overview of his own existence.

Treichel considers the German identity of Hans in *Mein Sardinien*, which evokes Treichel's personal history also through a repetition of concerns. Longing for Italy also appears in *Heimatkunde oder Alles ist heiter und edel* (1996) and *Der irdische Amor* (2004a). Italy is in many respects the antithesis to his East Westphalian place of birth and Germany in general, from which he flees because he is 'berlinmüde' (tired of Berlin). He is constantly aware of being 'typically German' and feels embarrassed that he poked fun at the conductor of a Baroque orchestra, Konrad Lattes, when he realises that Lattes is a Jew who survived a Nazi concentration camp. This is humorous because of the mild 'wrongdoing' that is regarded as a taboo in the light of the Holocaust. The combination of a 'frivolous' tone and the 'serious subject' of history and its effects on personal lives characterise Treichel's oeuvre as carnivalesque with regard to the manner in which the retrospective narrator remembers or focalises and depicts past and present fictional realities. Treichel's books are diverse with regard to the conceptual content of every individual work but very homogeneous with regard to its autobiographic and idiolectic character. This warrants further exploration. Central works of research done on Treichel include *Contemporary German writers: Hans-Ulrich Treichel* (2004) edited by David Basker in the Contemporary German Writers series edited by Rhys W. Williams and a special issue of *Colloquia: Internationale Zeitschrift für Germanistik* (2005; see Williams 2004). These studies frequently refer to and focus on relevant thematics and the relationship between autobiography and fiction, for example, David Clarke's (2004:61–78) 'Guilt and shame in Hans-Ulrich Treichel's *Der Verlorene*', but despite such research and a multitude of reviews of Treichel's books and interviews with him, no critical studies directly address his idiolect in terms of his autobiographic sources.

The self-exploratory and honest or confessional nature of Treichel's fiction as well as his self-centredness, humour and criticism of German society will be considered as characteristics of Treichel's oeuvre or idiolect that contribute to the so-called 'Treichel sound' (Dicks 2014). This section then also serves as a contextualisation for the discussion on *Lost*. *Lost* is presented here as a touchstone of Treichel's idiolect. The reason why *Lost* has been selected is because it is, except for *Leaving Sardinia* (Treichel 2004b), the translation of *Der irdische Amor* (Treichel 2004a), the only book that has been translated into English. *Der Verlorene* is also the book that made the name 'Treichel' a

well-known concept to the German reading public and is still the fictional work mostly associated with this author.

The first focus here will be on the theoretical possibility of using factual autobiographic information in combination with fiction. As Pavel (1986) explains, there are:

... many real historical and social settings in which writers and their public accept the assumption that a literary work speaks of something that is genuinely possible relative to the real world. (p. 46)

This principle also applies to the relationship between the experiences of Treichel and his narrators' experiences of their historical and social settings. This is self-evident when considering the plot of *Lost*: The main character in *Lost* is – like Treichel was during the early 1960s – an approximately 12-year-old boy growing up in Westphalia. As in Treichel's case, the narrator's parents are traumatised and grieving refugees from East Prussia whose baby son, Arnold, went missing during the flight in 1945. The novel begins with an account of them not being able to understand why Arnold was happy on the photograph at which he and his crying mother were looking: 'I don't know what was making him happy, it was the war after all, and besides that he was in the East, and he was still happy' (Treichel 1999a:3). The retrospective narration takes place by means of rendering his perspective as a child. The narration is, like here, often humorous because of the childlike, immediate and unthinking perspective reminiscent of Bergson's (1911:77–78) dancing-jack who thinks '... he is speaking and acting freely' but who is '... a mere toy in the hands of another who is playing with him' – or Treichel as the puppeteer. The narrator recalls being only partly visible or sometimes not really visible at all (Treichel 1999a:4) on family photographs. This marginalisation and miserably staring at '... cheerful and un-miserable Arnold, as my mother got more and more upset' (Treichel 1999a:5) is, on the one hand, humorous because he is so candid, but it is, on the other hand, also a sombre (of course fictional) reality. The parents truly suffer because they have lost a child and, in addition, neglect the son that they do have because of their trauma. They focus not only on regaining their livelihood but also on their lost child. They undergo genetic tests, predating DNA profiling, in order to determine whether a certain foundingling 2307 is their biological son or not. In *Lost*, the narrator's identity as an authentic, a 'real Westphalian' is impinged upon by his refugee identity. Although he was born there, he grows up in a place that has historically been seen, as far as his family's origins are concerned, as not his homeland. Not only does it seem that his parents do not love him, but through their lack of acknowledgement, they 'characterise' him as an 'empty identity'. Treichel refers to his own childhood as an empty condition in a 'world-less province empty of experiences', in a parental home marked by trauma as the consequence of the War and the 'Flucht' [the flight] (Williams 2004:13). However, through his narration, the main character creates an identity characterised by an idiolect that expresses a mocking understanding of the relationship between great historical events and the individual.



Carnavalesque idiolect and focalisation

Treichel's fiction escapes the seriousness of the aftermath of the flight from East Prussia and the Second World War in order to construct an identity that has been dispersed since his birth. Every work of fiction has the potential to 'heal' the identity of Germans by means of fictional identity creations. More universally, fiction can heal people who have been detached from contexts with which they associated themselves. This identity corresponds with the idiolectic traits of Treichel's fiction: The childlike honesty of this self-centred approach has a humorous effect with regard to the confessional perspectives on the narrators themselves and the critical perspectives on their societies. Self-exploration and self-acknowledgement in Treichel's oeuvre are in this sense necessary.

By being able to focalise the serious subject matter of loss in a way that can produce laughter, the narrator has to be more detached from emotion as opposed to intellect. Bergson (1911:139) argues that '... laughter is incompatible with emotion'. Indifference is 'the natural environment' of comedy and '... highly emotional souls, in tune and unison with life, in whom every event would be sentimentally prolonged and re-echoed, would neither know nor understand laughter' (Bergson 1911:4). The mother, having lost a child, would not be able to employ any kind of focalisation that produces a comic effect because she is so involved in the seriousness of her fate, but the narrator whose suffering is to live with traumatised parents and the consequent loss of an identity is more detached from the distress that his parents experience. 'Escape' in the sense of repose for the sake of 'recovery' belongs to the carnival experience.

It is through this experience of liberation from the suffering of sober and serious life, namely the official world being changed through a relativizing perspective, that existence can become endurable for a character like the narrator of *Lost*. Bachtin (1985) explains that seriousness which reduces people to servitude scare them:

It lied, it was hypocritical, it was stingy and it fasted. It was possible on the fairgrounds to put the serious tone down on the holiday table and another truth began to sound: laughing, crazy, unseemly, swearing, parodying, travestyng. Fear and the lie are dispelled due to the triumph of the material-physical and that of the festive. (p. 39)

Opposite spheres merge and are recognisable in one another: Birth becomes visible in death whilst death becomes visible in birth. In victory becomes visible defeat, in defeat victory. In elevation becomes visible humiliation, et cetera. The carnival laughter ensures that not one of these moments of change is made absolute, that they do not set in one-sided seriousness (Bachtin 1985:66).

Treichel's fiction deals with memories of events that resurface in various books. The male self or selves as a child and adult, social surroundings and their places, family history and education are central features that preoccupy Treichel's

central characters. This constitutes what is focalised, that is, what is let through the 'information-conveying pipe' as Genette (1988:74) describes focalisation. The selection of fictional experiences of the self indicates – through anecdotal memories – that matters like the effects of past events on the present life and experiences of a person, the nature of social interaction and by implication a yearning for better alternatives to the realities of a person's present life are central to Treichel's fiction.

Therefore, the *choice* involved in focalisation, namely what narrative information will be regulated (Genette 1980:162), could be seen as a consequence of a mind-set. For Genette, these two issues (a character's mind-set and focalisation) are unrelated, but the matter of selection would bring one to Mieke Bal's (1981:181–182; [1978] 1990:114) proposition that the focaliser's perspective contributes to a unique or individualistic representation of the actual world because of the mind-set.

It is not the factual or historical similarities that lend the story its strength and character, but the human qualities, which Marie-Laure Ryan (1991:45) calls 'psychological credibility', that serves as an 'accessibility relation', that is, one that allows the mental properties of a fictional character to be accessible from and possible for the actual world. That Treichel's life is the source of fictionally represented knowledge and experience is not in itself important with regard to the communicative value of the fiction. What is important is how Treichel manipulates and fictionalises his autobiographic raw data.

Lost is a story about the causal effects of the past on the life of a fictional human being: Being self-absorbed, having the human desire to be utterly honest in order to confess one's own weaknesses, to admit what one thinks or to criticise others and to poke fun by doing so are recognisable human experiences that contribute to Hans-Ulrich Treichel's idiolect.

Examples of Treichel's idiolect in his other works

The characteristics of the narrator or narration in *Lost*, namely self-centredness, criticism against society, humour and a confessional quality, also pervade Treichel's other works of fiction. Brief discussions of other examples, namely *Mein Sardinien* (2012), *Der Papst, den ich gekannt habe* (2007a) and *Heimatkunde* (1996) are intended to illustrate the narrator's ever-present humorous manner as well as his criticism against his family and society. Further brief discussions of three examples, namely *Frühe Störung* (2014), *Menschenflug* (2007b) and *Tristanakkord* (2001) serve the purpose of giving an impression of the prominence of self-exploration and confessional self-centredness in his oeuvre. This section concludes with a discussion of *Mein Sardinien* (2012) that refers to all the idiolectic characteristics above.

Der Papst, den ich gekannt habe (2007a) consists of the monologue of a narrator continually boasting about his



talents and skills to such an extent that the reader starts to suspect that he exaggerates. The German narrator says (own translation):

I also speak French. And Spanish. And English of course. You could also speak Russian and Polish to me, if you were fluent in Russian and Polish. ... I don't even notice that I speak when I speak English. I speak English as well as I breathe. At least since I stopped smoking. I could also say that I speak English as well as I play the piano. Because I play the piano very well. Enviously so. English has always been my second language and Italian only my third. So you could work out how well I play the piano if Italian is only my third language that I speak better than some Italians ... (Treichel 2007a:9–10)

It finally comes to light that the narrator is indeed unreliable and a resident in a psychiatric clinic. This satirically criticises parents and society that expect too much of (also talented) individuals with regard to educational performance (Van der Merwe & Sepp 2013:136–137). Here one also finds the implication of an insensitive society like in *Lost*.

The chapter 'Heimatkunde' in *Heimatkunde* (Treichel 1996) represents the narrator's dislike of his home country. He feels that the people in Westphalia are 'fossilised' (Treichel 1996:52). Ironically, his local-studies teacher awakens not a love for his home country in the narrator but a longing for distant places or 'Fernweh'. He finally does travel to Venice at the end of the narrative but is disappointed, as was Hans in *Mein Sardinien*. Dislike towards the people of his home country starts with his relationship with his father. When he loses a vendor's tray, his father has a fit of rage that leads him to yell: 'You are not my son any longer!' (Treichel 1996:15). The father is, in fact, immediately portrayed as an insensitive person because of his focus on his means of income, exactly like the father in *Lost*. There is a curtain between his father's tobacco shop and the kitchen where the narrator is being born. The father constantly asks his wife where specific merchandise is while she is giving birth. A detachment between the narrator and his family is also expressed by the remark that he mistakes the family dog for his mother because that is the first thing that he sees when he is born. Because of the ever-present anger towards his family, he destroys magazines in his father's shop while still a child. The father then uses his son's need for destruction to flatten cardboard boxes. However, when he realises that his father needs the boxes to be flattened, he feels abused and pulls bushes, shrubs and a giant rhubarb to shreds. This anecdote repeats itself in *Der Papst, den ich gekannt habe* (2007) when the main character destroys a giant fern in a park as an indication of a problematic relationship between the parents and their son.

Frühe Störung (Treichel 2014) is, like all of Treichel's 11 works of fiction, not only more or less autobiographically related but also told by a first-person narrator who explores himself and is in this sense self-centred. *Frühe Störung*, for example, begins with the narrator telling about his visits to a psychiatrist: 'I laid myself down on the couch and talked about my mother' (*ibid*:7). The middle-aged narrator finally concludes: 'I am not an adult. I am an old child who is afraid

of his dead mother' (Treichel 2014:189). The value of this conclusion '... to a novel that is similar to an overflowing monologue, a lamentation ...' (Sojitrwalla 2014) is an acknowledgement of the narrator's own condition.

Menschenflug (Treichel 2007b) depicts the longing of the main character, Stephan, to find his brother who was lost during the flight from East Prussia. The child in *Lost* is not keen to find his brother but finally does desire a unification: 'I wanted to tell my mother, beg her, finally to get out of the car and finally go in to him' (Treichel 1999:136). The journey to Egypt points to his need to escape from his personal realities. He is too fainthearted to continue to try to find his brother, and his siblings do not want to share their inheritance with a newfound brother. The 'human flight' towards his brother is only possible when, in a delirious state, he is conveyed in an ambulance after, presumably, a heart attack. This novel portrays the longing to have contact with his historical origins, but it acknowledges its impossibility. The narrator associates the Tristan chord with 'not being saved'. Neither Wolfgang Koeppen, 'the writer who did not write', nor himself and Cristina, his Isolde, was 'unerlöst' [not saved].

Tristanakkord (Treichel 2001) focuses on Georg whose intentions to commence with his doctoral studies are delayed because of his work for a histrionic and rather vain world-famous composer, Bergmann. Georg is boorish in contrast to the fastidious Bergmann. A humorous episode characterises Georg as unrefined. Georg reads a book during a performance of the Berliner Philharmonie while they were performing Mahler's ninth symphony. The book enables him to enjoy the music. The person next to him then complains, remarking to Georg that the reading disturbs him. Georg asks in a quite German manner: 'Wieso denn das?' [So why is that?]. His question is followed by a gruff 'Psst!' (Treichel 2001:271). Georg closes the book but then starts to itch and feels the need to cough. In light of Treichel's tendency to use autobiographic features for characters that differ much from Treichel himself – like the crazy narrator of *Der Papst, den ich gekannt habe* – the reader recognises aspects of Georg and Bergmann in other characters that are also reflected in references to Treichel in his interviews. Treichel (2005:24) says that the story of *Tristanakkord* differs greatly from his own experiences when he worked as a librettist for the composer Hans Werner Henze (1926–2012) but that there is some correspondence in the sense that a young, provincial and culturally very poorly socialised person enters into the world of a world-famous composer. The critical and high-handed character of Bergmann is also recognisable in Hans's petty astonishment in *Mein Sardinien* about the faulty German on the stickers on Italian passenger ships. He feels that he would proofread these texts for free. His pure joy of finding mistakes (Treichel 2012:46) is satirically humorous. In this *Künstlerroman*, Georg as well as Bergmann carry possibly exaggerated satirical autobiographic features of Treichel that is comparable to Hermann Hesse's portrayal of the divergent characters Narcissus and Goldmund that are autobiographically relatable to Hesse himself.



The main character of *Mein Sardinien* (Treichel 2012) is Hans who has been born in Westphalia in August 1952 – just like Treichel himself. He is not particularly fond of his self-chosen city of residence, Berlin, but he is even more cynical about his East-Westphalian homeland. He says that the appearance of place in literature seems like inoculations, but because his place of birth does not appear in literature, it has not been inoculated (Treichel 2012:32). He lives in the Schöneberger main street in a disagreeable part of the city where people take the bus to the philharmonics and are unperturbed by their miserable surroundings. He admits that he is grateful for the Berlin Wall that alleviates the noise of the 'Lärmhölle' [noisy underworld] where he lives (Treichel 2012:5). He is in this sense once again critical of the German context as well as humorous.

Honesty is an evident stylistic feature of this novel. Hans meets an Italian waitress to whom he declares his love. He confesses to having done this in a very calculated manner. He falls in love with her because of his declaration of love. He comes to the conclusion that one would start to believe in God if one were to pray regularly, and one would fall in love if one were to make regular declarations of love (Treichel 2012:29). The narrator then says that, in his case, it only required one declaration of love. It is humorous that he seems to be so calculated and matter-of-fact. Because Cristina is sad, he suggests to her that they should undertake a journey to Italy. This is also a way of fleeing from Germany and his childhood. However, he finds Sant'Antioco ugly and disappointing but nonetheless looks forward to beautiful surroundings (Treichel 2012:53). The narrator is honest about being irritated with the appearance of Sardinia and with Cristina who tries to teach him Sardinian words. One also finds this honesty when the narrator confesses to Enrico that he does not own a driver's license. The humorous description of Enrico's reaction mitigates the embarrassment:

He looked at me as if I had said that I was, in fact, a foundling from the Congo. Or that I was accidentally born without male genitals. Or something like that. (p. 85)

Honesty also appears when Hans wants to know what the implications would be for him when Enrico, Cristina's brother, convinces her to return to Sardinia. This also points to Hans's self-centredness.

The novel is a self-centred account in the sense that it is a revealing exploration of Hans's psyche. In a striking and illustrative passage in the novel, Hans finds himself in Carbonia, a city characterised by unattractive 'Fascist architecture' (Treichel 2012:166). His waitress in an equally unsightly restaurant is a beautiful child. It is to him as if he had a 'mignon experience', as if a divine child has appeared to him (Treichel 2012:169). The ugliness of Carbonia becomes meaningful through this child because it creates a contrast. Hans admires women (Cristina, Chiara, the woman from the tobacco store, the blonde in chapter 8, etc.) throughout this book. The child of Carbonia, however, is an angel of beauty and a symbol of his search. She is not a lost brother or a country like Italy but something like a child that has a future. He has to return to Berlin to look for his 'Mignon'.

Treichel's idiolect in *Lost*

Self-centredness and criticism: The narrator's compensatory self-acknowledgement

As a self-absorbed central character, the narrator describes in a cautious, distanced and aloof-ironic tone (Hage 1998:244) his own experiences, feelings and needs. This is clearly a self-induced compensation as a result of the marginalisation that he suffers. The father is portrayed as an autocratic parent, preoccupied with work both as a meat wholesaler and with regard to chores to be done at home. The narrator says:

My father communicated with brief orders and instructions on how to do things, and my mother did talk to me now and then, but mostly it was talk about my brother Arnold ... (Treichel 1999a:7)

The mother does not acknowledge her son as an individual: 'I could feel that she saw something in me that she had lost' (*ibid*:107). He is highly sensitive and bitter due to a lack of love and attention. The narrator consciously addresses his resentment towards his lost brother when he says that Arnold had the leading role in the family and has assigned him a supporting part (*ibid*:10). He says: 'I also understood that Arnold was responsible from the very beginning for my growing up in an atmosphere poisoned with guilt and shame' (*ibid*:10). The boy becomes 'infected' by his parents' shame and guilt for having lost their home and child.

The narrator declares:

From the day of my birth, guilt and shame had ruled the family, without my knowing why. All I knew was that whatever I did, I felt guilty and ashamed as I did it. (Treichel 1999a:11)

It is significant that he recognises and states that he did not know why he felt shame and guilt. The book is a self-acknowledgement in its entirety, and what he experiences and feels relates to the nature of his childhood and his relationship to his parents and members of his social context.

Not only the parents, but also other members of society are depicted as uncaring and indifferent, notably Professor Liebstedt and his lab assistant who perform the genetic tests. Larkin (2003:156) interprets the society that Treichel portrays as one '... veiled in inhumanity; civility remains only a superficial value, which may at any moment be overturned'. When the family returns to the laboratory after their lunch break, the lab assistant admonishes them by saying that their appointment was for two o'clock in the afternoon, not ten past two. Ironically, the professor only arrives about half an hour later. The professor enters the room '... without uttering a word of greeting, didn't look at us, and turned to the lab assistant, who pointed to us with the words, "They're here"' (Treichel 1999a:81). It is not only the lab assistant's fastidiousness but also his detached behaviour that seems comically pointless in the light of the sad reality that the couple came to him in an attempt to find their lost son.



Humour: The amusing eccentric society

Against the background of a sombre history, the strange characters and their stories have a tragicomic effect. For example, it is not only the nature of the 'crude genetic tests' (Basker 2004:48), that are amusing but also the formulation of the results. This is due to the serious scientific approach and verbose wording combined with the elusiveness of the accuracy of the tests. One of the tests involves the comparison of the family members' feet to Foundling 2307's feet. The lab assistant makes a plaster impression of the father's right foot only and does not notice that his feet are completely dissimilar: 'The plaster impression of his right foot would point to a completely different human being from the plaster impression of his left foot ...' (Treichel 1999a:68). Larkin (2003) explains:

When the assistant arbitrarily chooses the right foot of the father to be molded in plaster and measured against that of the foundling, the possibility is left open that a whole other line of relation would have been available had she taken the different left foot. (p. 151)

The last verdict that the mother receives as to the chance of the genetic relationship between her and the foundling confirms that there is a 99.73% improbability.

However, the foundling has an absolutely astonishing resemblance to the narrator, his putative brother (Treichel 1999a:40). The inconsistency between the scientists' overconfidence and their neglect with regard to the feet makes their test results unpersuasive. The implicit criticism is that these members of society could not only have been more cautious and modest but also more sympathetic.

The confessional quality of the narration

The narrator does not withhold information that could be embarrassing or critical of himself as well as others. For example, the narration is partly a confession of the hostile feelings that he holds for Arnold and of the things from his childhood that he does not like – which comprises almost the whole book. The narrator also confesses that he enjoys not having to be in the company of his parents: 'The most wonderful punishment they held over me was house arrest' (Treichel 1999a:13). Other members of society are farcically represented through frank and meticulous portrayals. During their lunch break in Heidelberg, they meet a talkative hearse driver in the canteen who tells them comical and bizarre stories that characterise himself as strange as well as the director of the crematorium about whom he tells a story.

This man tells how the director of the crematorium puts a little bone from an ash pan under one of the ovens into his mouth and chews around on it in order to show how clean and hygienic his cremation ovens are. He also encourages the hearse driver to also 'try it' (Treichel 1999a:80–81). As Larkin (2003:152) points out, the director 'essentially eats' the remains of the cremated person and is in this sense a cannibal. Many of Treichel's potentially morbid relationships evoke humour because of the unrestrained honesty and precision of

the focalised content. The narration is also confessional in the sense that the narrator admits to a certain somewhat wicked point of view with regard to his parents and other adults.

Conclusion

The titles of the original German text 'Der Verlorene' as well as the English translation 'Lost' point to a meaningful ambiguity with regard to past events and the effects of such events on lives after the Second World War. Arnold was literally 'lost', but the narrator is also 'lost' and 'neglected and confused' due to his relationship with his parents and his national context: 'The mother's fixation with finding Arnold and the father's obsession with his business render the narrator lost to their parental affection' (Larkin 2003:142). Both the parents are preoccupied with regaining what they have lost: their child and material security. Having irretrievably lost the land of their birth due to the loss of the war (Larkin 2003:142), they try to recapture a pre-Second World condition like during the slaughter-day celebration when guests are invited:

In some way, the dinner of pig's brain intoxicated my father and his guests with merriment. Particularly when the guests were friends of my father who came from the East as he did ... dinner could be accompanied by never-ending laughter. (Treichel 1999:30)

Another form of cheerfulness that the text introduces is the comic effect of the narrator's incomprehension and discomfort with his father's appreciation of pig's brain. Treichel embodies a frame of mind by means of an uninhibited, determinedly introspective, intelligent and humorous manner of writing.

Treichel uses point of view or perspective in his narratives to introduce humour to modify serious realities and prevent them from becoming endurable. Through its honest and consequently childlike 'comic relief', Treichel's idiolect is comforting as it relativizes problems that arose because of the Second World War. The song 'All this trouble' by the Canadian spoken word and folk-music collective 'The Fugitives' is comparable to and illustrative of Treichel's approach of encouragement to accept human problems: 'All this trouble in the world, let it come, let it come ...' Brendon McLeod said during a performance of this song: 'It's not like a bad thing, it's like small troubles, not like enormous troubles. Just small things. Like: You lost your toothbrush. Whatever' (The Fugitives 2013). McLeod continues to joke about the absurdity of human frustrations and brings the audience to laughter. Many of the problems mentioned are indeed relatively unimportant like: '... straining to remember, we've forgotten what was said ... Elevator music while the holding collar waits' (The Fugitives 2013). Yet, the song also includes serious realities like:

The infirm all alone by the window in their beds ... It is the softness of our skins against the sharp edge of a knife ... It is the certainty of death ... (The Fugitives 2013)

Both the song and Treichel's fiction invoke pathos but are relieved through humour. The typical Treichel narrator acknowledges not only 'serious emotion' through his



focalisation but also its greatest foe, namely laughter (cf. Bergson 1911:4). The world is marked by a constant return of 'bad' and 'good' events. In other words, it postulates that reality is never exclusively defined by either fortune or misfortune alone (Van der Merwe 2000:90).

The liberty of not refraining from almost 'impolitely' criticising society as well as confessing the weaknesses of his central characters is a kind of childlike honesty that contributes to the carnivalesque character of Treichel's idiolect. *Frühe Störung* contains the embarrassing quality of a character being obsessed with his mother. 'Der Hypochonder' in *Heimatkunde* refers to the narrator's humorous difficulties (cf. Larkin 2003:144) in finding the right therapy for struggling with stress. Treichel's narrators take the liberty to focus only on themselves – and other characters are only interesting with regard to how they relate to the main character. Like Treichel's other books, *Lost* entails fictional expressions of experiences in a social context that serves as an exploration of and a critique against the individual's place in his social context. Such literary expressions of disappointment point to unresolved issues and states of being 'unsaved' as presented by the motif of the Tristan chord.

The effect that the Second World War has had on the children of parents that suffered because of it is that it left them confused with regard to their identity. The autobiographically inspired characters are sometimes humorously ridiculous, eccentric or unpleasant. The same holds for the people of their social context: Westphalia is uninteresting whilst many people are quite dense, and educated people like Professor Liebstedt and his lab assistant are short-sighted and pompous. Treichel's idiolect that is characterised by self-exploration, his critical reflection on his social contexts, his confessions and his cynical humour serve not only as an acknowledgement of the individual, but it also expresses a longing for a better, more reasonable world. This is an aspect of the new identity that Treichel's fiction introduces. One finds the opposite of Westphalia's dullness in the form of beauty like the 'Mignon' in *Mein Sardinien*. The 'lost' characters in Treichel yearn for the 'Other', the opposite of Westphalia, Berlin, German parents in the form of Italy, women and, by implication, compassion in order to cancel out the Tristan chord and to be saved.

Curran (2005:44) concludes that the solution is for art to train its focus steadily on the details of the present moment, 'auf die Gegenwart reagier[en]' and to use realism and humour to integrate into present life the menacing shadows from the past'. Treichel's oeuvre – like *Lost* – considers factual autobiographical and other realities of the past, but in order to resolve the present confusion by means of fiction, it manipulates the available materials through narrator perspective. The latter is characterised by means of interdependent tone features like honesty and humour in order to counteract the state of being lost.

The purpose of this article has not been to address the 'theoretical question' of how the idiolect relates to author identity, especially with regard to his use of language, but

it would certainly be a possible topic for further research to explore typical expressions like 'Ich hätte ... am liebsten' (Treichel 2014:11; 2012:36–37) in order to further describe Treichel's idiolect.

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