Sara Jones

Why Stay?
Shifting Perspectives on ‘Inner Emigration’ and Resistance in the Works of Elfriede Brüning

This chapter examines the shifting perspectives on ‘inner emigration’ and resistance to fascism in the works of the East German writer, Elfriede Brüning. Focusing on two fictional texts, ...damit du weiterlebst (1949) and Septemberreise (1974) and one explicitly autobiographical work, Und außerdem war es mein Leben (1994), the chapter analyses Brüning’s presentation of different forms of opposition to Nazism. Drawing on statements by the author external to the primary texts, the position of these three works in Brüning’s autobiographical project is considered. In particular, the chapter examines tensions in Brüning’s presentation of female resistance to fascism across the three works and the conflict between narrative identities based on political commitment to antifascism and those based on a gendered commitment to familial ties. It is argued that a comparison of autobiography and self-reflexive fiction can elucidate tensions in the author’s self-understanding by highlighting the ways in which she explores different aspects of her identity and experience across different narrative personae.

In his analysis of autobiographical narratives by East German writers both before and after the Wende, Dennis Tate argues that in the GDR the development of Prosa and the concept of subjective authenticity, which ‘combines the awareness of the potential of multi-level narrative provided by modernist fiction with the integrity of self-analysis to which autobiography has traditionally aspired’, make sharp divisions between autobiography and fiction problematic. Tate highlights the shifting perspectives in the ‘autobiographical projects’ of the works of well-known GDR writers as evidence of an ‘intimate long-term relationship between autobiographically based fiction and explicit autobiography’. Fluid boundaries between different modes of self-representation have also been considered by feminist critics of autobiography. As Leigh Gilmore argues, the delimitations of what has traditionally been considered autobiography have been developed on the basis of canonical works of famous male authors. The traditional theoretical framework for interpreting and defining autobiography is thus based on a particular subject position, which may exclude individuals who
have undergone a different process of socialisation, for example, on the basis of gender. Women’s self-portraits are often characterised by features that would traditionally place them outside of the genre of autobiography, such as an ‘episodic and anecdotal’ style, ‘nonprogressive narratives’, a ‘focus on others’ and ‘lack of heroic self-assertion’. As Susan Stanford Friedman argues, this need not be an essentialist conception of ‘male’ or ‘female’ writing, but can be based on an understanding of different socialisation mechanisms and group cultural identities. Thus a broader definition of ‘life-writing’, which may include fictional forms, might permit a more inclusive examination of strategies of self-representation.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that the distinction between life writing and fiction must be collapsed completely: following Dorrit Cohn, autobiography can be considered referential in that there is a claimed identity between author and narrator. This does not, however, guarantee that the author does not lie or fantasise about his or her life. The writer of autobiography creates a particular face, which he or she posits as being identical with him or herself. This identity might be an illusion or even a lie, but the form of the illusion can reveal much about its creator. In works marked as fiction, referentiality in this sense does not exist; however, as will be seen, statements by an author external to the primary text may blur this distinction where they assert that their fictional forms are based on their own life experiences, that is, that the text both reveals and conceals its author.

Based on this theoretical approach, this chapter analyses selected autobiography and (auto)biographical fiction of the East German author, Elfriede Brüning. Through consideration of writings outside of the texts themselves, their place in Brüning’s autobiographical project is assessed. In turn, the chapter examines the shifting perspective of the narrators within these works on the issue of ‘inner emigration’ and resistance to fascism and what these perspectives can reveal about Brüning’s relationship to this part of her past.

Born in 1910, Brüning joined the Communist Party in 1930 and the *Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller* (BPRS) in 1932. She remained in Germany throughout the 12 years of Nazi rule and, before the war, took part in illegal activities on behalf of the BPRS, including smuggling documents to Prague for publication in the emigrant press. In the war years, she largely withdrew from political activity and, in her autobiography, describes herself as having been in ‘inner emi-