

Thelen, Albert Vigoleis

(1903-1989)

Born in North Rhine-Westphalia, the writer, literary critic and multilingual translator A. T., who adopted the nickname Vigoleis, began a 55-year long period of wandering at an early age. He left his country in 1931, without completing his education and after several courses and technical professions, followed by a brief time at university, also left unfinished. He set course to Amsterdam and soon after to Majorca (1931-36). However, what was at first voluntary led to a forced political exile. With the start of the Spanish Civil War and the arrival of the Falangists to the Canary Islands (1936), he was forced to flee. The official stances he took regarding Nazism (his refusal, for example, to pledge allegiance to the Führer) had turned him into a dubious figure, and he narrowly avoided execution by firing squad (Pütz, 1990: 26). He fled to Switzerland (1937-39), which he then left when he accepted an invitation from Teixeira de Pascoaes, at whose manor, near Amarante, he arrived on the day Poland was invaded (1-09-1939). He then lived for eight years in relative peace until, in 1947, the *Polícia de Vigilância e Defesa do Estado* did not renew his residence permit (Franco, 2014: 207). Although, at the time, nothing prevented him from returning to his homeland, T. chose to remain in exile, since he considered the denazification of post-war Germany insufficient (Pütz, 1990: 25). Visiting Portugal frequently (Caeiro, 1990: 48) and Germany rarely (Thelen, 1997: 145, 170), he first took up residence in Amsterdam (1947-54) and later Switzerland (1954-86), only returning to his native region in 1986, already very ill.

The multifarious author, whose life and work form a productive unit, has only been (re)discovered in recent decades – despite his importance not only in the context of German

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literature, but also in the international promotion of Portuguese literature (Schäfer, 1990: 175). Indeed, his few and late publications, coupled with a writing that was dramatically different from the literary orientation of the most influential school of German-speaking writers of the post-war period, “Group 47,” did not contribute to his popularity in Germany.

In his vast oeuvre, his first novel stands out: *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts. Aus den angewandten Erinnerungen des Vigoleis* (1953) (‘The Island of second sight. From the applied recollections of Vigoleis’). A reflection of the adventures lived by T. in Majorca in the 1930s interwoven with the humorous/satirical account of the events of the time, *Die Insel* is a book structurally marked by a tense relationship between autobiographical and fictional elements (Schäfer, 1990: 176-177; Pütz, 1990:151-153, passim). Despite being a bestseller and winning the author the Fontane Prize (1954), *Die Insel’s* reception was not consensual among critics. Laudatorily applauded by some (for instance, the writer Paul Celan), the novel was harshly rejected, as expected, by the *spiritus rector* of the “Group 47”. “The German of an emigrant,” was H. W. Richter’s judgement (Jung, 2005: 22) before the peculiarities of the author’s speech, overflowing and lexically baffling as it was.

T. would never again write a book that was well received by critics, and soon fell into oblivion. One need only recall the very reserved reception of his second novel, this one about his time in Holland in the 1940s and 50s, *Der schwarze Herr Bahßetup. Ein Spiegel* (1956) (‘The dark Mr. Bahßetup. A mirror’). However, besides the aforementioned Fontane Prize, he was awarded several accolades, such as the honorific title of Professor from North Rhine-Westphalia (1984) and the Cross of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany (1985).

Most interesting, perhaps, is T.’s connection to Portugal and its attending literary echoes, about which the studies of Caeiro (1987; 1990) are indispensable, as well as those of Schäfer (1990: 175-180) and Franco (2014) (although on a smaller scale and with a different focus), from which information has been taken for this essay.

Almost twenty years before any publication of his own, T. was already translating the work of Teixeira de Pascoaes, which was decisive for his coming to Amarante. As narrated in *Die Insel*

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and reported by Caeiro (1990: 28ss.), in 1935, while still in Majorca, T. encountered the Spanish version of Pascoaes' *São Paulo* (1934). Dazzled, he soon began correspondence with the poet (Thelen, 1997), proposing he take charge not only of the translation of *São Paulo* into German and Dutch (Thelen, 1997: 53-54), but also of the international dissemination of the book. The Dutch translation was published in 1937 in partnership with H. Marsman, followed by the German version (1938). The translation, especially the Dutch one, was a great success with both critics and the literary market. In 1936-37, T. and Marsman translated *São Jerónimo e a trovoada* ['Saint Jerome and the thunder'] (1936) (publ. in Dutch: 1939; public. in Ger.: 1941); and soon after *Verbo escuro* ['Dark word'] (1914) (publ. in Dutch: 1946; publ. in Ger.: 1949). T. also translated *Napoleão* ['Napoleon'] (1940) into German (publ. 1997) and Dutch (alongside G. Diels, publ. 1950), as well as *Duplo passeio* ['Double stroll'] (1942) into German (publ. 1951) (Franco, 2014: 204ss.).

From his journey to Portugal and his long stay in the country as Pascoaes' guest, a sequel to *Die Insel* would be expected, a new, long-winded work, now about his experiences amongst the Portuguese as a way of filling the gap between the time narrated in the Majorcan and Dutch novels. It is known that T. gave a public reading of one of the fragments which would make up the aforementioned work — regrettably, about the time before he came to Portugal —, as proved by a recording made in 1966. On the other hand, he stated in a 1987 interview that he could not expose what he saw of the grotesque in Portugal due to a feeling of gratitude towards Pascoaes (Schäfer, 1990: 180). This work never became public. Only three fragments survived, published in periodicals in the 1970s and posthumously collected in *Poetische Märzkälbereien* ['Poetic March horseplay'] (Thelen, 1990: 12-120). They are: '*Der Hirtenbrief*' (1979) ('The pastoral letter'), '*Grenzstein der Freiheit*' (1975) ('Freedom Landmark') — which is part of the mentioned recording — and '*Die Gottlosigkeit Gottes oder das Gesicht der zweiten Insel*' (1974) ('The atheism of God or the face of the second island') — all of them translated and commented on by Caeiro (1990: 41ss.). The first two texts, however, are about his crossing of Spain. Thus, in what pertains to the literary echoes of T.'s Portuguese phase, readers have access to little more than the third narrative mentioned above, as well as '*Tabakpanik*' (1955) ('Tobacco panic'). Indeed, if one further takes into

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account the digressions in his two great novels and his literary debut, the collection of poems *Schloss Pascoaes* (1942) ('Pascoaes' Manor') (Caeiro, 1990: 11-187), dedicated to his host, one has assembled the scarce literary record of T.'s sojourn in Portugal.

'God's atheism', which tells of the car journey from Porto to the Amarante manor house and builds towards the climactic first meeting with Pascoaes, puts forth a simultaneously euphoric and dysphoric image of the country. On one hand, Portugal is surprisingly hospitable, the salvation from the war as a result of the generosity of his host. On the other, throughout the text a critical attitude is evident towards the great social and economic divide in the rural north of the country — curiously, with no inferences on the political system of the time. Despite the occasional humorous tone, the archaic life of peasants is portrayed, marked by extreme poverty coupled with evident humbleness. In a striking contrast, the 'Rolls-Royce luxury cars (...), with elegant chauffeurs in white liveries' (Caeiro, 1990, translated: 102), with the peasants respectfully removing their hats as they see them drive by.

'Tobacco Panic,' in turn, revolves around a comic anecdote of the life of the great smoker Pascoaes, whose behaviour in a Porto tobacco store is considered suspicious by the shopkeeper. Throughout, we are given brief notes about some aspects of Porto's social backdrop. As is common in texts by exiles in Portugal, cafés are referenced as masculine social and cultural spaces. In turn, adopting the critical perspective of the disgruntled shopkeeper but simultaneously distancing himself from it, the narrator, who does not idealize refugees, comically points out certain ploys, some reprehensible, to which they resort to in order to survive.

As an intercultural mediator, T. has unquestionable merit, not only for having anticipated all other critics regarding the study and recognition of Pascoaes' oeuvre and thought (Franco, 2014: 17), but also for his tireless dedication to his promotion among editors and writers of Europe outside the Iberian Peninsula. On the other hand, one cannot deny a certain disappointment regarding the scarcity and superficiality of his Portuguese exile's literary echoes.

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## Travels

Holanda, Espanha, Suíça, Portugal

## Quotations

Tonight I will read a chapter from an unpublished book, on which I worked for a long time. [...] What I'm going to read comes from a manuscript of about 900 pages. [...] The book has the encompassing title of "God's atheism or The face of the second island". God's atheism because at the centre of the book is the character of my mystical friend, Teixeira de Pascoaes, the Portuguese poet, whose texts and books I translated into Dutch and German, and at the centre of Pascoaes' thought is the idea of religious atheism. (Thelen, 1966 [O ateísmo de Deus]: CD 1) (translated)

In those days, starving refugees roamed the country, speakers of all the tongues; some shops had been looted; many of those who, in their own country, wouldn't dare not pay even the Church tax, fled without paying for their drink. The citizen of that country, apparently so rich, and especially so hospitable, was swindled where he wound up. One lived in a state of alert. ("Pânico tabágico", translated from Caeiro, 1990: 194)

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