



The Island of Second Sight

Albert Vigoleis Thelen , Donald O. White (Translator)

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Unavailable to English readers for more than 50 years, *The Island of Second Sight* is a masterpiece of world literature. Set in the years leading up to World War II, it is the fictionalized account of the time spent in Mallorca by the author and his wife, who experience the most unpredictable and surreal adventures, pursued all the while by Nazis and Francoists. And just as the chaos comes to seem manageable, the Spanish Civil War erupts. Drawing comparisons to *Don Quixote* and *The Man Without Qualities*, *The Island of Second Sight* is a novel of astonishing and singular richness of language and purpose. At once ironic and humanistic, hilarious and profoundly serious, philosophical and grotesque, *The Island of Second Sight* is a literary tour de force.

Praise for *The Island of Second Sight*

"A masterpiece...Fabulous in all senses of the word."
—Iain Bamforth, *Times Literary Supplement*

"A genuine work of art."
—Paul Celan

"[*The Island of Second Sight*] is comparable in profundity as well as in complexity to Mann's own *Magic Mountain*. It is in a class with two other massive German masterpieces...: Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil* and Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*."
—Allen Guttman, *Amherst Magazine*

"There is a widely held misconception that Germans have no sense of humor. Here is evidence to the contrary as Thelen, belatedly, through his translator, gets a chance to show the English speaking world."
—Anthea Bell, *Literary Review*

The Island of Second Sight Details

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Author : Albert Vigoleis Thelen , Donald O. White (Translator)

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From Reader Review *The Island of Second Sight* for online ebook

Vit Babenco says

Epigraph “Praise be to Heaven and all the Saints for bestowing upon us finally an Adventure that shall yield us Profit!” from *Don Quixote de la Mancha* sets the style.

And “Put a la madre, puta la hija, puta la manta que las cobija” – the old Spanish proverb, that goes something like: “Mother a whore, daughter a whore and both lie in a whoring bed”, sets the tone.

So the book comes as a colourful hybrid of chivalric romance and picaresque novel of an imposing intellectual range.

“All at once several doors opened, and the hall filled with loose-limbed womenfolk who greeted mother and son in the most cheerfully salacious way imaginable. A torrent of obscenities assailed our ears, as we ran the gauntlet on our dash to the exit. My mother screamed; there were tears in her eyes. Was she at all aware that there existed such a thing as professional immorality? Probably not; she came from a happy family. I pity the people who frequent such establishments, or who depend on them for their living. But I regard them as much less despicable than professional mass murder, which involves not only mass graves but also ribbons and medals and heaps of money, and which also has to do with love—the pathological form of love that is called ‘patriotism.’”

To put it in a nutshell *The Island of Second Sight* is a tale of prostitution: corporeal, spiritual and political, individual and global...

“Death is a good thing only when the masses say it is.” that is a spiritual prostitution turning political...

If there is no enemy in sight then whoever is around becomes an enemy.

Caroline says

Fantastic, cascading paragraphs of memory, history, literary criticism, fictionalized adventures, tales of the consequences of his own credulity and Mallorcan character. There are Vigoleis the character, Vigoleis the narrator, and yet again Vigoleis the author.

Vigoleis and his soon-to-be wife Beatrice go to Mallorca because she has received a death-bed telegram from her brother. It turns out the brother is not dying but the victim of a Spanish amour. Soon Vigoleis and Beatrice are penniless denizens of the island, moving in the circles of writers, artists, destitute hidalgos, ineffective revolutionaries...

Throughout Vigoleis sees the coming murderous criminality of Hitler, and his life on the island is endangered by his plain speaking. And yet much of the book is very funny, as he recounts the (probably embroidered or altered) antics of native Mallorcans and other ex-pats.

Vigoleis writes by unhindered mental associations, so every story starts out with a topic sentence, then wanders through several pages of seemingly unrelated personal history or comments on books he values, only to eventually circle around to a logical connection and the rest of the story.

The reader is left adding dozens of books to the 'To Be Read' list, and lamenting that many of them haven't been translated into English, Pascoas in particular, as that Portuguese writer becomes Thelen's lodestar.

Absolutely highly recommended--you will underline many many fine passages. But settle in for a long visit.

It's 730 fully packed pages--in more regular type it would be 1,000. But well worth the weeks you will spend with Vigoleis and his Beatrice.

Joshua says

This is a massive book that feels light in your hands. The pages turn quickly. Miniature adventures follow comedic interludes follow subtle tragedies in an impressive and seemingly endless stream of stories.

The author writes in a crystalline prose lightly interspersed with erudite references and heavily laden with comedic wordplay. The structure of the narrative is subtly playful, the author refers to himself as an entity distinct from his own protagonist, discusses the adventures of Vigo and Bea in third person, then writes in the first person as the protagonist abolishing the previously established and flimsy distinctions between creator and created, and simultaneously muses upon the dual processes of remembering his own adventures and embellishing them (the later process he describes as applied recollection).

The author also utilizes several unusual narrative techniques such as describing a scene in detail up until its climatic resolution then breaking off the story and directly addressing the reader to invite them to imagine the rest of the scene for themselves. Similarly the author several times begins to describe the setting, some breathtaking Mediterranean seascape, and then digresses to complain of the difficulties inherent therein and of the author's own entrenched inability (perhaps unwillingness) to write about the landscape.

In the end, however, all of this structural manipulation is mere play, a manifestation of the innate playfulness of the protagonist and his equally fictional authorial counterpart.

The book is filled with life and characters of a distinctly 20th century flavor. It feels short and is ultimately about the individual stories and the unique characters found within and less about the overarching narrative.

It's a shame that this novel took so long to make it into English. However, the fact that a work of this caliber has avoided an English speaking audience for so many decades offers present day readers, such as myself, a unique opportunity to offer forth some of the initial salvos of praise for a piece of literature well worth an expanded readership and continued preservation. It is a mysterious honor to be one the very few people who seem to have read this book, especially after having taken such pure joy in the process. I highly recommend this great novel.

Simon Hollway says

Jesus, Mary and all the Saints, thank the Lord I have finished this catastrophe of a book. Yes I gave it 5 stars but I hated it. And not in a hipster conflicted 'she'll be right on a second reading when I'm in a better or more mature mood' type way. I despised it because it is awful. The author is insufferable. Repulsive. Simpering. Disingenuous.... You know that incredible floaty feeling you have once you finish the final sentence of a great novel? This is the opposite. I have literally never felt so furious after finishing a novel. It reached the point of diminishing returns around page 500 which is the precise stage where you start getting an inkling, an insight into the true nature of the author's persona: the true horror of his mewling, vacuous, insipid,

superficial observations.

Anywayhoo, I shall now go and wash my brain out with some Terry Pratchett and return a more reasoned review after a much-needed time-out. In the meantime, do not read this novel. It is a brilliantly written pile of pants penned by a pander.

*****sometime later*****

OMG, get me with the outrage! 'literally never felt so furious' said Furious Alice Literally from Tunbridge Wells literally situated in the outraged county of Kent. So anyway, I've had a time-out. I've taken my ritalin. I've done my deep breathing exercises and strengthened my pelvic floor and...I loathe Thelen's 'thing' even more. After all, what is it? A fictionalised account of what? 'Applied recollections' from whom? Gah, I can't even be bothered to deconstruct it...

The last word of my initial word vomity reaction above is the Pandora's box that contains the cipher to this gob-stopping, doorstep of a less than monumental but certainly reprehensible book: Albert Vigoleis Thelen is a 'pander'.

Bom-bom-bohhhhhhmmmm. With his poncily pronounced, repressed, coquettish, dainty, tricky-belle swagger we all know he's aiming at Candide, coming on all picaresque and mock-epic and wotnot, trying to join the pantheon of literary rogues and rascals with a few mistimed high kicks and a flurry of glitter. But he's not Candide. He's Panderus...and that, ladies and gentlemen, is the best possible description for this narrator/alter ego/super ego/monomaniac in this best possible and kindest of all possible reviews.

I think I have the rage again. I shall re-resume shortly...

Tony says

Before I start this review proper, I think this is an appropriate time to offer a word about Goodreads. My children insisted I join Goodreads because, perhaps, they've learned that I would rather read books than have anything to do with real people. So I joined, and, of course, lurked for awhile. Someone in real life who was also a Goodreads 'friend' told me I should write something, anything, about the books I was posting as 'read'. I did. And was liberated. Now I read better. And I write.

I write.

I used to write. As a precocious, probably unlikable, child: plays that didn't know how to end and poems that did no more than turn a phrase. Later, I barred a chord or two and sang off-key of loss and heartbreak. I found that the Dorian mode fit my sorrow. I wrote in two careers, oddly better in the one that was not titled 'writer'. But I'm having so much fun writing here. And reading you. Aubrey, Fionnuala, MJ, Garima, a couple of karens (and so many others). Your writing is more compelling than most of the authors we read.

I'm babbling.

What I'm trying to say is that Goodreads has become special for me. Which brings me to this slough of a book. Quicksand. There was a time I would have hit a wall, found something else, set this aside, and never got back to it. But I would post a status update - (p. 65) - or a random quote. Nothing. No effort. Yet, for a month and a half, Rod and Kris would 'like' that simple marking of time. Just a subtle way of saying *We like*

this book, actually, We liked this a lot, and You can do it, Tony, You can do it, Tony, you can do it.

Rod and Kris? I did it.

Wherever I went, I was redundant. And indeed he was. Watching his homeland from a distant island. Changing from the first person to the third. Weaving his own history into this fiction.

Some books are plot-driven. Some are character driven. Then there are books that are chimerical, one vignette after another. Yes, *Don Quixote*. This is *Don Quixote*, but the windmills are real. It's *Don Quixote* meets Roberto Bolano.

The first-person (sometimes third-person) protagonist has left Germany and gone to Mallorca with his 'wife' to check on the health of her brother. It is 1932.

Our protagonist, calling himself by the author's middle name - *Vigoleis* or *Vigo* or *Don Vigo* or many other variations - is a confabulator. He's allergic to work. But not to bullshit.

He becomes a tour guide, and a highly regarded one, perhaps because he has no clue what it is that he is actually explaining. He just makes stuff up. But wonderfully so. He is especially beloved by visiting Germans. To them he is their 'leader' - or *Führer*. I hope you can see the layers of possibility here.

Back then the word Führer was already something in bad odor, but only mildly so -- like the place on a pork chop near the bone, where the smell begins.

I cannot, in this short review, do justice to the humor in this book. At times it seemed every sentence had some dangling barb.

It was very, very funny. But it was never, not once, merely funny. And often it was profound.

Any Church with universal ambitions must be willing to walk over a few corpses.

The girl's noble parents were so impoverished that they had no fear of the specter of Communism.

There are times when people who don't believe in God, and thus cannot be expected to knife their fellow men in the name of the Lord, can incur the hatred of believers and fall prey to their lust for murder.

A shy person is convinced by instinct and experience that humans are often all-too-human to other humans, and this insight has the effect of restricting his behavior in the presence of others.

Read this. Read through the mire. Get to the part where Vigoleis is asked pretentious questions on his tours and watch him confabulate. Watch Silberstern get arrested for possession of pornography and see Vigoleis become his lawyer. *Why not?* Take a seat at the 'wedding' celebration of a Pekinese and a nameless pug.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention that this is a spectacular translation. I'm not saying this as someone who has read the original text in German. Rather, the translator made this 1953 book sound current without being cliché. It was seamless, and itself a work of art.

Looking back I see I did not do this book justice by my review. It's possible, you know, that no one can. It was a true 5-star book, a Top-10 of 2013 reads, and something that will make me smile and think for many years to come.

Let me repeat: Read this. I'll cheer you on. So will Kris and Rod. Everyone needs a Führer.

Janet says

"It was the same old tragic story: too stupid and not stupid enough. An entire life can be a shambles as a result of this predicament."

The book chronicles German writer and pacifist, Thelen's self-induced five year exile on the island of Majorca with his common law wife, Beatrice. The narrative, told through alter ego, Vigoleis, is equal parts farce, fantasy and scathing political/social commentary – the book at almost 800 pages feels as long as the Crusades. Covering years 1931 – 1936 this book will be better appreciated by those well-versed in 1930s European history which, alas, is not me. Keystone Cop Nazis and fascists abound. I became weary.

Still, his observations are deft and absolutely brilliant. Below are a few of my favorites:

"We do good deeds with an evil heart, and we do our hating with the best of intentions."

"Conjugal happiness is an art mastered by the very few. Genuinely happy people are as rare as Christians who believe in God."

"Women were his undoing, because in bed they were conscious only of today. This Man of Yesterday experienced failure after failure, until he had no Tomorrow at all."

"We had, as it were, no money. And without money even the most sublimely educated person will revert to the hairiest barbarism, unless he prefers to adopt the glassy-eyed look of an ascetic and simply starve."

"Just one more step and I would land in the bosom of both Fuhrer and Pope, the two medicine-men of organized mass deception."

"...she was in the pre-stage of fury that could turn her into a mute pillar."

"There's no helping a guy whose head is as fat as his ass."

"When Nina was sixteen, she consulted her drab mirror for advice, took off her maidenly little dress, and became a full-fledged girl."

A final warning: beware of priests with forked tongues and generals with two arms.

Rob T says

On the cover Thomas Mann promised me one of the greatest books of the Twentieth Century and I wasn't disappointed. Thelen has a fantastic voice, a storyteller's voice that moves from one unbelievable set piece to another with enough nuance that I can't help but think of Henry James or Javier Marías. Read it for the great stories, but also read it for the narrator who self-consciously shifts from important to self-deprecating in a whirl of reference to German authors and philosophers largely lost on me.

If I had one criticism, it'd be that the book draws to a relatively abrupt conclusion compared to the leisurely first two-thirds of the memoir. It's almost like Thelen realized he had a few thousand manuscript pages and he'd probably better wrap things up.

Rod says

"One of the greatest books of the 20th century." So says Thomas Mann right on the cover. That sets expectations pretty high, even for this reader, who knows the venerable Herr Mann more by reputation than by actually having read his works [ed., as of 7/5/2013, that is no longer the case]. Maybe Mann was in a hyperbolic mood the day he made that statement, but you know what? This is a damned great book. Albert Vigoleis Thelen—who I will henceforth refer to as "Vigoleis," his self-applied nickname and the name of the protagonist of his "memoirs," or as he terms it, "the applied recollections of Vigoleis"—is a phenomenal writer. Virtually every page crackles with ingenious turns of phrase, philosophical musings, pearls of wisdom, clever *bon mots* and rambling (yet entertaining) digressions. Many times during the course of reading it I would stop momentarily, smile, mutter to myself something like "Wow, that's great," and read the stunning passage again, making a mental note to remember it for later.

Small causes can often have large effects. Smaller causes can have even bigger effects, and the very biggest effects frequently have no cause at all. Witness, for example, the world. It was created out of nothing, and that has made it the worst calamity the world has ever seen.

First published in German in 1953 to great acclaim, translated into various languages, and never having fallen out of print, *The Island of Second Sight* was not published in English until 2010 in a paperback edition by Galileo, translated by Donald O. White. Better late than never, as they say. Who are "they," anyway? Practically everybody, including myself. The book recounts the author and his wife Beatrice's self-imposed exile from the political turmoil of an increasingly Nazi-fied Germany by escaping to the Spanish island of Mallorca in the early '30s. On Mallorca, the two live in dire poverty, taking what work they can get—Beatrice as a language tutor, and Vigoleis as a sometime writer/translator—and often preferring starvation to not buying books. (Priorities!) They meet a motley assortment of anarchists, whores, Honduran revolutionaries, political exiles, Nazi bureaucrats, Francoists, spies, pornography collectors, wealthy dowagers, spiritualists, crazies, and even some famous writers. Vigoleis at one point works as Robert Graves' typist/secretary, typing *I, Claudius* from Graves' handwritten manuscript (this is apparently true). There are also metafictional elements, as the first-person narration often switches from the younger Vigoleis to the older Vigoleis, who then tells the story of the *younger* Vigoleis in the third person and has conversations with his younger self. Rather than being contrived, it's very fluid and natural, and it works perfectly.

White's associate Allen Guttman, in an article praising the novel and White's translation, calls the plot "maddeningly complicated." I am reminded of Mark Twain's preface to *Huckleberry Finn* where he states "Those attempting to find a plot in it will be shot." Where Guttman sees "maddeningly complicated," I see nothing. Well, not *nothing*, but I don't detect an overarching "plot" going from A to B to C; instead it is a series of vignettes from Vigoleis' life in exile on Mallorca and his and Beatrice's adventures and misadventures with the aforementioned motley assortment of characters. It's often hilarious, such as the chapter where Vigoleis and Beatrice work as tour guides ("Fuhrers") for groups of boorish German tourists. Beatrice takes the job very seriously, studying and immersing herself in the island's history in order to do her job properly; Vigoleis, a consummate bullshitter, simply makes up crowd-pleasingly lurid and violent, completely fallacious "historical" accounts as he goes along. Naturally, Vigoleis becomes immensely popular and is acclaimed as the best "Fuhrer" on the island. There is much humor throughout, but during this section I found myself literally laughing out loud. I didn't realize a German writer could be this funny.

The description states that Vigoleis and Beatrice are "pursued by Nazis and Francoists," but this isn't *The Hiding Place* or *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Removed from the nexus of Nazi aggression in their island exile, V. and B. are certainly pestered and harassed by Nazi bureaucrats and stooges, but any horror to be found is not of certain death at the hands of Nazis, but of an autocratic bureaucracy immoral and malevolent enough to want to exterminate anyone who isn't willing to fall in line, yet so inefficient, lazy and corrupt that it is unable to find two people who are hiding in plain sight. There never is a feeling of true mortal danger, which may not reflect how serious the situation probably was in real life, as Vigoleis' jovial, devil-may-care attitude always keeps the tone light. Only later in the book do our protagonists feel the stakes rising to the point where they realize that they have to flee or die. I don't think I'm spoiling anything here by informing you that Vigoleis and Beatrice eventually escape their pursuers and from the burgeoning Spanish Civil War. Obviously they live; it's a memoir (of sorts), and Vigoleis often refers to their life in the current day. Anyway, this isn't the kind of book that can be ruined by "spoilers," as the joy is in inhabiting this picturesque landscape with these characters and experiencing their picaresque adventures, not in finding out what "happens." It is a book in which you should just immerse yourself and let it take you where it leads you, much as Vigoleis does his Mallorcan exile.

As of September 13, 2012, this book has been released in a US hardcover edition by Overlook. Get it.

UPDATE: Overlook trade paperback out as of 9/25/2013! Get it!

Barksdale Penick says

I won't forget this book, but I don't think it is properly described as the undiscovered masterpiece of 20th century literature. I read most books quickly (although there are certainly books that I find can only be appreciated as few pages at a time), but this took months for me to finish, and more than once I decided to stop. But then I looked at Goodreads reviews and lots were positive so I persevered.

It is a funny book, and opens and closes in strong fashion. But oh my goodness did we have to visit so many places in Mallorca and meet so many interesting and less interesting people. I adore the wife of the narrator, an anti-Nazi German who ends up penniless and nearly hopeless in Mallorca. I certainly would have given up hope in his situation. But Beatrice wife helps him through it all. The two end up in the most awful living situations and more than once lose everything, and one realizes that no matter how little you have, losing everything is painful.

The narrator employs a device that is puzzling at first--sometimes he refers to himself by his last name and sometimes by his first name as if it were a different person. After a while it isn't distracting but I fail to see how it adds much.

The ending--their flight from the Nazis and Fascists amid the incredible bloodshed that followed the Spanish Civil War is compelling and exciting, and sad and tawdry. And one can certainly argue that the ending would not have had its power had we not gone through 750 pages beforehand. But I bet it could have been pretty nearly as strong if we had only been through say 300 or 400 pages of development.

I won't forget this book, and I can appreciate that others may find it powerful and finely crafted. One might compare it to *Moby Dick*, where the ending is built on so many chapters where the reader wonders whether the detail about blubber or sea knots is really central to the tale. In the case of *Moby Dick*, I did feel the investment of time into innumerable details was necessary and built a beautiful path to the culmination, but *The Island of Second Sight* is not that great a book and thus I could not forgive the self indulgence of the author enough to recommend it.

Jos says

Finally, I'm through. I can't remember the last time when a book took me six weeks. Even *Les Miserables* in the complete 1,500 pages version lasted only four weeks. The main reason is that *The Island of Second Sight* doesn't invite casual reading on the couch after a day of work or even reading at the weekend for fun. Instead, it was an everyday companion on the train to work and back. A daily routine like the daily life, Thelen is writing about.

Thelen tells the life of his Alter Ego, Vigoleis, in Mallorca from 1931-1936 together with his partner and later wife Beatrice. They first are called to the island by Beatrice's brother Zwingli, who supposedly is about to die. As it turns out, he's not dying but is in the fangs of Pilar, a former prostitute. They strand in Mallorca and lead a hard picaresque life for the years to come until they have to flee from the island in the woes of the beginning Spanish Civil War.

The book could be seen as a personal history but this would be shortselling it. It's written in 1952, hence, the distance in time gives Thelen enough opportunity for reflection. Accordingly, *The Island of Second Sight* gives us Thelen's view on life, on the world. From simple descriptions of everyday situations like buying a bread he branches out into a philosophical discourse or into tales from the past. The topics of his diversions are the guiding principles of his life. Freedom of thought, neglect of materialism in favour of artistic self-realization, the value of friendships, the mythical philosophy of Pascoaes vs. his catholic upbringing, the disgust for mass movements.

Thelen called his style of writing "Cactus Writing" - like a Saguaro the story develops one branch after the other. It works as a whole though. Unluckily for him, the reception in post-war Germany wasn't too welcoming. The opinion leaders at that time were looking for radical breaks in literature, opulent writing as Thelen wasn't sought out. The "happy few", as Thelen at one point calls his readers himself in the book, enjoyed the book. But that was not enough for him to become recognized as a writer at large. Nowadays, he's mostly forgotten.

The Island of Second Sight without a doubt is a brilliant work, Thelen himself is an intelligent storyteller. Living by his principles, he mostly went the difficult way in his life. Reading this book, the reader follows

him on a difficult way through more than 900 pages. It's worth the effort and I'm glad I've gone this way but at times I wished I was in a comfy chair instead of walking this steep trail.

Samantha says

I read a lot of books, many of them quite good, but this was the most delightful thing I've read in awhile. The author, writing as his alter-ego, Vigoleis, recounts his many adventures on the island of Mallorca in the 1930's, during the rise of the Nazis in Germany and the run-up to the Spanish Civil War. Like Dante, he is accompanied by a Beatrice, and the parallel is not wasted on him. The two are not officially married, largely to permit Beatrice to retain her "bulletproof" Swiss passport. The two arrive on the island to tend to Beatrice's brother, whom they believe to be dying. He isn't, and the ensuing chapter is just the first of the pair's often hilarious, often harrowing exploits, driven largely by Vigoleis's guilelessness and their lack of funds. They make friends among the famous, the infamous, and the obscure. By the time the Civil War breaks out and the two are in real danger, it is their very ingloriousness, their reputation as harmless ne'er-do-wells, that comes to their aid. The book is rather long, and the plot meanders, but by the third section or so I was so enamored of Vigoleis, with his breadth of observation and his linguistic digressions, and of his and Beatrice's quixotic trajectory, that I was pretty much along for the ride. After seeing them take up fairly chaste residence in a whorehouse, serve as tour guides for visiting Germans (in a particularly funny episode), and embark on an ill-fated adoption scheme, I was increasingly ready for anything. I don't say this about many books, but when I was reading it I didn't want it to end.

Michael says

Ein ganz unglaublicher Roman, in dem barocke Sprachfülle und ein Goldschatz an Witz und Verstand im denkbarsten Kontrast zur braunen Barabarei stehen. Thelen ließ sich wie Arno Schmidt von und für niemanden vereinnahmen, Außenseiter des literarischen Betriebs.

Habe das Buch vor 13 Jahren verschlungen und danach alles von Thelen, was ich bekommen konnte (aber die INSEL ist sein stärkstes Buch).

Für eine ordentliche Review steht ein Wiederlesen an.

Jonathan says

This masterpiece, this extraordinary and hilarious novel, positions itself firmly in the picaresque tradition; it deliberately (and sometimes explicitly) makes clear that its parentage includes Boccaccio, Cervantes, Fielding and Voltaire. For this Reader such noble blood is a rare and precious thing.

As I wrote the above sentence I realised that, although I basically know what a picaresque novel is, and a little of the tradition, the origin and strict definition of the term was unknown to me. So I did a quick google...

According to Wiki: *The picaresque novel (Spanish: "picaresca," from "pícaro," for "rogue" or "rascal") is a popular sub-genre of prose fiction which might sometimes be satirical and depicts, in realistic and often humorous detail, the adventures of a roguish hero of low social class who lives by his wits in a corrupt society. This style of novel originated in 16th-century Spain and flourished throughout Europe in the 17th*

and 18th centuries. It continues to influence modern literature.

Seven qualities distinguish the picaresque novel or narrative form, all or some of which may be employed for effect by the author:

- (1) A picaresque narrative is usually written in first person as an autobiographical account.
- (2) The main character is often of low character or social class. He or she gets by with wit and rarely deigns to hold a job.
- (3) There is no plot. The story is told in a series of loosely connected adventures or episodes.
- (4) There is little if any character development in the main character. Once a picaro, always a picaro. His or her circumstances may change but rarely result in a change of heart.
- (5) The picaro's story is told with a plainness of language or realism.
- (6) Satire might sometimes be a prominent element.
- (7) The behavior of a picaresque hero or heroine stops just short of criminality. Carefree or immoral rascality positions the picaresque hero as a sympathetic outsider, untouched by the false rules of society

Interestingly, the two of these definitions that are not applicable to this novel are what, in my opinion, are its most wonderful qualities: the decidedly un-plain language, and the fluid movements between first, second and third person narrative. Thelen is the ultimate authorial voice, Vigoleis is the picaro at the story's heart, and we, the Readers (were that there were more of us!) are often called upon to comment and engage with the narrative as it flows back and forth through time, memory, geography and the historical vagaries of the 20thc. There is a beautifully maintained tension between identity, fiction and historical "truth" which is dazzling to behold.

And on top of it all, this is a very very funny book. I mean laugh out loud funny (which is very rare for a grumpy Reader such as myself).

Paul Celan called this novel a "*work of art*" and his reading copy of the novel apparently contained over 4000 underlinings and comments. If that is not enough to convince you of the worth of this great book, then nothing will.

However, this review in the NY Times is very good, though it does the usual boring review trick to telling you far too much of the damn plot (like all those annoying movie trailers that make seeing the actual film redundant):

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/14/boo...>

As is Rod's review on GR, which led me to this novel in the first place. Many, many thanks to him.

Read this novel. Clamour for more of his work to be translated. Enjoy.

Steve says

(*The Island of Second Sight* , by Albert Vigoleis Thelen - 1903-1989)

In the seven months or so I have been a member of GR, I have run across a good number of books I would otherwise never have heard about. But I thought I had a fairly decent idea of 20th century German literature;

I was not expecting a big surprise from that corner. However, in the Buried Book Club, moderated by the most dashing, but punctuationally challenged Nathan "N.R." Gaddis (all praise be to Him), I ran across a mention of a great work of German literature from the early 1950's I had never even heard a whisper of before. No way! That's my revier! With likes to Jonathan and Rod, whose reviews convinced me, I sought far and wide for the book in German *und bin fündig geworden*. With glowing recommendations by two of my favorite authors, Thomas Mann and Paul Celan, urging me on, I dived into the 915 thin pages with densely set, small type and started swimming for my life. Wow! And again wow! Thelen lifted himself into my little pantheon of German stylists.

Though the book is based upon his own experiences, Thelen holds the story at a certain distance by telling the story about Vigoleis, his stand in, who is often, but certainly not always, indistinguishable from the author. Thelen plays around with this sometimes present, sometimes absent ironic distance. Indeed, *das zweite Gesicht* has two meanings in German: "second sight" and "second face", and both meanings are played upon alternately throughout the book. Vigoleis is Thelen's second face. And Vigoleis/Thelen sometimes has second sight.

Already the title warns that Thelen is going to use one of the pleasures of literature which is least amenable to translation - the pun. These range from simple little joys like

Die Eifersucht ist eine Leidenschaft, die mit Eifer sucht, was Leiden schafft.

to the deeper investigations into the wonders of German compound words strewn throughout the text. Thelen, whose bedside books always included the great dictionary composed by the Grimm brothers (yes, those Grimm brothers) - still known as the richest mine in the German language - loved words perhaps even more than he did his beloved Beatrice. Along with the German language, whose riches he systematically mined for 30 years before he wrote his masterpiece, he was fluent in Dutch, French, English, Spanish and Portuguese (that I know of for certain). And he indulged himself in this love to the fullest in this book.

And digression? Sterne has nothing on Thelen! And Thelen, who constantly stands back from the story and makes comments about the events, characters, his mode of writing about them (yes, standard postmodern gadgets; but remember that this book was published in 1953), addresses his digressions and calls them his "cactus style", not merely because there are so many bifurcations in the text, but also because "eyes appear at unexpected places". Why write 10 words when it can be said with 100, no, 200, 500? The words whirl around themselves faster and faster, generating more words; and then, the vast mass falls to the ground and Thelen starts stirring the pot elsewhere... The style is alternately exhilarating and exhausting.

I'm not even going to try to give an overview of the hundreds of stories and substories and subsubstories Thelen recounts with glee. Not all are of equal interest, of course, but if you find one story dragging, just wait for a page or two, because three more are on their way. Suffice it to say that the narrative mainly takes place on the island of Mallorca during the 1930's, but it really runs from early in Thelen's childhood to just before he finishes the book. And it is stuffed with hundreds of colorful characters, each more memorable than the last.

Today's postmodern *literati* should read this book and note how it is so very full of life and humor, and not a sign of our poor age's authors' depression and bitterness. Please take an example.

Addendum 1

In the German edition I read there is a 25 page Afterword by Jürgen Pütz relating much interesting information about Thelen the person, Thelen the author and the reception of Thelen's writings in Germany. Here is a brief selection.

Born in the worker class, Thelen's early inclination to read and write were tolerated but not encouraged by his family. He started a few apprenticeships, visited a *Fachhochschule* for textiles, and studied briefly at university. He worked for a while. Finally, in 1931 he changed his name - adding Vigoleis - and left for Amsterdam, where he barely kept his head above water by writing the occasional article for periodicals and translating from Dutch to German (and *vice versa*). He had already met Beatrice, the love of his life, in Cologne, and they were inseparable for the next 61 years.

The major incidents related in *Insel* actually occurred - the (false) emergency call to Mallorca by Beatrice's irresponsible brother, Zwingli; the dispensing of all of their funds to help Zwingli; the years of living as paupers on Mallorca; the fascists' hunt for their lives during the Spanish Civil War. They escaped to Switzerland, then Portugal, where they were taken in by the writer and mystic Teixeira de Pascoaes, whose books Thelen subsequently translated into German. They were in Portugal from 1939 till 1947, when they returned to Amsterdam and continued barely getting by with translations and belle-lettristic articles.

Pütz recounts how the idea to write *Insel* arose (not surprisingly, Thelen was a marvelous storyteller in company, and some of his friends urged him again and again to write them up). One such friend was a Dutch publisher, who stated his willingness to publish the book in German in the Netherlands. (Initially he was going to publish a Dutch translation of Thelen's book, but deadline constraints caused him to publish the original.) Ultimately, a German *Verlag* published the book simultaneously in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Thelen keeps writing and writing as his cactus style asserts itself; he did not plan to write a thousand page monstrosity (his book contract gave him less than a year to write it; the deadline kept getting postponed and the publishers upset).

The book appeared in November, 1953. It was well received in the press by such influential writers as Siegfried Lenz and Maarten 't Hart (Celan's praise was in a letter to his wife; I don't know where the praise from Mann appeared). But the literary opinion makers in Germany at that time were the people in the *Gruppe 47*, led by Hans Werner Richter. Twice a year these people would get together and young authors would read from their new works. Thumbs up, thumbs down. For Thelen it was thumbs down, because at that moment Richter wanted to "strip the underbrush out of the German language". It was exactly the wrong moment for Thelen to come with his wonderfully rich prose! By 1958 the attitude of *Gruppe 47* had completely changed; when Grass read from his *Blechtrommel*, a similarly rich fountaining of language, they awarded him their prestigious prize... It also didn't help that *Insel* was full of "whore stories" in 1953. The police in Düsseldorf initiated an investigation for obscenity which was ultimately laid on ice.

But there was enough encouragement for Thelen to write another long (and, according to Pütz, comparably excellent) book, *Der schwarze Herr Bahssetup*, set in the Netherlands, which appeared in 1956. The 700 page work was blasted as "disappointing" by the German critics. (I've located a used copy in Germany and am anxious for its arrival.) After that experience the sensitive Thelen wrote only poems and the occasional story. I review one of them here:

<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

Thelen and Beatrice lived for many years in Switzerland and only returned to Germany in 1986, after the German government awarded him the Bundesverdienstkreuz.

Before *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts* appeared in 1953, when he was 50 years old, Thelen had published only some poems and translations of other author's works. He had written masses and masses of manuscripts but had lost or burnt most of them. Who knows what wonders we have missed because of Thelen's many misfortunes?

Addendum 2

Well, after the effort I made to transmit some of the information in the Afterword of the German edition to the non-German readers was so well received (I even lost a "like"), I think I'll not make the further effort to compare White's translation with the original. I'm sure it's wonderful.

Tuck says

you know that old guy who always sits closest to the wood stove but has the best stories? but the stories sometimes take forever to wind their way to the end, with lots of asides and funny bon mots between start and finish? both frustrating and hilarious to be the listener, being more and more surrounded by this forest of narration that has magically sprung up via the story, and if left to yourself, you would die in that forest, alone, starving, no way out. but the old guy suddenly hacks a path to his story again and off you go, jolly, intrigued, ready and wanting more titillation, crazy facts, and unbelievable escapades again winging past your face as follow down his clear trail again.

that's how vigoleis tells a story, seemingly interminably, but the listener [reader] has no power to turn away or ignore.

enter this forest at your peril, it's more than 700 pages of a yarn-spinner so smart and so funny you'll wish you packed a lunch.

so i guess, germans DO have a sense of humor. an epic story of "escaping" the nazi germany to mallorca to be safe, only to find the island a beacon for general franco, old spanish aristocrats, rich christian scientists, wanna-be hitlers, and a whole bunch of poor people starving on their feet, jostling with the artists in the cafes and panaderias.
